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Contextualising Liveness: Digitally
Distributed, Digitally Mediated and
Digitally Located Theatre in Edinburgh
and Berlin, 2017-2019

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Abstract

‘Liveness’ is a contested and often controversial term within theatre and performance studies. It is commonly used to describe sensations related to immediacy, spontaneity, unrepeatability, and co-presence, and often held in oppositions to ideas of the digital. Previous scholarship has taken a broad approach to understanding and defining liveness, for instance in Philip Auslander’s foundational monograph *Liveness* (1999), which considers liveness within the Western canon of live performance in general - but this thesis argues that liveness is often culturally and contextually contingent. To do so, it takes a comparative, material, and ethnographic approach, using case studies from Edinburgh and Berlin to reveal increasingly flexible, nuanced, and diverse experiences of liveness within performances that have been shaped by factors including funding landscapes, arts festivals, and hierarchies of cultural value. By focusing on Edinburgh and Berlin, the case studies in this thesis reveal how liveness is created, valued, and marketed differently in two Western European capital cities that have considerably different theatre industries, making the argument for further contextual studies into the phenomenon.

These case studies present emerging modes of digitally aided performance that challenge established definitions of liveness within theatre studies and the theatre industry and explore how liveness in performance relates to liveness as it is understood in the broader context of digital media. The thesis develops three key terms – digital distribution, digital mediation, and digital location – in order to differentiate between these emerging modes of performance: digital distribution is used to consider digitally aided modes of distributing and documenting theatre; digital mediation describes performances that use digital tools to mediate the relationship between performer and audience; and digital location examines performances that take place in digital, rather than physical, performance spaces. Collectively, these terms consider the time, place, and space of digitally aided performance to explore how far liveness is a contextual phenomenon.

Lay Summary

This thesis examines the extent to which ‘liveness’ in the theatre is a contextual phenomenon and explores how established definitions of liveness are challenged by emerging modes of digitally aided performance. I present case studies from theatrical productions in Edinburgh and Berlin, performed between 2017 and 2019, and take a comparative, material and ethnographic approach in order to analyse the significant differences in how liveness is created, valued and sold in the two Western European capital cities. As such, my research also provides vital contextualisation of a period that, in retrospect, can be seen as being on the cusp of unprecedented changes for theatrical performance. Throughout this thesis, I establish “digital distribution”, “digital mediation” and “digital location” as three key terms for the analysis of digitally aided performance. I argue that these terms make it possible to examine more specifically how the use of digital tools and techniques are reshaping the ways that liveness can manifest in the theatre. In doing so, I argue that liveness is more productively conceived of as a set of dramaturgical tools, rather than as an ontological state.

Note on Translations

Throughout this thesis I have provided a published English translation of the German text used, and these translations are referenced accordingly. Unless otherwise referenced, all other translations are my own.

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1. doublelucky productions. “Friends of Alma Beckman” (<http://almabeckmann.net/friends-of-alma-beckmann>) Web. [accessed 30 March 2022]
2. Toasterlab. ‘User Engagement by Experience’ (http://toasterlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/transmission_technical_overview-lower.pdf) Web. [accessed 30 July 2020]
3. Toasterlab. ‘User Engagement by Date’ (http://toasterlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/transmission_technical_overview-lower.pdf) Web. [accessed 30 July 2020]

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Introduction

What makes theatre live? The answer to this deceptively simple question has changed over time, in concert with evolving modes of performance, but never has it been more pertinent to the theatre industry and the field of theatre and performance studies than in the twenty-first century. This thesis captures a period of particularly intense change: digital tools and cultures have become increasingly commonplace within the theatre, causing a reconsideration of the notion of liveness and how it is created, felt, marketed and sold. I take a comparative and materialist approach to analysing theatrical performances in the cities of Edinburgh and Berlin over a three-year period and argue that liveness is a contextual phenomenon to a greater degree than previous scholarship has suggested. I also introduce new uses for three key terms – digital distribution, digital mediation and digital location – in order to facilitate deeper and more specific analysis of emerging modes of performance. The research for this PhD was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and it provides vital contextualisation and historicization of the ways in which the industry was already evolving in its approach to digital technologies, years before the global crisis. As such, the questions addressed in this thesis have only become more important to the future of the theatre industry in Scotland and Germany, and indeed the rest of the world.

Notions of liveness have long been tied to specific modes of performance – for instance, improvisational performance could be considered *more* live than a performance that has been rehearsed and will be performed according to those rehearsals – but the discussion of liveness within theatre scholarship has been, for the most part, concerned with defining the live against a series of oppositions. Of these definitions, Peggy Phelan’s ontology of liveness, written in 1993, is well known: her assertion that “performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations” will be explored in greater detail in Part 1.¹ Philip Auslander’s definition of liveness has been similarly influential, and his critical response to Phelan’s own stance has been framed as an antidote. Like Phelan he positions his

¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

understanding of liveness in relation to evolving technologies of documentation and distribution but, crucially, argues that this relationship is “determined by cultural and historical contingencies” rather than ontological differences.² I engage with the impact of Auslander’s deeply influential monograph *Liveness* (1999) in the literature review below, and throughout this thesis I seek to expand on his premise by exploring more fully the ways in which liveness is contextually and historically contingent. I argue that liveness is not simply defined by its relation to technologies of documentation and distribution, but that it is also created by specific modes of performance. This reframes liveness as an intentional dramaturgical strategy, achieved through a variety of performance techniques, as well as a phenomenon that is contingent upon broader socio-economic contexts, including national and local arts infrastructures and funding models, and the pricing, language and marketing strategies used to promote such performances.

One reason that an improvisational performance might be considered *more* live than a rehearsed performance is rooted in the notion that liveness is characterised by risk, and the idea that “the outcome is not guaranteed”, as Martin Barker describes it.³ Risk is one of several factors proposed by Barker as traditional characteristics of liveness in the theatre, alongside co-presence (“performer and audience are both there”), simultaneity (“the performance is happening at that moment”) and audience-impact (the idea that audience reactions “might affect how the event goes”).⁴ He lists others that are more pertinent to other artforms, such as the value of local colour to a comedian’s routine and the importance of created communities to sports fans, but his descriptions of virtual and screen-based artforms are also extremely pertinent to this thesis. He writes,

[v]irtual performance scholars are interested in how audiences can be *persuaded* that what they are doing is “live”, by techniques which generate immersion and closeness to avatars, for instance. Film and television,

² Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 11.

³ Martin Barker, ‘Coming a(Live): A Prolegomenon to any Future Research on “Liveness”’, in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 21–33 (p. 22).

⁴ Barker, p. 22.

meanwhile, are largely suspicious, seeing *claims to liveness* as part of commercial or ideological devices.⁵ (original emphasis)

I argue throughout this thesis that audiences of any artform can be persuaded of its liveness, and that the variety of techniques that can help to achieve this are rooted in the first factors that Barker listed: copresence, simultaneity, risk and audience-impact. The way in which these factors are utilised is, of course, different for every performance – not just in terms of a performance’s dramaturgical approach, but in how that performance mediates its relationship with an audience, the time and space of that performance, and the contexts that frame the performance. This approach reveals that there is no one single form of liveness and, in turn, makes it possible to analyse liveness from multiple perspectives.

Karin van Es makes a similar argument in the article ‘Liveness Redux: On Media and their Claim to be Live’ (2017), writing that liveness “can be foregrounded depending on the particular constellation that is relevant in each case”,⁶ and that conceiving of liveness “as a construction helps to account for its diversity”.⁷ For van Es, there have been three different approaches to liveness in media studies, specifically: an ontological approach, which “suggest[s] that technology is the source of liveness” but fails to consider the essential “sociality” of the live; a rhetorical approach, which positions the live as a “discursive construct emanating from the media industry” – under which she includes media scholar Jane Feuer’s influential claim that liveness is an ideological construct; and a phenomenological approach, which emphasises the human experience of liveness but, she argues, “downplays the influence of institutions and technologies in constructing its liveness”.⁸ Ultimately, van Es advocates an approach to liveness that considers the “power of institutions in shaping it” as well as how “both technologies and audiences also play a role in the construction of the live”.⁹ Throughout my research, I combine this perspective from media studies with scholarship specific to the manifestation of these factors within the

⁵ Barker, p. 23.

⁶ Karin van Es, ‘Liveness Redux: On Media and Their Claim to Be Live’, in *Media, Culture & Society*, 39.8 (2017), 1245-1256 (p. 1249).

⁷ van Es, p. 1249.

⁸ van Es, p. 1247.

⁹ van Es, p. 1248.

theatre, in order to capture how emerging modes of performance in Edinburgh and Berlin utilise liveness in new ways. This approach also assists me in avoiding the restrictive binary created when Auslander’s definition of liveness is perceived to occupy one pole of the discourse and Phelan’s ontological approach the other. Instead, I follow Anja Mølle Lindelof and Matthew Reason, the editors of *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*, in asking “less what liveness is, but rather *how* it matters? And to whom?”¹⁰

1. Digitally: Aided, Distributed, Mediated, Located

Throughout this thesis I use four key terms to bring greater specificity to my analysis of emerging modes of digital performance. The first, ‘digitally aided’, is used to describe any performance that explicitly foregrounds the use of digital tools, technologies, or cultures. It is designed to separate such performances from those that use commonplace technologies as part of the production – such as pre-programmed lighting design and sound effects. This differentiation is imperfect, as my analysis of Darkfield’s *Flight* reveals in Part 2, but it is a useful starting point, and particularly because it provides an alternative to the terms “digital theatre” and “digital performance”.

“Digital theatre” is the term used most often by the UK’s mainstream media to describe intersections between the theatre and digital technologies and it has been backed by major industry research published by organisations like the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA).¹¹ Leslie A. Wade, in “The London Theatre Goes Digital”, links the popularity of the term to the launch of the Digital Theatre project in 2009: the scheme raised over one million pounds in its start-up phase and has since partnered with many of England’s most prestigious theatres, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal Court, the Almeida and the Young Vic, to “sell theatre online”: “In this format plays transform into iPod

¹⁰ Anja Mølle Lindelof and Matthew Reason, *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

¹¹ For instance, in the 2010 NESTA report “New Research Reveals Audience Thirst for ‘Digital Theatre’”.

downloads. A single play can be accessed for around nine British pounds”.¹² However, as Wade’s analysis indicates, the term has become used almost exclusively to refer to digital broadcasting and distribution technologies – Wade himself mentions only digital screenings, “simulcasts” and digital downloads, despite speaking in broad terms of the “digital phenomenon sweeping British theatre”.¹³ The “digital phenomenon” in the theatre industry involved far more than digital distribution methods than when Wade’s article was published in 2011, and it was broader still during the research period of this thesis. In this way, I find “digital theatre” as a label to be both too vague and too specific: it does not establish in what way the theatre *is* digital but has become largely synonymous with digital broadcasting techniques, and it also gestures towards a kind of moralised ontological divide between digital and non-digital theatre that does not exist: Wade describes the “perception that theatre is experiencing a time of radical change, if not outright assault”, after noting that “some practitioners regard traditional theatre practice as obsolete”.¹⁴ Defining digital theatre in this way, by describing it through oppositions, is a consistent theme in much of the scholarship published in the 1990s and 2000s, as I explore in an analysis of the discourse surrounding Philip Auslander’s work. By avoiding the term, I aim to circumvent these oppositions in favour of a more forward-facing conversation.

Whilst “digital performance” carries less emotional weight, it is not broad enough for my purposes. Following Steve Dixon’s work in *Digital Performance* (2007), Johannes Birringer advocates the term “digital performance” in *Performance, Technology & Science* (2008), using it to label any kind of performance that “depend[s] on the use of digital interfaces”.¹⁵ It holds connotations of direct interaction between humans and technologies, and calls to mind the literal integrations of screens on stages that has been popular for several decades.¹⁶ In a later article, published in 2014, Birringer notes that, when looking back over twenty years of performance and technology, “[one] of the most significant features of contemporary interactive media

¹² Leslie A. Wade, ‘The London Theatre Goes Digital: Divergent Responses to the New Media’, *Theatre Symposium*, 19.1 (2011), 54–68 (p. 56).

¹³ Wade, p. 57.

¹⁴ Wade, p. 57.

¹⁵ Johannes Birringer, *Performance, Technology, & Science* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2008), p. xxi.

¹⁶ Both Dixon and Birringer contextualise this in their respective monographs.

is the prevalence of screens in performance”.¹⁷ Birringer also positions his definition of digital performance as the antithesis of “real-time interactivity”,¹⁸ which is not true of many modes of performance that make use of digital technologies, and is in direct contradiction to his own analysis of Berlin-based director Katie Mitchell’s 2013 production of *Fräulein Julie*, which he describes as using “digital modulation in real-time”.¹⁹ This description, in itself, is more aligned with Gareth White’s definition of “digital hybridity”, which I explore more fully in Part 2, as it is more useful when discussing specific modes of digitally aided performance rather than as a term to be used more broadly.

Ultimately, I propose “digitally aided” as a more accurate term to refer in general to the kinds of performance included within the scope of this thesis. It does not specify the form or content of the performance, it does not hold the weight of the anxieties caused by “digital theatre”, as described by Wade, and it does not skew towards the use of screens, or direct interfacing with technologies. Instead, it captures more precisely the relationships between performance and digital tools, technologies and cultures that are present in the case studies examined in this thesis. It also positions the digital as part of theatre’s toolkit, rather than as a generic adjective for unspecific forms of performance, and in doing so it leaves room to accommodate the on-going changes taking place in this rapidly evolving space.

The other key terms are closely related, and together they guide the structure of this thesis. “Digital distribution,” “digital mediation” and “digital location” are examined in full by Parts 1, 2 and 3, respectively. It is important to acknowledge that these terms are far from new: I am instead re-purposing them to describe different modes of digitally aided performances, and to examine how digital technologies can be used to shape the time and place of a performance, as well as how a performance mediates its relationship with an audience. This three-part structure is also influenced by Peter Brook’s famous definition of theatre, that “[a] man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of

¹⁷ Johannes Birringer, ‘The Theatre and Its Screen Double’, *Theatre Journal*, 66.2 (2014), 207–25 (p. 209).

¹⁸ Birringer, *Performance*, p. xxi.

¹⁹ Birringer, *The Theatre*, p. 222.

theatre to be engaged”.²⁰ Brook’s oft-cited description holds three key ingredients: a shared time (“whilst”), a shared “empty space” and co-presence, or, at least, spectatorship. I use the notion of digital distribution to examine the role of shared time in digitally aided performances, digital location to consider what kind of spaces and places digitally aided theatre can occupy, and digital mediation to explore participatory structures within digitally aided performances. In each instance, I consider what makes these forms of performance “engaged”, which can be read in this instance as a synonym for *live*.

These three terms are by no means mutually exclusive – a performance can quite easily be described by all three at once - but separating them in this way enables a deeper and more specific analysis of the key emerging modes of digitally aided performance in Edinburgh and Berlin. Suk-Young Kim’s argument in *K-Pop Live* runs along similar lines; she argues for an approach that examines the basis on which an instance of liveness exists, giving the example that “liveness in [certain cases] is realized around the axis of time”.²¹ This is helpful in describing most accurately the different ways in which liveness can function within a performance, as well as to demonstrate how pre-existing notions of liveness are being challenged by digital developments in specific elements of contemporary performance.

2. The Legacy of Liveness in Performance Scholarship

It is no exaggeration to say that Philip Auslander is cited in most twenty-first century research concerned with liveness in the theatre.²² His monograph *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, first published in 1999 and then revised in 2008, has been deeply influential: the editors of *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance* (2017) describe Auslander’s *Liveness* as a “key” and “frequently acknowledged” starting point “within the discourse of liveness”.²³ I aim, here, to

²⁰ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p.7.

²¹ Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), p. 69.

²² For instance, in the work of Toni Sant, Kirsty Sedgwick, Matthew Reason, Amy Jensen, Martin Barker, Gary Peters and Jonah Westerman.

²³ Lindelof and Reason, p. 12.

contextualise and historicise the impact of his work upon the research that has followed it, and to evaluate the lasting appeal of the supposed binary he establishes between his own understanding of liveness and Peggy Phelan's writing on the matter.²⁴

Since the turn of the millennium, Auslander's work has functioned as a shorthand for a specific approach to liveness, one that defines "live performance [as] significantly produced by mediatisation" and as "constantly changing in response to changing technological innovations".²⁵ Most importantly, his pithy rejection of Phelan's ontological approach to liveness (explored in greater detail in Part 1) has, perhaps inadvertently, concentrated much of the discourse surrounding liveness to fit between two opposing viewpoints. To a certain degree this has proved useful, as it has provided a framework within which scholars have situated their own argument, depending on how far they agree with Phelan's ontology or Auslander's more contextual approach – although most scholars tend to opt for the latter. Amy Petersen Jensen does so, for instance, in *Theatre in a Media Culture* (2007), where she allies herself with Auslander, she says, in order to "[open] the door to a discussion of mass media's dramatic influence over other art forms".²⁶ Suk-Young Kim, who describes Phelan as having been "countered" by Auslander, notes that his proposition is "seconded by many scholars working on the theoretical and empirical ramifications of liveness".²⁷

However, several other scholars believe that Auslander and Phelan have more in common than this popular, binary approach might suggest. Gary Peters, in 'What is a Live Event?' argues that their "somewhat entrenched" definitions share the suggestion that liveness is defined by its relationship to mediating technologies.²⁸ In the same edited collection, Jonah Westerman proposes that both Auslander and Phelan share "ahistorical" tendencies, due to a reliance on conflating liveness with an "abstracted 'now' of performance".²⁹ I discuss Westerman's criticism in Part 1, where

²⁴ I analyse Auslander and Phelan's different approaches to documentation and the cultural economy in Part 1, and focus, in this introduction, purely on the supposed binary between their efforts to define liveness.

²⁵ Lindelof and Reason, p. 4.

²⁶ Amy Petersen Jensen, *Theatre in a Media Culture: Production, Performance and Perception Since 1970* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2007), p. 2.

²⁷ Kim, p. 10.

²⁸ Lindelof and Reason, p. 164.

²⁹ Lindelof and Reason, p. 195.

the *time* of performance is explored in connection with the digital distribution of theatre in both cities. But Peters' observation that both Auslander and Phelan use mediating technologies to form their supposedly contrasting definitions of liveness is relevant here. It is true that Phelan uses mediating technologies to argue for what liveness is *not*, and that Auslander believes that the meaning of liveness has evolved in concert with the development of mediating technologies – but it is questionable if Auslander considers this relationship to be oppositional, as it is for Phelan.

Auslander has certainly been interpreted this way. Kirsty Sedgman uses his approach to “liveness as a concept [that] has crystallised in response to the rise in new media technologies” in order to frame her work on the live experience, and contextualises his work with the following reflection,

[w]ith the idea of “liveness” for the first time beginning to be conceptualised against its opposite – mediatisation – the performing arts began to be praised for their originality. Theatre's natural resistance to reproduction made it especially valuable [...].³⁰

Similarly, Daisy Abbott and Claire Read summarise his understanding of liveness “as a condition brought about only by the emergence of its counterpart, the mediatized”, and qualify this by adding that he “[sets] them in opposition tautologically rather than ontologically; a terminological and binauritic separation, rather than a realistic difference”.³¹ These two examples suggest that Auslander's legacy is indeed one of an oppositional relationship between liveness and mediatisation, which is interesting because this is precisely what he claims to have been trying to avoid. In the preface Auslander added to the second edition of *Liveness*, he writes, “[a]lthough my initial arguments may seem to rest on the assumption that there are [clear distinctions between the live and the mediatized], ultimately I find that not to be the case”.³²

³⁰ Kirsty Sedgman, *The Reasonable Audience: Theatre Etiquette, Behaviour Policing, and the Live Performance Experience* (Palgrave Pivot, 2018), p. 29.

³¹ Daisy Abbott and Claire Read, ‘Paradocumentation and NT Live's “Cumberhamlet”’, in *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, ed. by Toni Slant (Methuen Drama, 2017), pp. 165–88 (p. 168).

³² Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 7.

This lack of consensus is perhaps because one of his most cited statements, that “the relationship between live and mediatized forms and the meaning of liveness be understood as historical and contingent” does not explicitly establish a binary relationship.³³ Yet, this statement sits alongside a persuasive argument that the live and the mediatised have a “competitive opposition”,³⁴ as well as his description of the late nineties as a time when “the mediatised replaces the live within cultural economy” and “the live itself incorporates the mediatized”.³⁵ So although Auslander claims not to find the live and the mediatized ontological opposites, he exclusively conceives of them within an oppositional relationship – even despite his own intentions. There is also an implication that it is the “cultural economy” that establishes this opposition, rather than Auslander himself, but Adam Nash and Laurene Vaughan find fault with this. They argue that he “insists that theatre and television compete with each other without really offering any proof”,³⁶ and attribute this to Auslander being “unable to conceive of a live performance that is immanently digital”,³⁷ in the sense that digital technologies can have iterative or generative qualities that render them ‘live’ in a manner beyond that discussed in *Liveness*.

Patrick Lonergan, in *Theatre and Social Media*, finds a way through these contradictions. He draws a contrast between Auslander and Phelan on the arguments of ontology and liveness’ role within the cultural economy, but goes further, establishing that “within social media, the live and the mediatised converge: the content that we are receiving has been undeniably *framed* by media, yet its creation continues to unfold before us”.³⁸ Building on this, it is possible to see that day-to-day encounters with mediatised performances, such as on social media sites, are examples of the digital immanence highlighted by Nash and Vaughan as absent from Auslander’s monograph. Similarly, Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye consider Auslander’s argument to be “shadowed” by how liveness “is defined in the

³³ Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 8.

³⁴ Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 11.

³⁵ Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 44.

³⁶ Nash, Adam and Laurene Vaughan, ‘Documenting Digital Performance Artworks’, in *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, ed. by Toni Sant (London; New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), pp. 149-160 (p. 151).

³⁷ Sant, p. 152.

³⁸ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre & Social Media* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 33.

interdependence and so contamination of liveness *in* mediation and vice versa”.³⁹ This productive reframing of “contamination” as a mutual influencing between the live and the mediated, rather than as a competitive or oppositional fight for dominance, is how, in this thesis, I conceive of the differences – if any – between live and mediated states.

3. Liveness in Digital Media: Tools, Affordances, Audiences

The Web 2.0 Conference held in San Francisco in 2004 saw the popularisation of the eponymous term, which is used to describe the supposed metamorphosis of the internet into a malleable, editable form, one that prioritises creative engagement rather than passive reception. For prominent internet culture scholar danah boyd, this shift is reflected in the rise of social media as a buzzword: in 2015 boyd described this form of media as a “set of tools, practices and ideologies” which “set the context and shaped the contours of a phenomenon rooted in the social, technical and business dynamics of what would become Web 2.0”.⁴⁰ However, as boyd has explored elsewhere, “the very meanings of ‘user’, ‘participation’ and ‘active’ need to be critically examined”,⁴¹ as what it means to be a ‘user’ of the internet is far from static and is constantly shaped by new affordances and interfaces, as well as user-based trends. Similar to the multitude of meanings contained in what it means to be an ‘audience’ in performance studies, digital scholarship has experienced a shift in the agency and activities attributed to digital users.⁴² As I explore in this section, this shift has taken place alongside the rise in ‘live’ functions on social media sites.

Early examples of ‘live’ functions on digital social media platforms can be found in mid-1990s sites like RealPlayer, which facilitated online simultaneous

³⁹ Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 200.

⁴⁰ danah boyd, ‘Social Media: A Phenomenon to Be Analyzed’, *Social Media + Society*, 1.1 (2015), p.1.

⁴¹ danah boyd and Kate Crawford, ‘Critical Questions for Big Data: Provocations for a Cultural, Technological, and Scholarly Phenomenon’, *Information, Communication, & Society*, 15.5 (2012), pp. 662–79 (p.669).

⁴² From Susan Bennett to Jacques Ranciere, Baz Kershaw, Reinelt, Helen Freshwater, Sedgman, and Harpin and Nicholson have all proposed contrasting approaches to defining an audience’s role, but are linked by a shared emphasis on participation, agency and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviours.

broadcasting. Twitch-predecessor Justin.tv launched as a “life-casting” site in 2007, with the intention of being a new version of “reality-TV”.⁴³ YouTube hosted its first livestream in 2008, as a well-publicised, celebrity-hosted event, and introduced it as a functionality for users in 2011 – the same year that Twitch launched with its emphasis on gaming communities. By the mid noughties, most major platforms had followed suit: Twitter acquired streaming site Periscope in 2015; Facebook Live launched in April 2016; and Instagram Live arrived in January 2017, with the ability to save the live broadcast to a user’s profile added two months later.⁴⁴ On each site, liveness functions differently: for instance, on Instagram, users receive push notifications when an account that they follow goes ‘live’, but ‘lives’ can also be archived within an account’s profile – or disappear altogether. For the editors of *Instagram*, this exemplifies how the idea of ephemerality is “complicated” on the site, and how it permits “multiple temporalities [to] exist alongside one another”.⁴⁵ This is particularly interesting in the context of Westerman’s criticism of Auslander and Phelan, whom he accused of relying on an “abstracted ‘now’ of performance”,⁴⁶ and provides a valuable reminder that the concept of “now” is often created by the structures that surround it. I return to this point in Part 3, in my analysis of how *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* (2019) embeds Instagram’s mixed chronologies within the performance in order to excavate the recent past. On Twitch, certain streams can be given a “coveted ‘front-page’ slot” on the site’s home page:⁴⁷ this is a strategic act of curation on the part of the site, as it imbues those front-page streams with an extra sense of timeliness and importance.

Livestreaming and gaming scholar T.L Taylor emphasises the contextual importance of the affordances that surround a social media site’s live function, using the example of Twitch’s chat box. They describe

a space of real-time dynamic exchange not just between broadcaster and audience but the audience members with each other too. [...] This

⁴³ T. L. Taylor, *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming* (Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 53.

⁴⁴ Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), p. 169.

⁴⁵ Leaver et al, p. 73.

⁴⁶ Lindelof and Reason, p. 195.

⁴⁷ Taylor, p. 63.

component of live streams taps into language around ‘engagement’ that social media marketers often use superficially. It is part of a longer trajectory of interaction that spectators, fans, and audiences have always had with media objects. Contrary to the rhetoric of the passive viewer, many studies have shown over the years the creative, active ways audiences take up content. Live streaming chat continues this thread, and as users frequently do, iterates it.⁴⁸

Taylor’s reference to “engagement” is reminiscent of Peter Brook’s “engaged” act of theatre: both descriptions are based on a “real-time dynamic” that revolves around performers and spectators. Unlike Brook, however, Taylor is not implying that it is a factor unique to a specific medium, placing it instead within the history of “media objects”, under which I would include the performing arts in general. Both Brook and Taylor also raise the topic of active and passive spectatorship: Brook’s description requires action to occur “whilst someone else is watching,” and although it could appear to minimise the act of spectatorship, it in fact stresses it as essential; similarly, Taylor points out that although the word “viewer” is often described in passive terms, viewership can take many forms – but in every case, it is still essential to that “dynamic exchange”.

In his 2016 monograph, Andy Lavender argues that “engagement” is the defining feature of twenty-first century theatre.⁴⁹ He defines it as the “*intertwining* of performance and experience, performance and witness, performance and encounter, performance and actuality,” and as something that arises “within spaces and scenes of mediation that are also sites of encounter and experience”.⁵⁰ More pertinently, he insists that this indicates a shift from “a society of the spectacle” to “a society of implicated spectation [...] [folding] the participant modally into its procedures”.⁵¹ I return to this idea in Part 2, which examines how emerging modes of performance leverage liveness in their mediation of an audience’s experience, but here it is Lavender’s notion of intertwinement and implication that takes precedence. He

⁴⁸ Taylor, p.43.

⁴⁹ Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.10.

⁵⁰ Lavender, p. 26.

⁵¹ Lavender, p. 131.

identifies a shift in the role of the audience that is both an expansion and a restriction: the audience *becomes* the spectacle. It is similar to how, for Henry Jenkins, Web 2.0 renders an audience as both “media producers and consumers”,⁵² a twenty-first century version of Alvin Toffler’s “prosumer”.⁵³

Although “producer” might have connotations of power and creativity, there is rarely a form of digital participation that is not shaped by the contexts in which it occurs: Baym and boyd remind their reader that “the rules of engagement on a site may disallow certain kinds of conversation”, and that specific affordances can dictate the format, reach and content of any user’s contribution.⁵⁴ This is echoed by researchers in performance studies, where participation on the part of the audience is understood to be rarely, if ever, fully autonomous. Baz Kershaw has argued that certain “protocols of audience membership” have “undermined participation in performance,”⁵⁵ and Adam Alston has written extensively on how many forms of immersive theatre stage experiences of agency for their audiences, without handing over the reins in any meaningful sense.⁵⁶

Moreover, this reveals how an audience’s participation can *become* the product. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams has described concepts of the audience as “illusory”, and simply “ways of seeing people as masses”,⁵⁷ but the ability to observe mass audiences has been enhanced by digital tools, which Baym and boyd describe as “[producing audiences] through measurement and surveillance”.⁵⁸ The online presence of an audience can both commercialise a performance by making it appealing to advertisers – as well as through the rising trend for platforms to incorporate donation systems that function like a tip jar for creators⁵⁹ – and an audience’s interactions can create valuable data which a site can harness for profit.

⁵² Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), p. 3.

⁵³ The term is explored throughout Toffler’s *The Third Wave* (Morrow, 1980).

⁵⁴ Nancy K. Baym and danah boyd, ‘Socially Mediated Publicness: An Introduction’, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 56.3 (2012), 320–29 (p. 326).

⁵⁵ Baz Kershaw, ‘Oh for Unruly Audiences! Or, Patterns of Participation in Twentieth-Century Theatre’, *Modern Drama*, 44.2 (2013), 133–54 (p. 136).

⁵⁶ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), p. 25.

⁵⁷ Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 2.

⁵⁸ Baym and boyd, p. 322.

⁵⁹ Taylor, p. 60.

This monetization of an audience's attendance is, clearly, not exclusive to digital sites – a digital tip jar is no different in principle than passing around a bucket after a Fringe show, for instance – but it is clear that as theatre embraces digital tools and techniques, the culture around payment, labour and the role of the audience will continue to evolve.

Kershaw has described a perceived downward trajectory of the moral and economic role of the theatre audience, from “the authority of the patron” to professional “client” to a market-dominated “customer”.⁶⁰ Taylor, however, perceives a different trend in livestream audiences, asking:

How should we understand the active work of live-streaming audiences with a distinctly commercialised sphere of new media development? Rather than [writing] off that engagement as simple exploitation or hollow participation, we need to understand how audiences are often knowing participants in the construction of new media forms, even ones for sale.⁶¹

Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, editors of *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences and Politics* (2017), agree, writing that to ignore the “cultural shift” caused by the ubiquity of social media and “post-industrial”, digitally networked communities is to reinforce “patterns of thought that were associated with a previous industrial era”.⁶² They argue that scholarly arguments about participation in the theatre must be linked to broader conversations about agency, labour and authorship in society at large, which echoes Janelle Reinelt's argument that in “the current neoliberal conjuncture [...] a new way of thinking about the value of spectator experiences needs to be developed and articulated”.⁶³ This expands Auslander's argument that cultural understandings of liveness evolve alongside technologies, with the reminder that such technology does not evolve in a vacuum: it is essential to understand the models of finance, production and distribution that shape and support such shifts in technology.

⁶⁰ Kershaw, p. 143.

⁶¹ Taylor, p. 47.

⁶² Anna Harpin and Helen Nicholson, *Performance and Participation: Practices, Audiences, Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2017), p. 2.

⁶³ Janelle Reinelt, ‘What UK Spectators Know: Understanding How We Come to Value Theatre’, *Theatre Journal*, 66.3 (2014), 337–61 (p. 340).

The popularity of ‘live’ functions on social media sites is involving audiences in the creation of new structures of liveness, and these experiences draw on the same foundational tools that create liveness in the theatre: a ‘now’ moment that is positioned in relation to bespoke chronologies, and the visible demonstration of some form of “dynamic exchange” between performers and participants – or, just participants. Theatre maker Grant Tyler Peterson has argued that theatre scholars and digital culture scholars should embrace the potential of these similarities, writing that “the foundations of performance studies tackled early on what so many academic fields find so troubling about the internet: the destabilisation of binaries like spectator/participant, amateur/professional, singular/collaborative [...]”.⁶⁴ Although his call to action is dated, and he does not specify exactly *which* academic fields are troubled by the internet, his point that both theatre and digital culture explore the same tensions in society is affirmed by this description, from Baym and boyd, of how “social media blur boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public, and virtual and real, affecting how old patterns should be understood and raising new challenges and opportunities”.⁶⁵ The increasing overlap between theatre and digital culture provides such an opportunity in the study of liveness: an opportunity to explore how “old patterns” are being challenged, and how new cultural modes of liveness are being formed as a consequence of those challenges. Lavender writes that theatre is now “something other than an encounter between actors, or between actor and audience. There is no longer a separation between the space of performance and that of spectatorship”,⁶⁶ and this thesis will argue that many emerging modes of liveness are directly linked to this dissolution of clearly demarcated roles: when the object is also the subject, and vice versa, then liveness – once so linked to binary ways of thinking – must take a new shape.

⁶⁴ Jacky Bratton and Grant Tyler Peterson, ‘The Internet: History 2.0?’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, ed. by Christine Dymkowski and David Wiles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 299–313 (p. 304).

⁶⁵ Baym and boyd, p. 320.

⁶⁶ Lavender, p. 9.

4. Methodology

My methodology is informed by theatre historian Ric Knowles and his work in *Reading the Material Theatre* (2004). Knowles proposes a form of analysis that considers the “whole” theatre event, taking into account the buildings, marketing materials, funding structures and local and national historical contexts, as well as the performance itself. He describes his “site-specific” method as including “cultural materialism, theatre semiotics, and reception work in the field of cultural studies” and argues that meaning is “produced” by, rather than “contained within”, the “entire theatre experience”.⁶⁷ My thesis expands Knowles’ premise of the “entire theatre” to include the ways in which digital tools, technologies and cultures also contribute to a theatre experience: this can include increasingly commonplace factors such as digital marketing materials and a theatre’s online presence, and also the digital methods of performance distribution, digital tools of engagement, and digital sites of performance – instances where the main location, the *stage* of the performance, is digital rather than physical. Knowles does not discuss the materiality of digital tools and cultures, but I demonstrate through my case studies that his “site-specific” mode of analysis can be productively applied to digitally aided performances. Throughout my research I incorporate digital ephemera – screenshots, viewer counts, ticketing pages, and post-show discussion boards, for example – in order to enhance Knowles’ approach to contextualising performance.

Knowles also explains that his application of semiotics moves into “closer compatibility with phenomenology, one the one hand, and performance studies on the other”, which is an approach this thesis emulates. For Knowles, this approach allows a scholar to understand a performance as simultaneously “discursively constructed” and as a “phenomenon that occurs and has consequences in the material world, where it is encountered by individual human subjects”.⁶⁸ Although I agree that the consequence and meaning of any performance is contingent upon the individual, I do not undertake audience response analysis in this thesis: instead I frame an audience’s

⁶⁷ Richard Paul Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 67.

⁶⁸ Knowles, p. 201.

experience through Gareth White’s notion of the “theatrical invitation”.⁶⁹ This thesis is primarily concerned with liveness as an evolving set of dramaturgical tools and strategies, rather than with pinpointing the subjective and personal ways that liveness might be experienced by an audience member. As such, I have chosen to focus on the ways that a theatre-maker can pose invitations to their audiences within their work, as part of such a strategy, and how the context of a performance shapes the way that it is framed as a live experience, rather than to quantify the individual, subjective responses to those theatrical invitations – although that could offer a rich seam for further enquiry.

Moreover, research has already been carried out that evaluates liveness on a subjective, individual level. For instance, Reason’s ‘Young Audiences and Live Theatre, Part 2: Perceptions of Liveness in Performance’ takes a qualitative and empirical approach to explore the perspectives of young audience members on the “liveness of live theatre”.⁷⁰ Such an approach results in valuable insights into how the study’s participants respond to the “complex set of cultural values and social codes [which] govern our experience of live theatre”.⁷¹ Such an approach could enrich elements of my research, in particular the case studies of Part 2 which explore liveness and the experience economy, but to do so would have drawn the focus away from the broader contexts of digitally aided performance that are the subject of this thesis.

However, it is important to note that theatre and performance research has often overlooked the experiences of the audience, which Lynne Conner criticises as permission to “write our histories in comfortable allegiance to hegemonic perspectives”.⁷² Scholars such as Helen Freshwater have addressed and criticised this “broader scholarly tendency” to avoid “the voices and opinions of ‘ordinary’ audience members who have no professional links to the theatre”, and instead to prioritise the published opinions of academics and reviewers whom, she writes, “can in no way be

⁶⁹ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 18.

⁷⁰ Matthew Reason, ‘Young Audiences and Live Theatre, Part 2: Perceptions of Liveness in Performance’ in *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 26:3 (2006), pp. 221–241 (p. 221).

⁷¹ Reason, ‘Young Audiences’, p. 240.

⁷² Lynne Conner, ‘Disrupting the Audience as Monolith’, in *Routledge Companion to Audiences and the Performing Arts*, eds. Matthew Reason, Lynne Conner, Katya Johanson and Ben Walmsley, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 53–67 (p. 19).

described as representative of ‘audiences in general’”.⁷³ This opinion is shared by Kirsty Sedgman, who describes “a real need to analyse not simply the invitations that theatre makers extend to audiences, but also how audiences offer invitations to performers”.⁷⁴ Yet, for Liz Tomlin, in *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship*, this recent emphasis on non-expert audiences “can risk bolstering the reconfiguration of spectator into consumer”.⁷⁵ Tomlin argues that a “respondent’s narrative is never an unmediated truth” and that “the ‘real’ spectator’s ‘authentic’ response, while a perfectly valid object of research, is no more authentic or reliable than the predicted response of the theorized spectator”.⁷⁶ Tomlin’s own methodology considers such a “theorized spectator” alongside their personal, subjective experiences of a specific performance and similarly adopts White’s notion of the invitation as a means of evaluating dramaturgical strategies.⁷⁷

Identifying an “ordinary” audience member also proves to be more complicated than Freshwater’s criteria of a person without “professional links” to the industry; Sedgman reflects that evaluating audience members in such a manner is “rather more complicated to achieve in practice” and that using financial recompense as a means of distinguishing professionalism in the theatre industry is an unreliable measure.⁷⁸ Sedgman describes how, for instance, “the line between reporter and blogger is increasingly difficult to draw”.⁷⁹ Many of the case studies in this thesis took place at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the Berliner Theatertreffen, two events which could be described as industry trade fairs as well as public arts festivals, and drawing a line between so-called professional and non-professional audiences in such a context would prove a particular challenge.

Freshwater is also rightly critical of theatre scholarship that solely relies upon theatre criticism to speak for an audience’s response to a performance, arguing that reviews “project the subjective responses of the critic on to the rest of the audience,

⁷³ Helen Freshwater, *Theatre & Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 33.

⁷⁴ Sedgman, p. 19.

⁷⁵ Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019), p. 12.

⁷⁶ Tomlin, p. 19.

⁷⁷ Tomlin, p. 23.

⁷⁸ Sedgman, p. 49.

⁷⁹ Sedgman, p. 50.

discursively producing the audience the critic would like to imagine rather than accurately reflecting the complexity and potential diversity of collective and individual response”.⁸⁰ I agree that theatre criticism cannot fully represent the response of any audience, but I do consider published reviews to be an important component of the context in which a performance exists. Knowles writes that reviewers are neither “consumer reporters nor aesthetic judges” but also that theatre criticism is both a product of, and a form of evidence for, the context in which a performance exists.⁸¹ He writes that “reviews operating at Fringe time [can] act as consumer guides to the festival marketplace” and demonstrates how reviews can be used to evaluate the relationship between certain horizons of expectation and a theatre’s marketing campaigns.⁸²

I use theatre journalism for similar purposes in this thesis. Reviews are used in addition to a range of sources that contextualise a performance, and offer insight into the public-facing, institutionally approved discourse surrounding a performance, while news headlines and reports bring a sense of historical scale to some of the events detailed in this thesis. Lastly, I use published interviews with artists not to provide a more ‘correct’ or authoritative reading of a performance, but as insight into the way an artist wishes to present their theatrical intentions in the public record. It is also important to note that journalistic or critical coverage does not exist for every performance analysed in this thesis, and it is no coincidence that it is typically the institutionally backed performances that have been chronicled in such a way. As such, I do not use reviews, news reports or artist interviews as a sole source of information for any case study in this thesis, rather as one possible source in a broad range of possible sources.

Moreover, analysing digitally aided performances requires additional skills and sources beyond the remit of Knowles’ methodological approach. Encouraged by Freshwater’s advocacy for interdisciplinary study as the future of research in the field of theatre and performance, my thesis draws on a broad theoretical background that begins with theatre studies but includes digital media, gaming and social geography,

⁸⁰ Freshwater, p.8–9.

⁸¹ Knowles, p. 21.

⁸² Knowles, p. 197, p.93.

as well as digital ethnographic practices.⁸³ Freshwater's call for cross-disciplinary research is also echoed by leading scholars in the field of digital media research, and provides the basis for Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase's comprehensive handbook on social media research methods, published in 2017. In their introduction, they write, "some scholars have studied social phenomena on social media as a separate sphere from 'real life', [but] we argue that these applications need to be viewed as integrated into and as an integral part of society at large".⁸⁴ It is the importance of integrating such phenomena within specific societal contexts that has led to my close analysis of two cities over three years, which I explain in more detail in the 'Edinburgh and Berlin' section below.

I have developed my social media methodology in reference to the codes of ethics of the Association of Internet Researchers, which is in turn grounded on widely accepted principles of ethical research, and I have chosen a conservative approach that protects individuals' identities even in the case of information that they have made publicly available on social media. All personal data that I have collected from Twitter has been anonymised and paraphrased or aggregated in my thesis. Although Twitter does not impose an age restriction on users, I have not researched performances marketed specifically towards children. Some performers and theatres created WhatsApp groups and Instagram accounts to be used during the show by audience members: audience members were invited to take part in these groups and could refuse, or leave the online group at any point, with no consequence for their participation in the broader performance. I treat these digital spaces as part of the public space within which an audience gathers, akin to the auditorium of a physical theatre. I do not seek out the personal information of any participants within these spaces and ensure that no potentially identifying information has been included within my PhD. In one other instance, I use the comments board of the German theatre website *Nachtkritik.de*, where the identity of the users is impossible to verify: as such, all users are already either anonymous or pseudonymous. The only identifiable social media comments published in full in this thesis are those that have been published in a professional

⁸³ Freshwater, pp.31-32.

⁸⁴ *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods.*, ed. by Anabel Quan-Haase and Luke Sloan, 1st ed.. (London: SAGE Publications, 2017), p. 3.

capacity – for instance, by a theatre company’s marketing department, or by a theatre-maker on a public-facing platform.

In terms of my observational role as an audience member and a researcher, I have observed behavioural trends amongst audiences both online and offline in a manner in line with standard ethical practices within theatre studies. No interviews were conducted, or personal information gathered, during this element of my research. All interviews conducted by myself that are included within this thesis have been carried out in my capacity as a freelance journalist, rather than as a PhD student, working in commission for *The Guardian*, *The Skinny*, *Exberliner* and *Fest magazine*. As such, they reflect the editorial standards and interests of those publications and discuss topics that were considered news-worthy at the time of publishing. I use quotations from those articles as they exist in the public domain.

Throughout this research I have remained alert to the danger of prioritising my own experiences as an audience member within my analysis, and within these broad cultural, political, and economic contexts. I specify in each case study if, and when, I have personally attended a certain performance, and in those instances I use my subjective experiences as just one lens through which to analyse a performance – a process that Lavender describes as “a form of immersed analysis”⁸⁵ – and combine this with the wider remit of my research materials. In Deidre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan’s analysis of spectatorship in One-to-One performances, they describe a form of “Spectator-Participation-as-Research” and reflect that even in such performances when “the academic commentator might, for once, reasonably speak for the whole audience”, “the data are always partial and subjective and significantly incomplete”.⁸⁶ Heddon et al highlight Iball’s identification of “giving good audience” as one such impulse that necessarily impacts an audience member’s experiences, and which could distort the experiences and post-performance reflections and research of an “academic commentator”.⁸⁷ I recognise this impulse as particularly difficult to overcome in performances that invite specific contributions from an audience member,

⁸⁵ Lavender, p.4.

⁸⁶ Deidre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan, ‘Come Closer: Confessions of Intimate Spectators in One to One Performance’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:1 (2012) pp. 120–133 (p. 132).

⁸⁷ Heddon et al, p. 124.

and have considered if, and when, my own contributions could damage my ability to critically reflect on the performance, when analysing it for this thesis. One such instance can be found in my analysis of *The Believers are but Brothers*, in which audience members were encouraged to text in answers to specific questions. I chose not to respond, caught between the desire to “give good audience” and the concern that I would distort my role as an “academic commentator”.

In his work on immersive theatre, Alston proposes that a researcher should be considered “a researching audience member ‘embedded’ in immersive theatre performances”, and I acknowledge my position as similarly embedded – regardless of my behaviour as an audience – within the performances discussed in this thesis, as well as more broadly embedded within the theatre landscapes in Edinburgh and Berlin.⁸⁸ This is part of Alston’s broader “cross-disciplinary methodology” where he writes that “[i]f a given performance is to be adequately analysed, then the limitations of individuality must be recognised as limitations, but ultimately employed as an advantage”.⁸⁹ Alston argues that it is possible for an “opinionated theorist” to harness a “critical position, even if it is not an *objective* position (which would seem a difficult ambition to achieve”.⁹⁰ (original emphasis) Moreover, he argues that this form of embedded, site-specific “researching audience member” can “open up space to engage in depth with a particular field of cultural production and a detailed political and economic context that has affected this field”.⁹¹ This is of particular importance to my research, which endeavours to offer a comparative analysis between the contrasting contexts of cultural production in both Edinburgh and Berlin, from the perspective of a sustained period of embeddedness in both cities as a researching audience member.

⁸⁸ Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 25.

⁸⁹ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 25–26.

⁹⁰ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 26.

⁹¹ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 23.

5. Edinburgh and Berlin

Since the late 1990s, much academic research regarding liveness has been either extremely broad – Auslander’s *Liveness* takes in the legal system, rock music and sports, for instance – or extremely narrow, concentrating on liveness as it pertains to one specific performance or broadcast. Through a comparison of the theatre industries in Edinburgh and Berlin over a three-year period, I offer a middle ground: this approach provides the opportunity to interrogate in greater depth the relationships between liveness and institutional, socio-economic, and cultural factors, and supports in-depth analysis of performances created within these contexts. Adam Alston has suggested that “focusing [...] on work presented in a single city opens up space to engage in depth with a particular field of cultural production and [with] a detailed political and economic context that has affected this field”,⁹² and I build on this line of thought by offering a comparative analysis of the contrasting contexts of cultural production in both cities. In *K-Pop Live* Kim emphasised how the study of liveness is extremely Western-centric, and although this thesis is concentrated upon Western European cities, my intention is to demonstrate the need for deeper contextualisation in this field of research.

Edinburgh and Berlin are two Western European capital cities with deeply influential performing arts traditions. Home to historic theatre institutions like the Edinburgh International Festival and the Berliner Ensemble, both cities hold global reputations for theatrical excellence. However, this is where their similarities end: the attitudes and approaches to theatre making in Edinburgh and Berlin are extremely different, from creative decisions regarding form and content to the institutional funding structures that support the industries in both cities. By examining these points of difference, I hope to illustrate the extent to which liveness is contextual, and how it can manifest extremely differently, even within two Western European cities that – on the surface – might have much in common.

Berlin’s theatres are, for the most part, ensemble organisations: theatre venues that are home to large, permanent creative teams comprising actors, technicians,

⁹² Alston, *Beyond*, p. 23.

directors, and dramaturgs, and which draw from an existing repertoire of performances to curate the theatre's programme on a month-by-month basis. This system allows for productions to be restaged intermittently over a span of weeks, months or even years. In Part 1, I analyse how the structure of repertory theatres support festivals like the prestigious annual Berliner Theatertreffen, and what happens on the rare occasion that it is impossible to resurrect a particular production. In Edinburgh, none of the city's five main theatres are repertory, functioning instead as commissioning theatres or simply as venues for touring companies. In the case of the former, exemplified by the Royal Lyceum and the Traverse, a smaller permanent creative team hires in playwrights, directors, actors, and other creatives on a project-by-project basis. This results in a strictly limited run for each production, usually lasting anywhere between three nights and three months, and it is far less common for these plays to be restaged in the same venue, although they may tour elsewhere. Throughout this thesis I explore the repercussions of these different industry structures on the perceived lifespan of a performance, and how these different approaches to a performance's creation, duration and longevity can impact upon its relationship to liveness.

Moreover, the two capitals have deep-rooted differences in their creative practices. Two concepts are central to the German theatre tradition: *Werktreue*, which concerns fidelity to the text upon which the performance is based, holding up the script as the original 'work' and the playwright as the ultimate author of any subsequent production; and *Regietheater*, which speaks to an artistic process that prioritises the creative vision and hierarchical role of the director within an ensemble.⁹³ Both these concepts are, as David Barnett explains, somewhat alien to English-speaking theatre "because of the different dynamics of the two theatre systems, in particular the relative importance of the playwright and the director".⁹⁴ Although 'Werktreue' is largely considered to be a regressive and conservative approach to theatre-making, it still resonates in discussions surrounding a re-staging or an adaptation of a work.⁹⁵ Barnett

⁹³ Christopher B. Balme, *Einführung in die Theaterwissenschaft*, 2nd rev. edn. (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2001).

⁹⁴ David Barnett, 'Offending the Playwright: Directors' Theatre and the "Werktreue" Debate', in *German Text Crimes: Writers Accused, from the 1950s to the 2000s*, ed. by Tom Cheesman, *German Monitor*, 77 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 75–98 (pp. 75–76).

⁹⁵ For example, a search on prominent German-language theatre review web site *Nachtkritik* finds 88 articles which use the term. [Searched 9 May 2017]

contextualises ‘Regietheater’ in particular as an historical artistic movement linked to Germany’s “decentred” state system, which supports “major theatres [all over] Germany as opposed to being found exclusively in the capital city”, and explains that it places directors in a “far more central role in the business of theatrical production than those in the English-speaking world”.⁹⁶ It was popularised in the 1970s, when directors like Peter Stein and, slightly later, Frank Castorf, refashioned themselves as auteurs and the theatre-making process as a vessel for establishing idiosyncratic directorial voices. I return to Barnett’s correlation between modes of theatre making and Germany’s decentred state system in Part 1, where the contrast between Germany’s federal funding and the UK’s London-centric arts ecosystem is shown to influence patterns of touring theatre in both countries, as well as the boom in the livestreaming industry in the UK and its relative absence in Germany.

For now, it is enough to say that Germany’s federal system impacts the theatre industry far beyond the evolving historical role of the director. State funding plays a large and important role in the upkeep of theatres across the country, creating a network of leading theatre houses. In Berlin, it is governed by the Senate’s 2008 General Directive on the Funding of Private-Sector Theatres and Theatre Dance Groups in Berlin, which was created to improve the transparency and accessibility of the funding process. Certain institutes acknowledged as “high profile” receive “secure long-term institutional funding”, and this support is discussed as part of the Berlin Senate’s budgetary legislation.⁹⁷ A tiered system also offers individual grants to short-term projects, basic two-year funding plans for groups and venues, and concept funding which lasts for a minimum of four years. Of the theatres that appear in this thesis, two are official, state theatres: the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz and the Deutsches Theater both receive legally protected, institutional funding which supports building maintenance and operational costs as well as artistic programming. This level of financial support gives a certain amount of control to the Senate; for instance, key hiring decisions are often made on a governmental level.

⁹⁶ Barnett, p. 76.

⁹⁷ Senate Department for Culture and Europe, *Theatre and Dance* (2016), <<http://www.berlin.de/sen/kultur/en/funding/cultural-institutions/theatre-and-dance/index.php>> [accessed 2 April 2017].

In comparison, Edinburgh's theatres and festivals are partially supported by Creative Scotland, a nation-wide organisation which distributes arts funding from the National Lottery, and, to a lesser extent, a budget allocated by the Scottish Government. In the 2016-17 Annual Plan, the organisation announced a reduction of £1.2m from the Government's Grant in Aid funding scheme and warned of on-going instability, saying "we do know that the financial environment will continue to be challenging".⁹⁸ Although the "cultural carnage" predicted to hit the industry following this statement did not come to pass, the BBC's Scotland arts correspondent Pauline McLean noted that of the nineteen new organisations added to the funding scheme, many were administrative bodies rather than artistic companies. She reflected that "the argument [is] that they can reach a wider number of organisations than one single production",⁹⁹ which is particularly interesting in contrast to Germany's federal system. On the one hand, Creative Scotland's strategic move towards funding administrative bodies like Creative Edinburgh and the Federation for Scottish Theatre, in theory, hands over the responsibility for distributing funds within artistic communities to localised and/or industry experts. On the other, it creates another level of bureaucracy – and that Creative Scotland would choose administrative bodies over creative organisations (like the several theatre companies initially dropped from the same funding round) speaks to a different set of priorities, in comparison to Berlin's tendency to fund buildings and artistic institutions directly.¹⁰⁰ I do not intend to argue for the benefits of either system here, simply to reveal how financial structures have a direct impact on what kind of art gets made, and who gets to decide.

Creative Scotland allocates financial support across the entire nation, rather than by city or county, and the 'Regular Funding' model is the closest comparison to Berlin's long-term institutional funding. However, Creative Scotland's model only offers theatres (and other creative organisations) the opportunity to apply for funding on a three-year basis, even though 102 organisations were carried forward into the next

⁹⁸ Creative Scotland, *Annual Plan 2016-17*, <<http://www.creativescotland.com/what-we-do/annual-plan>> [accessed 9 May 2017].

⁹⁹ Pauline McLean, 'Big Losers but Arts Funding Avoids "Cultural Carnage"', *BBC News*, 25 January 2018, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-42816509>> [accessed 9 July 2021].

¹⁰⁰ McLean.

three-year cycle in 2018. A formal, published overview explained the stipulations for ‘Regular Funding’ that year, explaining that all successful organisations

needed to demonstrate clearly their vision and purpose and how their work helps to deliver our first two ambitions: “excellence and experimentation” and “access and enjoyment”. In addition, organisations were asked to demonstrate how their work contributed to Creative Scotland’s connecting themes; to the broader development of the sector; commitment to fair pay; that they have effective governance and leadership in place; that they are financially resilient and robust; and that they have a commitment to EDI.¹⁰¹

In the 2018 funding round, 121 organisations were deemed to have succeeded at demonstrating these qualities. Twelve of those organisations were year-round Edinburgh-based theatre organisations, and the Traverse and the Royal Lyceum theatres received the highest allocation, granted £2,600,000 and £3,630,000 respectively. Both of these theatres have an emphasis on new writing: the Traverse foregrounds this most obviously, marketing itself as “Scotland’s new writing theatre”¹⁰² with two, versatile black box theatres, but even the Lyceum’s plush, late-Victorian auditorium and grand proscenium arch is committed to developing “a mix of rediscovered classics, new plays, and fresh adaptations”.¹⁰³ It is fair to say that this is likely encouraged by Creative Scotland’s own emphasis on “experimentation” and sector “development”.

Another major organisation that receives regular Creative Scotland funding is the Edinburgh International Festival. The EIF has established a world-wide reputation over its seventy-year history, and hires many of the city’s grandest venues – including the Royal Lyceum – to host an international programme of artists during its three-week run in August. Yet, in 2018, the Edinburgh Fringe Society – set up as a once-radical

¹⁰¹Creative Scotland, *RFO Overview*, <https://www.creativescotland.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/47627/RFO-Overview-2018.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2021], p.7.

¹⁰² Traverse Theatre, *About Us*, <<https://www.traverse.co.uk/about-us>> [accessed 21 March 2022].

¹⁰³ The Lyceum, *Season 2017/18 Announcement from David Greig*, <<https://lyceum.org.uk/press/entry/season-2017-18-announcement-from-david-greig>> [accessed 21 March 2022].

alternative to the EIF – was dropped from Creative Scotland’s funding scheme, a decision that McLean interpreted as implying that the Fringe “should rely more on their major source [of funding]... the City of Edinburgh Council”.¹⁰⁴ The Fringe and the EIF both take place in August, alongside the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and *The Herald* has acknowledged that “each major August festival in Edinburgh is expanding”, writing that this is prompting “increasing questions over the sustainability of the continual growth of the capital’s festival season, with some asking: how much Festival can one city take?”¹⁰⁵ The Edinburgh Festivals are a dominating force on the city’s arts scenes; they generate a reported 6000 full-time jobs and draw millions of tourists to the capital. In the same article, *The Herald* summarises: “The city [...] relies, financially, on them, and yet some feel it impinges on the quality of life of ordinary Edinburgh citizens”.¹⁰⁶ Throughout this thesis, it becomes apparent that much of the truly experimental work performed in Edinburgh is brought to the city through the festivals, and that the sector is deeply August-biased: few of my Scottish case studies were performed during the rest of the year, despite Creative Scotland’s ring-fenced Made in Scotland scheme, which supports Scottish theatre, music and dance at the Fringe.

This analysis of the differences between the theatre industries in Edinburgh and Berlin is far from exhaustive and will be continued throughout this thesis. The discussion thus far is intended to establish here that funding infrastructures inevitably shape the nature of what theatre gets made, staged and seen in these cities and, in turn, how liveness is created, perceived, and valued in contrasting performing arts industries.

¹⁰⁴ McLean.

¹⁰⁵ Phill Miller, ‘Edinburgh Festivals: Is It Time to Call a Halt on Their Growth?’, *The Herald*, 24 February 2019. <<https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/17455433.edinburgh-festivals-time-call-halt-growth/>> [accessed 14 July 2021].

¹⁰⁶ Miller.

6. Chapter Outlines

This thesis is divided into three parts, and each part consists of a pair of chapters, with one focused on theoretical approaches and the other on case studies from Edinburgh and Berlin.

In Part 1: Digital Distribution, I first explore how technologies of digital distribution pose a challenge to long-established definitions of liveness in the theatre. I consider the history of the argument that holds liveness to be a quality that resists documentation and discuss in greater detail the positions held by scholars such as Phelan and Auslander. Chapter 1 also delves into the function of ‘live’ as a label and examines it through the scholarship of J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, and Daisy Abbott and Claire Read, as well as in relation to the United Kingdom’s event cinema industry. In Chapter 2, I analyse the use of broadcasting and livestreaming at the Berliner Theatertreffen and argue that it creates a hierarchy of performances based on notions of limitation and exclusivity. The chapter then discusses similar presentations of livestreaming at the Edinburgh Fringe, in Nassim Soleimanpour’s *Nassim* and Anita Rochon’s *Pathetic Fallacy*, and establishes how digital distribution is more commonly used to reinforce, rather than to disturb, pre-existing hierarchies of cultural and economic power.

In Part 2: Digital Mediation, I consider the relationship between sensations of liveness and performances that use digital mediation to invite creative contributions from the audience. First, in Chapter 3, I discuss theoretical approaches to theatrical immersion and focus on the work of Josephine Machon, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Gabriella Giannachi, and Adam Alston. I explore the connection between experiences of liveness and performances that emphasise participation and agency on the part of the audience. Then, in Chapter 4, I present case studies that use technologies ranging from virtual reality and binaural sound to messaging platforms and neural networks in order to discuss questions of labour, authorship and privacy in digitally mediated performances.

Finally, in Part 3: Digital Location, I examine performances that take place in digital spaces, and the ways in which a digital performance space or place can be considered to be 'live'. In Chapter 5, I discuss the difference between place and space as it pertains to digital sites of performance through Henri Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space, Marvin Carlson's configuration of performance space, and Doreen Massey's analysis of globalisation, and with a consideration of the physical and socio-political implications of the popular augmented reality game Pokémon Go. In Chapter 6, I illustrate how understanding digitally located performances through these approaches to space and place can reveal the ways in which a digital performance site can be experienced as live. Chapter 6 compares the Instagram-based production *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* to the use of augmented reality in *Verirrtten sich im Wald*, analyses the use of digital mapping apps in the creation of temporarily site-specific performance, and discusses the use of digital performance sites by national and regional theatres seeking to reach beyond their geographical remits.

PART 1: DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION

“Is this real, or has the story already started?” – *The Encounter* (2015)

1. Introduction

Digital distribution technologies can transport theatre from an initial time and space of performance into alternate times and spaces of viewership. In doing so, these modes of digital distribution pose a challenge to long-established definitions of liveness in theatre and performance, as well as to hierarchies of cultural value that are based upon notions of limitation, accessibility, documentation, and authenticity. Part 1 of this thesis examines instances of digitally distributed theatre in Edinburgh and Berlin and compares the infrastructure and cultural hierarchies behind the contrasting modes of digital distribution in both cities. I argue that liveness is not only created by certain modes of performance, but that it is also directly shaped by the various ways in which performance is valued, marketed, and sold – even though these value systems are often based on a fixed, ontological definition of liveness.

Part 1 consists of two chapters. Chapter One explores the history of the argument that liveness is a quality that resists dissemination, documentation, repetition, and remediation, and does so with reference to the rapid growth of the event cinema industry in the United Kingdom; Chapter Two provides in-depth case studies of digitally distributed performances at the Berliner Theatertreffen and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and considers how two extremely different theatre festivals approach the questions raised by such performances: questions of presence and absence, and exclusivity and access.

Chapter 1: Liveness as a Commodity

1. Defining Digital Distribution

In the introduction to this thesis I argued for greater specificity in the language used to describe digitally aided performance. Here I propose ‘digital distribution’ as one particular kind of digitally aided performance; I use the term to pinpoint a difference between the way digital tools can be used to enhance the staging of a performance (for instance, in pre-programmed lighting design), and when digital tools are used to broadcast a performance (or an aspect of a performance) beyond an initial time and space into additional performance contexts. This chapter begins by defining digital distribution in greater depth, and then examines how acts of distribution pose a challenge to the idea that fixed notions of time, space and duration are integral to liveness in the theatre. I then consider how the digital distribution of theatre intersects with theoretical approaches to remediation, which have been foundational to media studies more broadly. Lastly, I use the example of the event cinema industry in the UK to explore how the event-status of such events contribute to the creation of a specific kind of liveness.

My use of the term ‘digital distribution’ refers to performances that are made available to audiences by means of digital infrastructure. This includes simultaneous online broadcasts and the streaming of pre-recorded performances hosted on purpose-built web sites or social media platforms, as well as the distribution of recorded or simulcast performances in brick-and-mortar venues such as cinemas and theatres. I do not use it to describe performances that incorporate digital media purely for narrative purposes, although of course performances of that kind can also be digitally mediated. German theatre has a particularly rich history of incorporating such hybrid media on stage, as Johannes Birringer observes: he writes of “the interest that German theatres have invested in deconstructivist dramaturgical visions” and references “Frank Castorf at the Berlin Volksbühne [who] has worked consistently with camera teams,” among

many other artists.¹ Although I do not address directly this rich history of hybrid media on German stages in this chapter, in order to speak more precisely to the relationship between digital distribution and the time and space of performance, I am not denying the creative intent and artistic merit behind the modes of broadcasting considered in this chapter. Nor do I wish to imply that hybrid media performances cannot also be digitally distributed, and one such Castorf production features in my Theatertreffen case study. It is relevant, however, that Birringer associates these hybrid modes of performance with the “avant-garde”, given that this chapter and the accompanying case studies reveal that digital distribution is increasingly used as a hegemonic tool in both the German and British theatre industries, rather than to develop new forms of performance. It is also significant that Birringer’s article positions the use of film and screen technologies on stage as the antithesis of “realist conventions” in the theatre. In the following discussion of remediation theories, I argue that emerging technologies continue to be perceived in opposition to the ‘real’, and analyse the impact of this on the cultural and economic values placed on certain digital modes of performance.²

2. Peggy Phelan’s Theory of Limitation

Since the 1990s, many performance studies scholars have discussed the relation between the documentation, reproduction and distribution of performance and ontological definitions of performance.³ Peggy Phelan’s argument in *Unmarked* is one of the most influential, and her firm assertion that “[p]erformance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive” has underpinned many subsequent arguments against the liveness, or performance-status, of distributed performances.⁴ However, *Unmarked* is also often held up as an example of an impossibly restrictive ontological definition of performance. Phelan writes that performance cannot “participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations”, because it is only through being “saved, recorded

¹ Birringer, ‘The Theatre’, pp. 108–10.

² Birringer, ‘The Theatre’, p. 210.

³ Most notably, Auslander’s 2006 article ‘The Performativity of Performance Documentation’, Matthew Reason’s *Documentation, Disappearance, and the Representation of Live Performance* (2006) and *Documenting Performance* (2017), edited by Toni Sant, amongst others.

⁴ Phelan, p. 148.

or documented” that a performance can “enter the economy of reproduction” and that, in doing so, performance “betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology”.⁵ This is essential, she writes, because performance must exist outside of “the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital”.⁶ In *Liveness* Auslander responds to this particular line of argument, describing it as “unrealistic” and retorting, “I doubt very strongly that any cultural discourse can stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define a mediatized culture or should be expected to do so, even to assume an oppositional stance”.⁷ Beyond Auslander’s market-based analysis, Alberto Pendón Martínez and Gema Bueno de la Fuente, create a three-fold categorisation process for documenting performance that directly counters Phelan’s ontological description of performance. Their system acknowledges the lack of a stable, single identity for any performance and differentiates between “the author’s mental concept of the work,” “the set of instructions and resources that serve that process”, and a “concrete expression of that work”.⁸ They position the performance event as an *expression of* those three categories, already a reproductive act. These two criticisms of Phelan’s work – the first on the realities of the marketplace, and the second regarding the impossibility of fully separating a performance event from all other iterations of that performance – will be important throughout this chapter, but there is one significant element of Phelan’s approach to the valuation of performance that remains extremely useful.

Phelan’s definition of performance relies on three central beliefs: a performance is non-reproducible; a performance is defined by its relation to the ‘real’; a performance is defined by limitation.⁹ The first of these beliefs, as we have already seen, has been criticised by Auslander, Pendón Martínez and Bueno de la Fuente, and the second belief – the notion of the real – will be returned to later in this chapter. Here, I focus on Phelan’s theory of limitation, as it provides insight into hierarchies of cultural value that are remain highly relevant. Phelan defines performance as “the

⁵ Phelan, p. 148.

⁶ Phelan, p. 148.

⁷ Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 45.

⁸ Alberto Pendón Martínez and Gema Bueno de la Fuente, ‘Description Models for Documenting Performance’, in *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, ed. by Toni Sant (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp.29-46.

⁹ Phelan, p.146, p.3, p. 149.

artform which most fully understands the generative possibilities of disappearance” and returns to this idea later in the monograph, arguing that “[p]erformance honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward”.¹⁰ Combined, these two statements create a definition of performance based on limitation – that a performance must have a limited duration and thus be attended by a limited audience, in order to create value. In short, this suggests that if it were possible for a performance to be seen by *everybody*, that performance would not have the same value.

In this elaboration on her oft-cited argument that “performance’s only life is in the present”,¹¹ it becomes clear that, for Phelan, the “present” must have a strict beginning and end, as it is this “specific” sense of time that is critical to the “life” of a performance. It is also vital to Phelan’s argument that this “present” can become an absence. She writes that “[p]resence is theatre’s promise as well as its doubt”¹² and, ultimately, her ontology rests on a state of permanent coming-into-being, that performance is “[p]oised forever at the threshold of the present”.¹³ As the case studies in Chapter Two will demonstrate, this continual marking of disappearance is often a key tenet of liveness. The key difference in my argument, however, is that this ephemerality can be ontologically ‘real’ or it can be constructed – and whichever it is, it remains an essential tool in staging a sense of liveness. Limitation is central to contemporary presentations of liveness in other ways, too. In the *Theatertreffen* case study, I demonstrate how limitation is enacted in terms of audience size, ticket price, insider knowledge and short performance runs in order to confer the cultural value of traditional live events upon digitally distributed events. In the *Fringe* case studies, I explore how digital distribution is used to respond to hostile visa policies and the global climate crisis, and how a dramaturgical approach to limitation creates forms of liveness in such performances.

Phelan’s emphasis on limitation has not gone uncriticised. Auslander responds to her suggestion of ephemerality by arguing that

¹⁰ Phelan, p. 27, p. 149.

¹¹ Phelan, p. 146.

¹² Phelan, p. 121.

¹³ Phelan, p. 127.

[j]ust as recording media like film and video can provide an experience of evanescence, so, too, live forms such as theatre have been used in ways that do not respect, or even recognise, the ostensible spatial and temporal characteristics of live performance. I would go so far as to argue that live performances can be mass-produced. One example would be the WPA Federal Theater's 1936 production of *It Can't Happen Here*, which opened simultaneously in eighteen different American cities.¹⁴

Although I do not agree that Auslander's example suitably illustrates his argument, as it is possible to interpret all eighteen performances as individual components of a single event, it is true to say that theatre can exist beyond the spatial and temporal characteristics that Phelan describes. Moreover, when Auslander argues that "disappearance may be even more fundamental to television than it is to live performance [...] [as it] exists rather as a lively, and forever unresolved process" he is simply reiterating Phelan's own insistence that ephemerality – the threat of absence – is located at the "threshold of the present", regardless of the medium.¹⁵ This means, as Westerman argues, that both Auslander and Phelan are discussing a specific definition of liveness or presence that is tied to a moving horizon of "now", and which cannot exist in the past or the future. Westerman describes this as an "abstracted 'now' of performance" which renders time "ahistorical".¹⁶ He writes that this formulation results in the "confines of the presence/absence problematic [which] exempts performance from historical time" and that it is fruitless to discuss the "now" of a performance without rooting that "now" in its literal historical context.¹⁷ Matthew Reason finds similar fault, explaining that Auslander, in his critique of Phelan, creates a

double argument, suggesting: first, that the repeat experience is only a possibility with non-live performance, neither inevitable nor significant in the first experience; and second, that live performance does not enact an

¹⁴ Auslander, *Liveness*, p. 51.

¹⁵ Auslander, *Liveness*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁶ Jonah Westerman, 'The Place of Performance: A Critical Historiography on the Topos of Time', in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 188–200 (p. 194).

¹⁷ Westerman, p. 195.

unrepeatable present, with processes of promotion, construction and the economies of production meaning that live performances are always already a reproduction of representation.¹⁸

This inexact location of the “now” of performance is precisely what Westerman also warns against and this emphasis on a performance duration that is conceptual rather than literal weakens both scholars’ arguments. Phelan’s ontological claims become less persuasive, and Auslander’s contextual, market-based critiques become vague.

Although many have disagreed with in Phelan’s argument, her approach to limitation can be adapted to become extremely useful when analysing liveness in the late 2010s, an era of performance that is reliant upon the illusion, if not always the reality, of limitation. Considering limitation as a fundamental tool in creating liveness in performance, one can more accurately capture the way in which liveness is not an ontological state, but the potential and varied results of dramaturgical tools, framing devices and modes of performance, many of which are based upon different forms of limitation. This will become evident in the following case studies, as well as in my examination of the hierarchical values of the event cinema industry in the United Kingdom, an industry largely based upon the restriction of access. But it is also important to trace the history of this fixation upon presence and absence, through the influential work of Walter Benjamin.

3. Walter Benjamin and Meeting Art Halfway

Some eighty years since its publication, Walter Benjamin’s 1935 essay ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ (The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility) remains an important reminder that discussions of cultural value and emerging technologies are far from unique to contemporary digital culture. Cited by both Auslander and Phelan as foundational to their critical perspectives on liveness, Benjamin’s essay offers vital tools for contextualising and historicising the evolving relationship between art and technology. He begins with a

¹⁸ Matthew Reason, ‘Theater Audiences and Perceptions of “Liveness” in Performance’, *Participations*, 1.2 (2004) [accessed 3 June 2018]. Web.

brief introduction to the purpose of replicas throughout art history – for technical practice, for dissemination, or for profit – via Ancient Greek methods of casting and stamping, historically reproductive printmaking techniques like woodcut and lithography, and, finally, photography, which Benjamin sets apart by noting that it “freed the hand [...] in the process of pictorial reproduction”.¹⁹ The essay describes a trajectory that begins with intricate handiwork and culminates in intricate technology, and he goes on to mark technological reproduction apart from manual reproduction in a significant way.

Benjamin defines technology as a tool that can surpass the human eye or hand in its engagement with an artwork, specifically in the way it can “bring out those aspects of the original” that would otherwise be inaccessible or even invisible to an onlooker.²⁰ For instance, the enlargement of a photograph can make visible small details that might otherwise go unseen. He argues that this creates a non-human perspective on a piece of art, alongside the ability to distribute a reproduction of that art in contexts beyond the work’s original context. He writes that technological reproduction “can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself”,²¹ and that, most importantly, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway.²² Here, “halfway” can be read as a mediatised space between the artwork, the reproduction, and the recipient.

Proximity and distance are central to the framing of Benjamin’s argument, and they function as a metric for the presence, or the “aura” of an artwork. He argues that the aura of a work is directly related to “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.²³ A more literal translation of the German (“das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks”²⁴) would read, “the here and now of the work of art”. In this way, it appears that he is arguing that the closer the proximity of an artwork to its original, “unique” time and space, the greater the aura of that artwork.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (Boston, New York: Mariner Books, 2019), p.130.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 130.

²¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 170.

²² Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 170.

²³ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 169.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), p.11.

This could be interpreted as supporting Auslander’s argument for the contextual nature of liveness, or Phelan’s suggestion that a performance only truly exists in a fixed time and space, were it not for the a-historicity of both scholars’ approaches. Moreover, Benjamin advocates directly for understanding the specificity of an artwork “under the present conditions of production”.²⁵

More important to my argument, however, is the position of the beholder, and the point of “meeting”, or encounter, in Benjamin’s sense of distance. When he writes that reproduction techniques can allow the original to “meet the beholder halfway”, he is suggesting that this experience for the beholder is “half” that of meeting the work in its original context, but it also calls into question Benjamin’s own argument that a photograph is itself an “original”. On the other hand, he also argues that this “halfway” meeting would not be possible at all without the distance-crossing capabilities of technological reproduction – in German, the verb *entgegen* means to move towards, implying that it is the artwork, rather than the beholder, that is crossing the distance. Benjamin builds on this doubt by describing the process of meeting halfway as substituting “a mass existence for a unique existence”, but also by arguing that the creation of new, “halfway” contexts “actualizes that which is reproduced”.²⁶

He does not further clarify this line of argument, but the present-tense sense of liveness that is evoked by the idea of actuality implies that such a mass existence can spark mass instances of new “unique” moments in time and space, thus rendering the reproductions originals in their own right. In this light, the “mass existence” need not be seen as a lesser, or halved, experience. Indeed, I seek to frame my understanding of digital distribution as the creation of a multiplicity of original experiences that are not necessarily ontologically different to the ‘original’ artwork which they reproduce but are valued differently within the current marketplace.

Fundamental to Benjamin’s argument is the separation between manual reproduction and technological reproduction. In the theatre, this could translate to the difference between the manual reproduction of performing the same play several nights in a row, versus the technological reproduction of a live broadcast. Rather than

²⁵ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 169.

²⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 171.

attempting to find an ontological difference between an original and a reproduction, this structure offers a more flexible way of thinking about the relationship between different modes of reproduction. For Benjamin, the key difference between manual and technological reproduction is human ability: the ability of a human eye or hand to pick out and re-create specific details, versus the capacity of a technological apparatus to perform such functions, as well as the distributive possibilities created by those technologies – possibilities which have grown far beyond those discussed by Benjamin in the 1930s. These beyond-human abilities in the technological reproduction of art result in the possibility of getting nearer to, and further away from, an ‘original’ artwork – both literally and metaphorically – and this idea is developed in Bolter and Grusin’s scholarship on remediation.

4. Remediation: Reproducing the Reproducible

Coining the term in their 1999 publication *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin argue that understanding remediation can counteract misleading debates about authenticity in art, particularly when longer-established artistic practices are compared to emerging modes of artistic expression. Their central argument is directed against a perceived fear of “new” media, and they write that “[w]hat is new about new media is [...] also old and familiar: that they promise the new by remediating what has gone before”.²⁷ In other words, Bolter and Grusin show that ‘newness’ is often a process that involves the absorption and reformation of the ‘old’ – a process that is as old as art itself. Appropriately, their approach is not entirely new: there are similarities between their work and, for example, Bertolt Brecht’s analysis of the impact of film on older art forms. In Brecht’s ‘The Film, the Novel and Epic Theatre’, he writes that “the old forms of communication are not unaffected by the development of new ones, nor do they survive alongside them”.²⁸ Brecht considers how a “filmgoer develops a different way

²⁷ J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. 270.

²⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. by John Willett, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 47.

of reading stories” and asserts that “the mechanization of literary production cannot be thrown into reverse”.²⁹ He is describing an evolution in artistic form and technological innovation, but one in which modes of production and reception inform and challenge each other. Brecht’s argument, like that of Bolter and Grusin, is that all modes of communication, no matter how established, are constantly becoming ‘new’ again.

Bolter and Grusin’s definition of remediation depends on a central argument: “No medium, it seems, can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning.”³⁰ This sounds strikingly similar to Brecht’s argument, bar one important difference: Bolter and Grusin’s emphasis on the “now” in their statement. As Brecht’s writing reveals, published several decades prior to *Remediation*, it is inaccurate for the writers to imply that their claim only holds true in the contemporary moment. Elsewhere in *Remediation* they clarify this, acknowledging that the only “new” element to their idea as it pertains to their contemporary moment is in the digital’s “particular strategies for remediating”.³¹ In turn, I acknowledge that Bolter and Grusin’s perspective is situated in a different historical moment to the time of my own research, where the digital is hardly ‘new’ but its impact is not yet fully realised.

Still, Bolter and Grusin propose a three-part approach to analysing remediation, and this provides a useful structure when considering the role of proximity and distance in new media. The first definition presents “remediation as the mediation of mediation”.³² The authors use it to explain how the function of any media is to comment on, reproduce and eventually replace other media: a straightforward concept that is complicated only by virtue of the different meanings that media can hold. It recalls Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement, that “in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message”, in which McLuhan uses “medium” to describe a means, rather than a specific technology or form, and does so in order to

²⁹ Brecht, p. 47.

³⁰ Bolter and Grusin, p. 55.

³¹ Bolter and Grusin, p. 50.

³² Bolter and Grusin, p. 55.

argue for an understanding of media as extensions of the self.³³ He illustrates this point with the example of the electric light, which

escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no “content”. And this makes it an invaluable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the “content” (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, perverse, and decentralised. For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet *they eliminate time and space factors in human association* exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, *creating involvement in depth*.³⁴ (my emphases)

The distinction that McLuhan draws between the light and the “content”, or one medium distributed by another medium, helps us to visualise Bolter and Grusin’s “mediation of mediation”. Moreover, McLuhan finds a subversive quality in “pervasive” and “decentralised” forms of distributive media, specifically because these mediations of mediations can disrupt traditional notions of time and space – an argument we have already encountered in Benjamin’s writing. I revisit these ideas in the case studies in Chapter 2, in order to examine how such disruptions can be used to create economic and cultural capital. The “involvement in depth” to which McLuhan refers will also be discussed in Part 2, which explores modes of participation made possible through remediation.

Bolter and Grusin’s second definition describes “remediation as the inseparability of mediation and reality” and touches on Baudrillard’s theorising of simulation and simulacra. Bolter and Grusin write,

[a]ll mediations are themselves real. They are as real as artefacts (but not as autonomous agents) in our mediated culture. Despite the fact that all

³³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 1.

³⁴ McLuhan, p. 2.

media depend on other media in cycles of remediation, our culture still needs to acknowledge that all media remediate the real.³⁵

In this instance, “mediations” should be understood as technological processes *and* the affective force of a particular medium upon a viewer. The argument that the process, the content and the affective force are as “real as artefacts” is particularly pertinent, given the claims that digital distribution of theatre can create an experience that is less authentic and of lesser value than attending the ‘original’ performance, even when the precise identity of the ‘original’ performance is difficult to specify. The technologies used to broadcast a theatre performance remediate that performance, because the medium of theatre is already a mediation of ‘real’ experience in the first place. Even Phelan makes a similar argument, writing that “[w]ithin the history of theatre the real is what theatre defines itself against, even while reduplicating its effects”.³⁶ By this logic, neither act of remediation has a greater claim to ‘reality’. Bolter and Grusin criticise, too, the use of ‘real’ as a criterion for such value judgements. This is particularly relevant to the field of theatre and performance: some forms of theatre work extremely hard to persuade an audience of its proximity to ‘realness’, whilst other schools of performance reject ‘reality’ altogether, making clear the tools of illusion employed during the creation of a theatrical act. Brecht’s own practice, encapsulated by his call for a “radical separation of the elements” on stage is a famous example of the intent to strip such illusion from the theatre, in order to encourage a critical perspective from which a spectator can draw productive comparisons between the stage and the world beyond the stage.³⁷ He intended that no spectator would mistake a performance as a straightforward vessel for ‘real’ life, just as McLuhan emphasised the importance of analysing the communicative medium separate to its content.

However, Bolter and Grusin’s claim that “all media remediate the real” does not share this spirit. Although it is likely that they are simply arguing that all media *can* act as representations of human experience, their claim perpetuates an unhelpful binary of real/unreal that often correlates with the persistent framing of live/non-live performance encountered in this chapter’s analysis of Phelan and Auslander’s

³⁵ Bolter and Grusin, p. 55.

³⁶ Phelan, p. 3.

³⁷ Brecht, p. 37.

approaches to distributed performance. Moreover, McLuhan alludes to a hierarchy of sorts within remediation, in which the content can render the initial medium less visible to a spectator. Bolter and Grusin present this differently: they argue that each new medium “promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience”, thus suggesting that it is in the creation of new media that this hierarchy is, inevitably, constructed. They envision the evolution of media as a pursuit of “the real” – a quest that many European theatre makers have already reckoned with.

Antonin Artaud, for example, is well known for his pursuit of a “virtual reality”: he coined the phrase in his 1938 monograph *The Theatre and its Double*. He argues that true theatre should “reject man’s usual limitations and powers and infinitely [extend] the frontiers of what we call reality”,³⁸ a statement echoed in McLuhan’s connection between mediation and extension of the self, as well as in Bolter and Grusin’s depiction of how exploration of form expands perceptions of reality. Like McLuhan, Artaud advocates for a form of theatre that clearly delineates the medium as a message: “Theatre’s production potential is wholly related to staging viewed as a language of movement in space.”³⁹ His monograph explores the pursuit of a more ‘real’ reality, against the admission that “[a]ny true feeling cannot in reality be expressed. To do so is to betray it. To express it is to conceal it. True expression conceals what it exhibits”.⁴⁰ This tension between revealing and concealing is at the heart of Bolter and Grusin’s analysis of remediation, which they describe as a process of “oscillation” that takes place “between transparency and opacity”.⁴¹

Bolter and Grusin use their own discussion of virtual reality – now a term unrelated to Artaud’s original meaning – to explore this further. They write,

[D]igital media that strive for transparency and immediacy (such as immersive virtual reality and virtual games) also remediate. Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real. They

³⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Victor Corti (Richmond: Alma Classics, 2014), p. 7.

³⁹ Artaud, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Artaud, p. 51.

⁴¹ Bolter and Grusin, p. 19.

are not striving for the real in any metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer's experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response.⁴²

Here they concede that “the real” is an emotional experience and, similarly to Artaud, conclude that any form of representation is a concealment of a “real” emotional response, which can only be created by the viewer. I discuss virtual reality in more detail in Chapters 4 and 6, but in using it here as an example of a supposedly “transparent” media experience, Bolter and Grusin conflate a medium with an assumed intention, exactly as McLuhan warned against. Ultimately, this line of thought becomes an ouroboros, as each medium remediates the next in the pursuit of greater proximity to ‘reality’.

However, this discussion of transparency is valuable for what it reveals about the degrees to which the means of mediation can be visible to an audience member. Bolter and Grusin's third definition of remediation is one of “reform”, and it is a continuation of their thoughts on mediation, transparency, and reality. They propose that if “all mediations are both real and mediations of the real”, then “remediation can also be understood as a process of performing reality”. In short, an act of remediation makes clear this unstable relationship to reality by rendering the previous mediation processes tangible and visible. Their illustrative anecdotes on this point are outdated – for instance the way in which a computer “always intervenes and makes its presence felt” when a viewer uses a mouse – and fail to take into account the importance of context to tangibility.

As discussed previously in this chapter, many scholars equate reality with ephemerality when ontologically labelling theatre or dance. It is interesting then that this notion of “reform” is more applicable to digitally distributed theatre, where this kind of layered visibility/invisibility is indicated by camera angles which provide a perspective on a performance that is noticeably, experientially different to that of a human eye. However, these technologically-aided perspectives can also create an effect that goes unnoticed, due to the contemporary audience's familiarity with filmed media. As Brecht argued, the cultural impact of evolving modes of communication

⁴² Bolter and Grusin, p. 53.

cannot be reversed. Ultimately, this harks back to Benjamin's description of how technological reproduction operates beyond the realms of a human's capability of processing art, and provokes questions that are extremely relevant throughout the entirety of this thesis. What impact does the visibility of digital technologies within a performance have on the creation of liveness? Does an audience need to understand a digital process in order to comprehend it as live? A partial answer can be found in the work of Daisy Abbott and Claire Read, and their analysis of the UK's Event Cinema industry.

5. "Live" as a Label: Event Cinema in the United Kingdom

The event cinema industry in the United Kingdom is a pertinent example of how an experience of liveness, and the visibility of remediation, are subjective. The sector includes the simultaneous broadcasting of theatre performances to cinema screens and other venues around the country, as well as screenings of those broadcasts at later dates – often known as 'encores' – and it has seen rapid growth: it was valued at a reported £30 million in 2014.⁴³ Several major cultural institutions have commissioned special reports to investigate the impact of this increasingly mainstream form of digital distribution on the arts industry more broadly. One such report, jointly commissioned by Arts Council England and the British Film Institute and published in 2015, recognised that of these screenings, "theatre is now the leading genre, accounting for almost half of all event cinema revenue".⁴⁴ The same report acknowledges that the market is also "dominated by a handful of key distributors", almost certainly because the cost of producing and distributing a high-quality stream remains prohibitively high. These key players are the National Theatre in London and the Royal Shakespeare Company, two of the largest and most prestigious institutions in the UK's theatre industry, with lucrative public funding: they receive an annual figure of £16.6 million and £14.98 million respectively from Arts Council England.⁴⁵

⁴³ Arts Council England, 'Understanding the Impact of Event Cinema | Arts Council England', <<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication/understanding-impact-event-cinema>> [accessed 28 March 2017], p. 7.

⁴⁴ Arts Council England.

⁴⁵ National Theatre, *Facts and Figures* (2015), <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/key-facts-and-figures>> [accessed 14 September 2021], Royal Shakespeare Company,

At an event regarding the National Theatre’s NT Live scheme in 2015, Executive Producer David Sabel revealed that each broadcast cost the theatre between £250,000 - £350,000 to produce, but still generates revenue.⁴⁶ I do not aim to provide a full history of the UK’s event cinema industry here, but rather to examine the hierarchy – in modes of performance, experiences of liveness, and national and regional access to the theatre – that is created by the digital distributions of the National Theatre and RSC.

Within the National Theatre’s online FAQs, one section is titled: “Are the broadcasts truly ‘live?’”⁴⁷ The answer explains, in careful language, that the performances are “filmed live and broadcast simultaneously, across the UK and Europe”, but that in other time zones a broadcast is “delayed” accordingly. It stresses, too, that even in these instances “[w]e don’t edit the footage, even for the delayed time zones, so they enjoy exactly the same broadcast as the regions that get the simulcast”. This phrasing demonstrates the same correlation between proximity to the “real” and cultural value that is found in Benjamin’s argument, as well as a promise of the *lack* of extra layers of mediation – in this case, film editing – that shares a perception of media “transparency” with Bolter and Grusin’s *Remediation*. The answer to another question – “What is your approach to filming National Theatre Live productions” – is even more revealing. The site states,

The approach to filming National Theatre Live broadcasts is to prioritise the audience in the cinemas for that night. The camera director is given complete flexibility in choosing camera positions, so that the performance can be captured from the best seats in the house. [...] The camera choices and set-up vary according to production, usually ranging from five to eight cameras, which are cut live into a single feed.⁴⁸

Finance and Funding, <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/finance-and-funding>> [accessed 14 September 2021].

⁴⁶ Matthew Bell, ‘Making Live Theatre Work on Screen’, *Royal Television Society*, 12 March 2015. <<https://rts.org.uk/article/making-live-theatre-work-screen>> [accessed 14 September 2021].

⁴⁷ National Theatre, *FAQs* (2016), <<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/support-the-NT/faqs>> [accessed 14 September 2021].

⁴⁸ National Theatre, *FAQs*.

By marketing the broadcasts as the equivalent of the “best seats in the house”, the National Theatre perhaps unwisely sets up a direct comparison between the experience for the remote, cinema audience and the experience of sitting in an expensive seat in London. Under the guise of democracy, this establishes a straight-forward hierarchy of experience, with these “best seats” at the top. This is confirmed when the site adds, “We generally show a live introduction to convey the immediacy of the live event and the presence of the audience here in London”.⁴⁹ It indicates that the worth of the broadcast is created by its proximity to the more valuable event, and thus the National Theatre’s ability to promise both presence and absence to its remote audiences. As Phelan argues, “[p]resence is theatre’s promise as well as its doubt”, and this is evidence that theatres can leverage that sensation of doubt in order to heighten the sensation of liveness – or, more accurately, to heighten the sensation of *missing out* on another experience.

Abbott and Read, in the edited collection *Documenting Performance* (2017), examine a particular NT Live broadcast of Hamlet that took place at the Barbican Centre in London and argue that one strategy for boosting the liveness of a performance is to position it in contrast to a supposedly *non-live* event. Abbott and Read examine the term “paradocumentation” and use it to “assert a notion of unity between performances and their documents”.⁵⁰ They describe the “single ‘live’ performance and its documentation via live streaming as the primary ‘text’ of a play,” and then organise other forms of official and non-official documentation (leaflets, programmes, reviews, memorabilia, audience members’ private documentation, for example) to fall under three categories, which will be revisited later in this chapter.⁵¹ Most importantly, though, they demonstrate how the framing of a performance can contribute significantly to its live-status:

Whilst the cinematic version of the performance may be seen as a document, in reality played seconds behind the theatre due to streaming delays, its live performative qualities and significantly its labelling as *live*,

⁴⁹ National Theatre, *FAQs*.

⁵⁰ Abbott and Read, p. 165.

⁵¹ Abbott and Read, p. 169.

mark it as a hybrid working between performance and performance documentation.⁵² (original emphasis)

Abbott and Read make two vital points here. The first concerns the act of “labelling as *live*”, which reveals that there is a greater fluidity to the labelling and attribution of liveness in the theatre industry than the theoretical binaries between live and not-live performance would suggest. Abbott and Read discuss one night in 2015, when the NT Live production of *Hamlet*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, was performed in the Barbican Centre’s theatre and screened in its three cinemas. They write that the Barbican’s advertising material “split its liveness into two categories: live theatre and live cinema” and reflect that this is reminiscent of Auslander’s argument that the “labelling of the live was secondary to the labelling of the mediatized”.⁵³ However, I find this framing to be productive rather than reductive: the dual labelling can be seen as an expansion of liveness, rather than a splitting, as it presents two kinds of liveness side by side in a context that consumers can easily understand. It also suggests that liveness holds a more flexible position in the marketing and reception of mainstream performance than theorists like Phelan, and indeed Auslander, have suggested. This is not to say that reductive dual framings do not exist, however, as my case study on the *Theatertreffen* reveals. The difference in that case, though, is that the framing is used to establish a hierarchy of events that are ‘more’ and ‘less’ live, rather than different forms of liveness.

Abbott and Read’s second important point concerns the “streaming delays” inherent in a broadcast. That a livestream, so-called because of its synchronicity in time with the broadcasted performance, is likely to be received a second or more “behind” the performance reveals that the marketplace is already flexible in its application of “live” as a label, and that liveness as a label is more impactful than a fully “unique time” of performance. Abbott and Read’s description reminds the reader that digital transmission itself takes time, and recalls digital theorist David Berry’s work on the post digital. Berry argues that we must “stop thinking about the digital as something static and object-like and instead consider its ‘trajectories’”.⁵⁴ He describes how digital

⁵² Abbott and Read, pp. 169–70.

⁵³ Abbott and Read, p. 168.

⁵⁴ Berry, p. 1.

technologies often have a “stable ‘representation’” that belies complex functionality and how, beneath this surface-level impression, “there is a constant stream of processing, a movement and a trajectory, a series of lines that are being followed and computed”.⁵⁵ Although Abbott and Read describe this in the past tense – “played” – it seems they, like Berry, intend to establish broadcasting as a process rather than an end result, and that any digital representation of a performance is in a constant act of being. This imbues any digital representation of another artistic medium with an inherent quality of liveness that is different to the liveness of the media being represented – a quality that Berry labels “real-time experiential technology”.⁵⁶ In contrast to Phelan’s ontology of liveness, based on the finite, Berry finds liveness in constant movement.

However, as Berry points out, live digital processing is often mistaken to be “static and object-like”, and it can be even less recognisable as liveness in a theatrical context. The National Theatre make steps to acknowledge this in their FAQs, where they highlight the in-the-moment creation of the broadcast, describing how “five to eight cameras [are] cut live into a single feed”.⁵⁷ In practise this live editing can be akin to the role of an orchestra’s conductor, requiring artistry and rhythm, but perhaps because this technique also comprises myriad other forms of digital content consumed daily, like live news broadcasts, it does not necessarily register as a form of liveness to the average member of the public. I return to the question of live editing in digitally aided performance in the final chapter of this thesis, where it is used to create a unique sense of digital geography in the Schauspiel Dortmund and Berliner Ensemble’s co-production, *Die Parallelwelten*. It is also important to reiterate that quantifying audience responses to liveness is not within the remit of this thesis. Instead, I seek to illustrate how not all forms of liveness are staged as such – and that this is where labelling or framing can become an essential component in the creation of liveness in performance.

This raises a further question, however: what do these seconds of delay mean in terms of the geography of the United Kingdom’s theatre industry? Berry suggests

⁵⁵ Berry, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Berry, p. 2.

⁵⁷ National Theatre, *FAQs*.

that the post-digital indicates a departure from the “physicality of destination”.⁵⁸ However, in practice, the seconds it takes for the digital processing to occur becomes indicative of the physical distance between remote audiences and the performance being broadcasted. The ontological implications of this are less significant than the cultural and political ones. The potential for such broadcasts to “cannibalise” other forms of theatre attendance has been discussed in several commissioned reports on the ‘Event Cinema’ industry, NESTA’s report in 2014 and the ‘From Live to Digital’ project commissioned by Arts Council England and the Society of London Theatres.⁵⁹ The NESTA report cites Alan Ayckbourn’s statement that, “One’s fear, which may be groundless, is that eventually we and our equivalent theatres will stop doing plays and they’ll all be streamed live from these centres of excellence”. Six years later, Ayckbourn’s concern that we will “stop doing plays” does indeed appear to be groundless, however his second reflection, that *all* the broadcasts will be “streamed live from these centres of excellence” is more relevant. I do not wish to discount the many smaller theatres that create excellent livestreams of their work, but it is accurate to say that the industry, at least from a financial and mainstream cultural perspective, is dominated by specific and well-funded “centres of excellence”. It also speaks to the cultural marketplace in the United Kingdom more broadly that such “centres of excellence” are located in or near London.

The dominance of London in the livestreaming industry reflects the dominance of London theatres more broadly. For instance, the National Theatre in London has a long history of touring work throughout the rest of the country and the Festival Theatre in Edinburgh is usually host to those productions: now it hosts the live broadcasts, too. That theatre is more often broadcast *from* London than *to* London is indicative of the capital’s continued cultural dominance and reflects how technologies that supposedly disrupt notions of time and space can still reinforce centres of economic and cultural capital.

⁵⁸ Berry, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Hasan Bakhshi and Andrew Whitby, ‘What Impact Does Live Broadcasting Have on Theatre Attendance?’, *Nesta*, 24 June 2014. <<https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/what-impact-does-live-broadcasting-have-on-theatre-attendance/>> [accessed 15 September 2021].

Brecht advocated against technologies being used in this way in his essay ‘The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication’, where he argues that “[r]adio is one-sided when it ought to be two. [...] So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication”.⁶⁰ In the following case studies, I examine more specifically how modes of digital distribution typically reflect the pre-existing infrastructures and hierarchies in a theatre industry, and contrast Germany’s lack of an equivalent event cinema industry against the UK model. I also continue to investigate the relationships between theatrical time and space and emerging modes of digital distribution, and how absence, or the illusion of absence, is leveraged to enhance sensations of liveness at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

⁶⁰ Brecht, p. 52.

Chapter 2: Case Studies in Digitally Distributed Liveness

1. Livenesses at the Berliner Theatertreffen

In this case study, I examine the use of digitally distributed performances as a replacement or substitute for traditionally live performances at the Berliner Theatertreffen in the years 2017-19 and argue that the prestigious theatre festival creates a hierarchy of livenesses that reveals the notion of liveness to be a socio-political tool, rather than a fixed, ontological state. Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof write that “the status and significance of the live in contemporary performance has become contested” and is “perceived variously as a marker of ontological difference, a promotional slogan or a mystical evocation of cultural value”.¹ In this spirit, this case study considers liveness – as it is presented at the Berliner Theatertreffen – in relation to three factors: its ontological status, its value as a promotional slogan, and its capacity to act as a marker of cultural prestige. By exploring the ways that the Theatertreffen confers value upon different forms of liveness, I argue that such a hierarchy can also have socio-political implications, particularly in terms of the relationship between the public and a publicly funded theatre festival.

The Berliner Theatertreffen is the foremost annual celebration of German-language theatre, and it has functioned as a microcosm of the broader German-speaking theatre industries since its inception in 1964. Each year, a panel of judges selects the ten most “bemerkenswert”, or noteworthy, productions from the previous theatre seasons in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, and these productions are then invited to be re-staged in Berlin. As a selection criterion, “noteworthy” often proves controversial, but it is designed to facilitate the selection of a cross-section of timely, innovative performances. Alongside the main programme, the Theatertreffen often

¹ Lindelof and Reason, p.1.

showcases work by emerging theatre-makers, as well as public talks, workshops, and prize-giving ceremonies. One of eight “cultural beacons” that receives regular funding from the German Federal Cultural Foundation, the festival has received 1.9 million euros annually since 2016 – a sum that is fixed until further review in 2022. As a publicly funded festival that typically promotes and honours the work of similarly well-funded state theatres (as opposed to theatres of the “Freie Szene”, Germany’s independent arts scene), the Theatertreffen provides a useful opportunity to examine the intersections of politics, finance, and socio-cultural capital that relate to liveness as it is understood in Germany’s mainstream theatre industry.

Theatre historian William Grange writes that the Theatertreffen has always been a product of its socio-political circumstances, noting that at the time of its creation, West German theatre attendance was shrinking despite public funding for theatres increasing by 215% at the time.² He describes the festival’s launch, then, as part of “an effort to stimulate public opinion and interest in live theatre” and judges that it has “proved to be extraordinarily successful, at least in terms of keeping theatre in the public consciousness and helping theatres maintain their subsidies”.³ Grange’s evaluation contains within it the suggestion that the Theatertreffen is political both in its public-facing role and its broader, financial role within the industry, and that these roles are intrinsic to its relationship with “live theatre”. There is a considerable body of existing scholarship on the Theatertreffen and its curation, but the field has yet to investigate the presentation and valuation of liveness within the festival’s programming.⁴ As such, by examining the different modes of, and contexts for, digitally distributed theatre within its programming, I can pinpoint how liveness becomes a stratified experience at the festival and evaluate the impact this has on the festival’s relationship to the public. To do this, I examine digitally distributed forms

² William Grange, *Historical Dictionary of German Theater*, 2nd edn (Washington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 22.

³ Grange, p. 22.

⁴ For instance, Marvin Carlson contributed academic reports of the festival’s main programme to the *Western European Stages* journal from 2000–2012. Other scholars have researched the function of the “noteworthy” criterion, such as Urska Brodar in ‘The Great Ten and the Interrogation of New Theatre Forms’, *Maska* (2014) Vol.29, pp. 200-13. The Theatertreffen also features in many historical studies of German theater, including David Barnett’s *A History of the Berliner Ensemble* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Matt Cornish’s *Performing Unification: History and Nation in German Theater after 1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

of liveness found at the Theatertreffen between 2017-2019, using examples ranging from the livestreaming of plays as they are performed at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele, the festival's main venue, to screenings of pre-recorded performances.

1.1 Public Viewings, Private Stagings

The Theatertreffen's notion of a public event is most clearly illustrated by its so-called Public Viewing initiative. Since 2011 the Theatertreffen has produced open-air events in collaboration with television broadcaster 3sat, using the public space outside the Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, a famous square in the city centre that draws tourists to its IMAX cinema and Lego World shop. Potsdamer Platz has no reputation as a venue for theatre; instead, it is home to Berlin's Film and Television Museum and the German Film Archive, and the annual Berlinale Film Festival's main venue is just a short walk away. The square is flanked by cafes, bars, and high-end hotel chains and it is a noisy thoroughfare to choose as the location for an outdoor screening. Neither was the square selected due to its proximity to the Theatertreffen: Potsdamer Platz is roughly 2.5 miles from the Theatertreffen's home at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele in the west of Berlin, a journey that takes around thirty minutes by public transport.

The viewings, usually held in the afternoons of one weekend within the festival's programme, consist of three pre-recorded, high-quality multi-camera recordings of performances participating in the Theatertreffen that year. These recordings are then broadcast on television by 3sat later in the year. The viewings make use of a large, pre-existing screen that hangs on the external wall of the Film and Television Museum, and colourful deck chairs are arranged to create a seating area for roughly 150 audience members. The area is open to passers-by, and the viewings do not require tickets or any other form of pre-booking to attend. Due to this open access, there is no definitive data on the number of people who participate in these screenings but, anecdotally – based upon the three years that I attended these screenings from 2017 to 2019 – it is rare to see the seating used to its full capacity.

The Potsdamer Platz viewings are marketed with a heavy emphasis on their public nature. The phrase "Public Viewing" is displayed in bold lettering on advertising posters distributed throughout the city, alongside reminders that these events are free to attend. It is a separate advertising campaign to that used for the rest

of the festival's programme and this, in turn, implies that the festival's ticketed, indoor events are in some way *less* public. This is truer than perhaps the festival intends. The Festspiele building has a fixed capacity of 999 seats in its main auditorium, and each of the ten invited productions is usually staged two or three times during the festival's two-week duration. This results in roughly 30,000 seats available for the festival's main programme, with the most expensive priced at around fifty euros or more. The inherent limitations in terms of seating and pricing combined with the festival's tendency to sell out within minutes of going on sale means that the public Potsdamer Platz viewings are unlikely to generate any further ticket sales for that year's festival. The Theatertreffen's committed, returning audience, who have prior knowledge of the high competition for attendance, make it a slim possibility that any new audience member inspired by the public viewings could spontaneously attend the festival's main programme. This goes some way towards explaining the logic behind the separate advertising campaigns and even suggests that the festival and the public viewings, although linked by the performances on show, are almost entirely separate events.

It explains, too, why there is little at the public viewings to encourage an attendee to explore the rest of the Theatertreffen. There is no sense of ceremony at the screenings; there are no introductions, welcoming addresses, or post-show discussions, as there are for the main, traditionally live programme. By contrast, there is plenty of information about the public screenings at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. A screen in the foyer displays promotional videos of the public screening events, advertising the viewings as an alternative means of watching the productions to the Theatertreffen's ticket-holding audience. The times and locations of the screenings are also printed in the festival's programme. This internal marketing strategy is directly targeted at the Theatertreffen's pre-existing audience rather than Berlin's broader populace and suggests that the persistent framing of these literally distanced events as public is merely a half-hearted attempt at broader outreach – and one which, intentionally or not, maintains the sense of exclusivity surrounding the Theatertreffen's main programme.

As I have previously discussed, Peggy Phelan finds the liveness of a performance in limitation, ephemerality, and the promise of impermanence. She specifically locates cultural value within these limitations, arguing that a restricted

capacity for spectatorship in terms of the time and space of the performance is integral to the valuation of an audience's experience. The Theatertreffen's strategy regarding these public viewings has a similar logic. The productions invited to the Theatertreffen may never again be performed in Berlin and may even have fully completed their run at their home theatre, often making the festival the last opportunity to watch them. As each of these productions is only performed around three times at the festival, the demand to see these critically acclaimed plays drives the demand for tickets, and makes it extremely competitive to even be able to purchase a ticket at all, let alone for an affordable price. This pressure in terms of time, money and prior knowledge of the festival creates clear barriers to access, and these barriers contribute to a system of limitation and ephemerality that increases the cultural value of the productions selected to appear at the Theatertreffen.

In addition to the performances on the festival's main programme, which are live in the traditionally understood sense of the word, and the pre-recorded performances screened at the public viewings, the Theatertreffen also offers a form of livestreaming, but one that is sequestered from the general public. Rather than capitalizing on the notion that a livestream is more *live* than a pre-recorded film to generate a broader audience or generate income, as seen in the UK's event cinema industry, the Theatertreffen uses livestreaming to maintain the sense of exclusivity that surrounds its traditional live programming. In the Haus der Berliner Festspiele's upstairs area, known as the Bornemann Bar, there is often a simultaneous livestream of the production on stage in the adjacent auditorium, freely available to anyone present. This livestream is either projected onto the back wall of the bar, or viewable from a large screen wheeled into the bar for this purpose, but this viewing opportunity is not advertised anywhere within the Theatertreffen's marketing materials. The lack of advertising could be considered economically driven, in the sense that a free livestream might detract from ticket sales, were it not for the festival's well-established ability to sell out its performances far in advance, and the regular sight of would-be audience members camping outside the venue hours before curtains-up, with signs offering to purchase any potentially spare tickets at competitive prices. Moreover, as the next case study will establish, the festival's audience (as opposed to its public) has historically lacked interest in screenings over traditionally live performances. As such,

the Theatertreffen could safely advertise these Bornemann Bar livestreams to would-be attendees otherwise unable to get a seat in the auditorium, without concern that interest in these livestreams would supersede ticket sales. To broadcast the existence of these streams might even feel appropriately public-spirited for a state-funded festival, but instead their secretive nature makes these livestreams private and exclusive, open only to those with certain, insider knowledge that can only be gained by visiting the festival site in person – which someone without a ticket is unlikely to do.

In ontological terms, and following Phelan's line of argument, these livestreams are very different to the films produced by 3sat for the public viewings. Livestreaming is often described as a simultaneous broadcast, and is perceived to be a direct transmission from camera to screen. "Simultaneous", however, is a misnomer: as we saw in Chapter 1, it is almost impossible to avoid a delay of at least a fraction of a second in the transmission from the recording equipment to a recipient's screen. But this near-simultaneity imbues the medium with a valuable proximity to the production being streamed, in terms of a sense of a shared time and (digital) space between the audience and the performance.

The Theatertreffen's livestreams use a fixed camera that provides a full view of the stage, with several rows of the audience within the frame. In some ways, this mode of digitally distributing a performance might feel more familiar to a theatre-goer unused to the intervention of film editing within their theatre experiences: given an unrestricted view of the entire stage, an audience member can choose where to focus their attention, as opposed to the close-ups and panning shots utilized in, for instance, the National Theatre London's complex, choreographed camera work for their livestreams.⁵ I return to this line of argument in the following case study, but for now it is important to note that the lack of conspicuous editing and the perception of an immediate, simultaneous transmission in a stream of this kind can convey the impression of an interference-free, almost entirely unmediated, experience for the audience of the streamed production. This touches on Bolter and Grusin's notion of

⁵ Notwithstanding the dramaturgy within the performance that may guide an audience member to focus on specific elements of the production.

transparency, and the awareness of “the new medium *as a medium*” (my emphasis). Although in ontological terms these models of livestreaming – either with multiple camera angles or a single, fixed gaze – do not change the live-status of the stream, the visibility of the means of mediation can have an important impact on the reception of the stream and the *experience* of liveness in a phenomenological sense.

In the last three years of the Theatertreffen, the in-house Bornemann Bar livestreams have been actively promoted only once, for the Volksbühne’s production of *Faust*, directed by Frank Castorf, which was invited to the 2018 festival. A notification on the Theatertreffen’s web site read: “The performances will be broadcast live into the Bornemann Bar. If any seats are no longer used by the ticket holders in the second half of the show, these can be made available to successors.”⁶ This supposedly egalitarian approach to seat sharing positions the livestream as a means of queuing for the ‘real’ event, rather than a performance event in its own right. There is an explicit hierarchy of value and access built into the statement: the term ‘successors’ suggests that audience members have the possibility of *upgrading* their experience from the bar to a seat in the auditorium, provided they are willing to wait all evening for the single, brief interval in the lengthy performance. In clear language, it describes the livestream as a secondary option, of less experiential (not to mention financial) value than a seat on the other side of the wall.

This unusually explicit advertisement of the Bornemann Bar livestreams is also caught up in a complex, industry-wide scandal. *Faust* was Castorf’s final production as *Intendant* of the Volksbühne, after he took up the post in 1992.⁷ The Volksbühne is one of Berlin’s most prestigious theatre houses and is funded predominantly by the city of Berlin. This funding scheme allows the Staatssekretär für Kultur (secretary of the federal state of Berlin for cultural affairs) to manage key hiring positions, and it was then-Staatssekretär Tim Renner who hired well-known Belgian curator Chris Dercon to replace Castorf in 2017, to the well-publicised outrage of the venue’s staff. The controversy and protest that coloured the beginning of Dercon’s ill-fated and ultimately brief leadership of the Volksbühne undoubtedly prevented *Faust* from being

⁶ Interestingly, this statement no longer remains on the archived version of this web page.

⁷ The intendant position common to German theatres is a combination of artistic director and theatre manager.

re-staged in its original venue for the Theatertreffen, which is common practice for Berlin-based productions invited to the festival, and particularly for productions with a set as complicated as *Faust*'s. Instead, the full three floors of stage designer Aleksander Denic's set, replete with an underground metro-station built into the revolving stage, were relocated to the Festspiele at the reported cost of 500,000 euro, resulting in the equivalent of a publicly-funded subsidy of 100 euro per ticket sold.⁸ The investigation into this cost by several of the city's journalists is surely an explanation for the Theatertreffen suddenly becoming eager to promote its livestreaming facilities as a viable alternative to the on-stage performances. Still, despite this unusual advertising, when the re-located *Faust* opened the festival on 4 May, only eleven people were present to watch the Bornemann Bar livestream, myself included.⁹

1.2 Die Räuber: Alive or Dead?

Since an invitation to perform at the Theatertreffen is highly sought-after, only serious logistical complications or the ill health of the cast or crew will prevent an invited production from attending. This section takes *Die Räuber* as case-study of such exceptional circumstances: the production was quite literally too large to be re-staged in Berlin for the 2017 Theatertreffen.¹⁰ The play depends upon the use of two fully functional metal treadmills, roughly two floors in height, which are set on a revolve. The cast are then strapped to these treadmills and march into a metaphorical void for over three hours without pause. The mass of the set was certainly unusual, but more unusual still was the solution to this problem decided upon by the Theatertreffen's organisers: a premiere for a 3sat produced film of *Die Räuber* was held to celebrate the production. Similar in style and purpose to the films of Theatertreffen plays that 3sat creates for the Potsdamer Platz public screenings, which are then screened on television as part of 3sat's "Starke Stücke" series, the film of *Die Räuber* was screened

⁸ Martina Kaden, 'B.Z. traf Castorf und Schlöndorff zum Regie-Gipfel', *B.Z. Berlin*, 12 August 2017. <<https://www.bz-berlin.de/kultur/b-z-traf-castorf-und-schloendorff-zum-regie-gipfel>> [accessed 3 June 2018].

⁹ Some livestream attendees were indeed 'upgraded', but the system seemed unclear. I opted to watch the livestream for the entire evening.

¹⁰ "'Die Räuber' aus München nicht beim Berliner Theatertreffen', *Nachtkritik*, 2017. <https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13720&catid=126&Itemid=100089> [accessed 11 March 2018].

on 3sat some months after the festival. Phelan would find no ontological difference between this film and the other 3sat productions for the Theatertreffen, but the way in which the Theatertreffen attempted to invoke a sense of liveness around the premiere sets *Die Räuber* apart.

Rather than being screened at Potsdamer Platz with the other 3sat recordings, the premiere for the film of *Die Räuber* was held in the main theatre at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. The event followed a hybrid model; the filming techniques were those used for the “Starke Stücke” productions, but the film was broadcast to a screen placed on the stage usually reserved for the Theatertreffen’s traditionally live performances. The cast and creative team were present at the premiere, too, making the event similar to the prize-giving ceremonies that usually accompany each production performed at the festival.¹¹

The first public announcement about the premiere was sent via the Haus der Berliner Festspiele’s Twitter account on 9 March 2017. It read: “Aufzeichnung statt Aufführung: ‘Die Räuber’ @residenztheater aus technischen Gründen nur als @3sat-Preview beim #theatertreffen in Berlin!”¹² (Screening instead of staging: The Robbers @residenztheater only as @3sat-Preview due to technical reasons at #theatertreffen in Berlin!) This statement references key elements of the central debate surrounding liveness, reproduction, and digital technologies in the theatre. The alliterative, oppositional phrasing of “Aufzeichnung statt Aufführung” suggests a binary relationship between (live) performance and (non-live) documentation, precisely in the manner used by Phelan and warned against by Auslander. This binary is then weighted with value judgements implicit in the tweet’s apologetic tone – describing it as “nur” (only) a screening, as if anticipating disappointment on the part of Theatertreffen attendees. It clearly describes the preview screening as a secondary option, less valuable than the literal re-staging of the play at the Festspiele would have been, and this creates tension between the apologetic phrasing and the purpose of the tweet,

¹¹ I attended the premiere, which took place on 21 May 2017.

¹² ‘Berliner Festspiele on Twitter: “Aufzeichnung statt Aufführung: ‘Die Räuber’ @residenztheater aus technischen Gründen nur als @3sat-Preview beim #theatertreffen in Berlin! <https://t.co/Cco9f8blva>”, 9 March 2017. <<https://twitter.com/blnfestspiele/status/839794234764976128>> [accessed 20 January 2020].

which is to promote the cultural value of the screening and advertise that, in some capacity, *Die Räuber* will, in fact, be presented at the Theatertreffen.

Many of the newspapers and arts publications that reported on the Festspiele's announcement mimicked the language and tone of this tweet, as well as the value judgements encoded within it. Daily newspapers *Die Welt*, the *Schwäbische Zeitung*, and news magazine *FOCUS* each published the same headline, based on reporting by the Deutsche Presse-Agentur: "Münchner 'Räuber' nicht live beim Berliner Theatertreffen" (Munich "Robbers" won't be live at the Berliner Theatertreffen).¹³ More explicitly than the Theatertreffen's original tweet, this headline draws a direct connection between a supposed state of non-liveness and performance documentation, indicating that the Festspiele's use of "Aufzeichnung" is commonly interpreted to mean an event *without* a sense of liveness. The following day, the *Berliner Morgenpost* and *Hamburger Abendblatt* offered a slight variation: "Münchner 'Räuber' nicht wie geplant live beim Theatertreffen" (Munich "Robbers" not live as planned at the Theatertreffen), emphasizing the nature of the screening as a solution to a problem rather than a deliberate, stand-alone event.¹⁴ The influential German theatre criticism web site *Nachtkritik* found a somewhat blunter description for the news: "Die Räuber aus München nicht beim Berliner Theatertreffen" (Munich's The Robbers not at Berliner Theatertreffen).¹⁵ This headline ignores the screening entirely, instead focusing on a supposed total absence of the play from the festival – the screening is considered to be a "no-show". A later *Nachtkritik* article on 4 May reported on

¹³ 'Münchner "Räuber" nicht live beim Berliner Theatertreffen', *DIE WELT*, 9 March 2017 <<https://www.welt.de/regionales/bayern/article162702030/Muenchner-Raeuber-nicht-live-beim-Berliner-Theatertreffen.html>> [accessed 25 April 2018]; "Münchner "Räuber" nicht live beim Berliner Theatertreffen', *Schwäbische Zeitung* <https://www.schwaebische.de/sueden/bayern_artikel,-m%C3%BCnchner-r%C3%A4uber-nicht-live-beim-berliner-theatertreffen-_arid,10628551.html> [accessed 25 April 2018]; 'Theater: Münchner "Räuber" nicht live beim Berliner Theatertreffen - FOCUS Online' <https://www.focus.de/regional/bayern/theater-muenchner-raeuber-nicht-live-beim-berliner-theatertreffen_id_6762288.html> [accessed 30 December 2019].

¹⁴ 'Münchner "Räuber nicht wie geplant Live beim Theatertreffen", *Berliner Morgenpost*, 2017 <<https://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article209885333/Muenchner-Raeuber-nicht-wie-geplant-live-beim-Theatertreffen.html>> [accessed 25 April 2018]; 'Münchner "Räuber" nicht wie geplant live beim Theatertreffen', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 2017 <<https://www.abendblatt.de/kultur-live/article209885933/Muenchner-Raeuber-nicht-wie-geplant-live-beim-Theatertreffen.html>> [accessed 25 April 2018].

¹⁵ *Nachtkritik*, "Die Räuber" aus München nicht beim Berliner Theatertreffen, 9 March 2017. <https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13720&catid=126&Itemid1000089> [accessed 11 March 2018].

Hamburg's Thalia theatre withdrawing from the Theatertreffen due to a leading actor's poor health, and conflated the two: "Noch eine Absage" (yet another cancellation).¹⁶ These three approaches to reporting on the screening of *Die Räuber* indicate the uncertainty surrounding the precise live-status of the screening, but find agreement in their judgement that the event is not live, or present, in the same way that a re-staging of the Munich production in a Berlin theatre would have been.

This verdict by the press was complicated by the insistent promotion of the screening as a "preview" by the organisers of the Theatertreffen. It framed the screening as an exclusive event, an opportunity to watch the screening before it was broadcast on public television, and suggests that the Theatertreffen believed this the most efficacious method of persuading its audience of the value of such an occasion. It follows Phelan's argument that notions of limitation can foster a sense of liveness, but proves wrong her claim that liveness stands outwith markets of representation: the rhetoric used to promote the screening utilises ideas that are central to live performance in order to position this screening as *more live* than 3sat's usual TV broadcasts. It is interesting to note that the Potsdamer Platz screenings are technically previews, too (they are most commonly broadcast on television after the festival), but this is not discussed within the promotional materials for those events. In fact, the only difference in 3sat's treatment of the Potsdamer Platz screenings and the *Die Räuber* screening is in the length of time between the films' appearances at the festival and when they became available to watch online or on television. The recording of Thomas Luz's play *Traurige Zauberer* (Sad Magicians) was screened at Potsdamer Platz, and then became available to watch on 3sat's *Mediathek* the same weekend. *Die Räuber*, however, was not available on *Mediathek* or broadcast on television until November, almost seven months after the festival. It is not clear if this delay was intended to promote interest in the premiere event, but it certainly contributes to the sense that the preview was an exclusive viewing opportunity for the festival's audiences.

This sense of exclusivity was heightened further in the printed programme for the 2017 Theatertreffen, where the *Die Räuber* "preview" became a "premiere". The

¹⁶ Nachtkritik, *Berliner Theatertreffen ohne Hamburger Gastspiel*, 4 May 2017. <https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13941&catid=126&Itemid=100089> [accessed 11 March 2018].

event was also ticketed – unlike the Potsdamer Platz public viewings – and the presence of the cast and crew at the screening was advertised far in advance. However, those tickets cost just five euro – a hugely discounted price compared to the rest of the festival’s programme – and included a free drink. The web site also included a text notification in the online checkout, somewhat nervously reminding the attendee that “Diese Inszenierung kann nicht beim Theatertreffen gezeigt werden” (this production cannot be shown at the festival).¹⁷ This disclaimer, within a programme of otherwise traditionally “present” live performances, complicates the status of the screening further: what is the screening, if not a means of showing the performance? Evidently, the festival’s audience picked up on this sense of doubt as the screening did not come close to selling out – an extremely unusual occurrence for a Theatertreffen event.

On the night of the premiere, the play’s director Ulrich Rasche and the film’s director Peter Schönhofer were both introduced and applauded. This contributed to the ceremonial, prestigious framing of the event, but it also worked to reinforce a separation between the production and the screening – a theme that was prevalent in the most in-depth coverage of the screening, too. The Theatertreffen and 3sat invited journalist Melanie Brandl to attend the process of filming *Die Räuber*, and her reporting offered a behind-the-scenes insight into the creation of the recording that, to date, has not been provided for the screenings presented at the public viewings. In her article “Filmreifes Theater” (Cinematic Theatre), Brandl interviews Schönhofer rather than Rasche in order to reveal the layers of directorial decisions required to capture the performance on film. She reflects that “eine Theaterverfilmung eine Art ‘Regie der Regie’ sei” (the process of filming is a sort of “directing of the directing”), and Schönhofer agrees in his description of the artistic relationship between himself and Rasche:

Die eigentliche Inszenierung und Kreativität ist und bleibt das Werk von Ulrich Rasche. Ich versuche, das, was ihm wichtig ist, rüberzubringen und so viel Theatergefühl wie möglich zu transportieren. Theater ist Theater, Fernsehen ist Fernsehen.

¹⁷ This statement is also not archived by the Theatertreffen.

Eine zweidimensionale Verfilmung wird nie das Theatererlebnis ersetzen – aber sie soll ihm nahekommen.¹⁸

(The actual staging and creativity are, and remain, the work of Ulrich Rasche. I am trying to convey the elements of the production that are important to him, and to convey as much of that theatre feeling as possible. Theatre is theatre and television is television: a two-dimensional recording will never replace the theatre experience, but it should come close.)

Schönhofer sounds eager to emphasise, on the public platform afforded to him by Brandl's article, that his own directorial process was purely in the service of Rasche's original directorial vision in a manner entirely in keeping with the Theatertreffen's in-house marketing of the relationship between the screening and the production. He quite bluntly describes his role as a mediator rather than a creator, and his task as that of translating the essence and the "theatre feeling" of *Die Räuber* into a different medium.

However, his insistence that his role is secondary to Rasche's is at odds with the tone of Brandl's article, which focuses primarily on Schönhofer as a creative. The photographs accompanying the piece are clearly focussed upon the method of filming, and Brandl describes at length the intricacy of the process. She explains that two full performances of *Die Räuber* were required – once with an audience present and once without – so that the cameras could capture every angle of the performance, without disrupting the audience's experience of the play. The cast's effort in performing the intensely physical four-hour play twice in one day is described as a "marathon", and Brandl details how the theatrical structure of the play – constant movement without clearly demarcated scenes or intervals – complicated the filming process further still. As director, Schönhofer choreographed the movement and focus of the cameras whilst the play was in process, "wie bei einer Live-Show" (like at a live show), Brandl notes. She observes, too, that drummer Fabian Löbhard was required to clean his music stand

¹⁸ Melanie Brandl, 'Filmreifes Theater', <https://www.merkur.de>, 19 May 2017. <<https://www.merkur.de/kultur/in-berlin-wird-am-sonntag-eine-aufzeichnung-raeuber-gezeigt-8327413.html>> [accessed 11 March 2018].

prior to each filming session, as the cameras could detect specks of dust that otherwise would not be visible to an audience.

Later in the interview, Schönhofer discusses how, paradoxically, the filming of a performance can create a sensation of greater proximity for its audiences than established and conventional modes of theatre spectatorship – even though this greater proximity is simultaneously a visual reminder of the ‘distance’ between the film and the performance. He says to Brandl,

[j]ede Nahaufnahme fokussiert die jeweilige Person, setzt sie für den Fernsehzuschauer ins Zentrum. Da nehme ich als Regisseur also direkt Einfluss. Der Theaterzuschauer hingegen entscheidet selbst, wen er fokussiert.¹⁹

(each close-up focuses on an individual person and places them centre-stage for the viewer. So as a film director I am exercising a direct influence. The theatre audience, however, chooses for themselves upon whom they focus.)

Moving beyond the simplified binaries of theatre versus film or performance versus documentation, Schönhofer claims here that he has attempted to replicate the supposed autonomy of a theatre-goer’s gaze in his filmmaking, to replicate a kind of “Theatergefühl” or sense of theatre, within the film. Although an audience member’s individual focus is not necessarily the same as the camera’s, and a theatre audience is certainly encouraged by a performance’s dramaturgy to focus on specific elements of a production, this discussion between Schönhofer and Brandl reveals an apparent desire to render his own directorial input invisible in the film of *Die Räuber*. It has a similar sentiment to Phelan’s opinion that documentation is interference rather than performance, but more importantly echoes Bolter and Grusin’s observation that innovation in mediation often seeks invisibility in order to present greater proximity, and therefore authenticity, in its relation to the subject.

This, coupled with Brandl’s observation of the dust on the music stand, is reminiscent of Benjamin’s analysis of the relationship between an artwork, a

¹⁹ Brandl.

technological gaze, and the abilities of the human eye. As we saw in Chapter 1, Benjamin reflects on how technological reproduction can bring out “aspects” of the original that would otherwise go unseen by the human eye, and how such processes can also “put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself”.²⁰ The substitution of Schönhofer’s film for *Die Räuber*, an original artwork physically unable to “reach” Berlin, is precisely this: an instance where technological innovation can cross such distances. Rather than the complete divorce between performance and distribution alluded to by Phelan, the Theatertreffen itself, and the media’s response to the premiere event for the film of *Die Räuber* can thus be seen as an alternative mode of presence, rather than the representation of an absence.

Rather than a straight-forward document, the *Die Räuber* film had a hybrid status at the festival, shifting the “here and now” of the play in ways both literal and metaphorical. It drew together footage from two separate performances to create a single representation of the play, and in doing so, it provided visual perspectives on *Die Räuber* that would otherwise have been unseen: as the actors marched, solemnly, towards the unreachable brink of their treadmills, slow tracking shots permitted the audience to take in the full extent of the set’s imposing bulk. The possibility of intimate close-ups on the actors invited the audience to observe the minutiae of the performance that would not usually be visible, particularly for the audience members in a playhouse’s cheapest, most distant seats. When Katja Bürkle, performing as Franz Moor, delivered a pivotal monologue, she spat with such venom that saliva trickled from her chin: such grotesque character detail may otherwise have gone unseen, if not revealed by Schönhofer’s lens.

At the culmination of the premiere event there was lengthy, enthusiastic applause and the cast and crew took to the stage, standing in front of the screen to give a bow – as is customary at the end of a theatre performance. In the three years that I attended the Potsdamer Platz public viewings and the Bornemann Bar livestreams, there was no applause at the end of these digitally distributed performances; *Die Räuber*’s film premiere is the only exception to this admittedly anecdotal rule. In contrast, it is common practice for the traditionally ‘live’ performances of the

²⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 170

Theatertreffen's "bemerkenswert" productions to receive extended rounds of applause, often lasting upwards of ten minutes. The hearty applause at the premiere, then, is a possible indication that the Theatertreffen organizers were somewhat successful in their efforts to persuade their audience of the screening's liveness. The context of the premiere, held within the prestigious auditorium, and the commitment on the part of 3sat and the Theatertreffen in revealing the complexities of the filming process, as well as the literal presence of *Die Räuber*'s creative team at the event, were all important factors in this re-contextualisation of a digitally distributed performance.

In fact, in contrast to the "no-show" headlines garnered by the announcement of the screening, the audience at the premiere appeared to be celebrating the performance's presence at the festival after all, despite the logistical difficulties. In 2017, the Theatertreffen used the hashtag #TT17 to organize its online presence, with audiences encouraged to use the hashtag in their social media posts when discussing the festival on Twitter. The screening of *Die Räuber* inspired one fifth of the tweets posted about the ten invited productions, a remarkable online presence for a supposedly absent play.²¹ The case of *Die Räuber* clearly complicates the clear divide usually drawn by the festival between the pre-recorded public viewings, the secretive livestreams, and the live (in a traditional sense) performances on stage at the Haus der Festspiele. It also suggests that liveness, in this context, is an experiential device and marketing tool that is decisively employed by the Theatertreffen, rather than a quality inherent to some forms of performance and wholly absent in others. It also undermines the hierarchical value system that attributes sociocultural, economic and political value to certain performances (and the audiences of these performances) over others: the *Faust* livestream became 'public' largely because of enquiries into the public cost of staging the performance for an inner-circle audience who had already purchased tickets, while subsequent Bornemann Bar livestreams have remained unpromoted and thus invisible and inaccessible to those outside the festival's returning audiences. Moreover, the sense of ceremony and exclusivity built around *Die Räuber*'s film premiere proves that the other pre-recorded 3sat films could be similarly imbued with a quality of liveness, if they were contextualised differently. This reveals a certain level

²¹ Based on tweets using the "TT17" hashtag collected over the duration of the 2017 festival.

of attention paid towards the festival's ticket-buying audience that is notably absent from the Theatertreffen's so-called "public" programming, despite the festival's prestigious, publicly funded status.

1.3 Futures

Since *Die Räuber*'s film premiere in 2017, several other productions have been unable to attend the festival. Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's play *Nationaltheater Reinickendorf* was prevented from performing at the 2018 festival by a conflicting schedule and although an early press release suggested that an alternative event would be held, and *Nachtkritik* reported that a "Video-Dokumentation" (video documentary) of the production would be shown, no such event materialized.²² A new solution was found for *Das Internat* in 2019, however. The Schauspiel Dortmund production, directed by Ersan Mondtag, had closed the previous summer, and the complications of rebuilding its intricate set, reuniting the now-otherwise engaged creative team, and locating a theatre space in Berlin that could allow for a build-time of five full days, proved insurmountable. In short, *Das Internat* could not be re-performed in any capacity, and this also meant that 3sat could not film the production: any form of film premiere, public screening or television broadcast was impossible. Instead, an in-house recording of a previous rehearsal of *Das Internat* was hosted on the *Nachtkritik* web site, for a limited period between 6pm on 17 May until 11pm on 20 May. This period was clearly intended to replicate the four-night run such a performance could have had at the Theatertreffen, but it nonetheless placed a curious viewing restriction upon a recording, and a production, no longer tied to any obvious form of capital.

Two years after the premiere for the film of *Die Räuber*, the discussions surrounding this screening of *Das Internat*'s rehearsal revealed a shift in the discourse. In the comment section below the broadcast, *Nachtkritik* users complained not about a perceived absence of the production from the Theatertreffen, but about the quality of the play itself. One such commenter, using the pen name Berstscheibe, made the cutting remark that "Ohne Stream hätte man die Legende aufrecht erhalten können,

²² *Nachtkritik*, "Theatertreffen 2018 ohne "Nationaltheater Reinickendorf", 9 March 2018. <https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=15112:nationaltheater-reinickendorf-von-vinge-mueller-nicht-beim-theatertreffen-2018&catid=126:meldungen-k&Itemid=100089> [accessed 30 March 2022].

das [sic] dieser Abend was besonderes [sic] war” (without this stream, people might have been able to maintain the idea that this play was something special). Rather than the means of its distribution, it was the form and content of the performance itself that were at the forefront of public discussion. One interpretation of this is that the screening, as a medium, had achieved the ‘invisibility’ sought after by Schönhofer and described by Bolter and Grusin – if not for the fact that the filming was often unsteady and out of focus, with extremely tight close-ups on seemingly unimportant aspects of the production. Clearly the film of the rehearsal was part of the theatre’s creative process and was never intended to be made available to the public, but in being broadcast as part of the Theatertreffen, the recording’s compromised viewing experience, in contrast to 3sat’s sleek, purpose-made films, offered the audience a behind-the-scenes insight into the production that imbued it with a different kind of authenticity.

Returning to Abbott and Read’s argument that it is often the “labelling as *live*” that results in a “hybrid working between performance and performance documentation”, the recording of *Das Internat* can be seen as a working document – in the sense that it both documented and contributed to the rehearsal process – that was temporarily re-labeled as live by its platform on *Nachtkritik* and, more significantly, the restricted viewing time that replicated a traditional run of performances. That the discussions on *Nachtkritik* focussed upon *Das Internat* itself, rather than the medium by which it was distributed, reflects the rapid normalization and acceptance of digitally mediated forms of live performance, and suggests an expanding and more flexible industry-wide understanding of what live performance can be, where it takes place, and to whom it is accessible.

These case studies have clarified that the Theatertreffen prioritizes traditional modes of liveness over digitally distributed ones, and they have also shown that this prioritization is rooted in the notion that exclusivity and limitation are integral to the creation of a sense of liveness. However, in contrast to Phelan’s argument, these case studies also demonstrate how exclusivity and limitation can *create* liveness, rather than existing as a *result of* an ontologically fixed form of liveness. The limited screening of *Das Internat*’s rehearsal footage suggests that the festival is willing to embrace digital modes of replicating traditional practices of exclusivity and limitation, rather than

using digital tools to expand their audience or generate alternative forms of income. We have seen, too, how the festival's hierarchy of access – a hierarchy built upon traditional, limited notions of liveness – is used to distinguish returning audiences from broader publics. This is evident in the literally distanced, so-called public viewings of the re-recorded films that are kept separate from the festival's main programming, and the livestreams of the festival's main performances that are guarded from the general public by a lack of sign-posting. It is visible, too, in the efforts made to confer a sense of liveness upon *Die Räuber's* film premiere, which was framed as an exclusive, ticketed, artistic, ceremonial event distinguished from the presentation of 3sat's other pre-recorded material. The use of the premiere as a form of compensation for a perceived absence of the production set a precedent for the broadcasting of *Das Internat's* rehearsal film, and the planning of an entirely digital program for the Theatertreffen during the COVID-19 crisis.

Although this PhD focuses on the years 2017-19 and cannot offer here an analysis of the Theatertreffen's response to the impact of the global pandemic, it is clear that the years preceding the COVID-19 crisis fundamentally shaped the festival's approach to its all-digital programming in 2020 and 2021. These case studies have demonstrated the Theatertreffen's precedent for using digital distribution out of necessity, rather than for the artistic and democratic potential of such technology, when embracing modes of digital distribution could in fact ensure the resilience of the Theatertreffen and its relationship with a theatre-going public. This focus on the Theatertreffen also speaks more broadly to the relatively uncommon use of livestreaming in the German theatre industry more broadly, which is striking given the country's federal funding system and its lack of one identifiably dominant cultural centre – a line of argument that becomes even more relevant in the following case study on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and its increasingly hegemonic role in the wider theatre industry.

2. Digital Distribution as a Solution at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is one of the world's largest performing arts festivals. Established in 1947 as a freely accessible alternative to the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival, the Fringe was born from an anarchic, independent spirit. In his definitive book on the festival, theatre critic Mark Fisher describes it as “the Greatest

Show on Earth”.²³ But unlike the Theatertreffen, or the Edinburgh International Festival, the Fringe is not curated. It operates instead as a searchable directory of performances and a support network for performers: any artist, for a fee ranging between £72.00 and £221.40, can submit their show to be listed in the Fringe’s programme.

The Fringe takes place parallel to the International Festival, running for three weeks each August, and its sheer size provokes annual media attention. The 2019 Fringe was reported to be the most-attended Fringe to date, with “just under 250,000 attendees [...] and three million tickets issued”.²⁴ Over 3,800 shows were performed under the Fringe’s umbrella, from 63 countries. Arts critic Phil Miller asked, “how much Festival can one city take?”, balancing questions of sustainability and economic impact in his 2019 report for the *Herald*. He interviewed Shona McCarthy, the chief executive of the Fringe Society, who states that the festival “does not have a ‘growth agenda’” – despite the celebratory framing of “record audiences” in the Fringe’s own marketing materials, as cited above. Miller also speaks to the Fair Fringe pressure group, who describe “a Fringe built off the backs of exploitation” and argue that “The Fringe Society need to refuse to let employers who don’t treat their staff fairly advertise in the programme – that will ensure we are working towards sustainable growth that benefits everyone”.²⁵ However, as both Miller and Fisher point out, these questions have been asked for almost as long as the Fringe has been in existence. Fisher notes, humorously, that, “in 1961, the theatre director (Gerard Slevin) complained that the Fringe ha[d] grown too big”.²⁶

Rather than a fringe event, the Fringe is now a major institution. Its own advertising foregrounds its reputation as the epicentre of the world’s performing arts market, stating that in 2019, over 100 professional development events took place during the festival, and that “1,661 producers, programmers, bookers, talent agencies,

²³ Mark Fisher, *The Edinburgh Fringe Survival Guide: How to Make Your Show a Success* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 7.

²⁴ EdFringe, *Record Edinburgh Audiences as Edinburgh Festival Fringe Comes to a Close* (2019), <<https://edfringe.s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/uploads/docs/media/releases/Fringe-media-release-26-08-2019.pdf>> [accessed 3 December 2021].

²⁵ Phil Miller, ‘Edinburgh Festivals: Is It Time to Call a Halt on Their Growth?’, *Herald*, 24 February 2019. <<https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/17455433.edinburgh-festivals-time-call-halt-growth/>> [accessed 14 July 2021].

²⁶ Fisher, p. 13.

festivals, and others from 54 countries [were accredited and] looking to find work, tour it and support artists beyond the festival itself”. This reputation places considerable pressure on artists to *be there*. Playwright Mark Ravenhill once described it as an “essential rite of passage” for a performer, contributing to the myth that the Fringe can make or break an artist’s career.²⁷

It is with this context in mind that I examine two performances which use digital distribution to take part in the Fringe, and to overcome geographical, political, and ethical barriers which might otherwise prevent them from doing so. *Nassim* (2017), a self-titled work by Iranian playwright Nassim Soleimanpour, and *Pathetic Fallacy* (2019) by Canadian artist Anita Rochon, both frame their uses of digital technologies as a solution to a problem, rather than as an intrinsically artistic decision, a trope I have discussed above in relation to the the Theatertreffen, and a trend that grew exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressure to *be there* is manifested differently in these two works, and both performances are fundamentally shaped by the underlying conditions of performing at the Fringe. Below, I consider how forms of digital distribution are used to position a traditional notion of theatrical liveness as dramaturgical leverage, creating the dramatic tension on which these performances rely, and how this dynamic contributes to a larger question of how presence and absence are staged in the theatre.

2.1 *Nassim*: The Artist is Present

Soleimanpour describes his self-titled play *Nassim* (2017) as a “machine”, apt for a performance that makes a virtue out of following instructions.²⁸ Its initial premise is deceptively simple: a stack of papers comprising the script are placed on a table on the stage, and each night this script is performed on sight by a new, intentionally unprepared, professional actor. Soleimanpour’s critically acclaimed break-through work *White Rabbit, Red Rabbit* (2011) also required a different, unrehearsed actor to perform the script each night and Nelson Pressley, reviewing that play for *The Washington Post*, described the format as a “bit of a stunt”, before conceding that

²⁷ Fisher, p. 1.

²⁸ *Nassim* premiered at the Bush Theatre in London in July 2017 and was performed throughout August in Edinburgh that same year, as part of the Traverse’s Fringe programme. I saw it on 16 and 27 August 2017.

“[most] tantalizingly of all, it brings you into remarkably close contact with a real person who isn’t there”.²⁹ It is common for a playwright *not* to appear on stage, and for a performer to enact the playwright’s written instructions, but Pressley’s remark reveals how Soleimanpour’s play is engineered to highlight, and make strange, precisely this dynamic. While writing *Rabbit*, Soleimanpour was unable to obtain a passport to leave his home country of Iran (due to refusing to take part in national service), so he created a performance that could travel the world without him.³⁰ This biographical detail was a crucial element of *Rabbit*, and Pressley remarked on Soleimanpour’s “deliberate and near-total control over an actor and an audience from his own isolation”.³¹ *Nassim* develops the same themes of authorial control, language, and border politics, and challenges ideas of theatrical presence and absence through the use of digital distribution technologies.

The show begins with the brand-new performer sitting at the table, facing the script, and receiving instructions via a livestream that is projected onto the backdrop of the theatre. The livestream shows Soleimanpour seated at another desk, remotely turning the pages of another copy of the same script. The playwright’s actions encourage the actor to follow along and turn the pages in unison. Crucially, Soleimanpour does not speak: for the most part, the screen shows only his hands and the paper, and the pen that he uses to gently but firmly underline a particularly important instruction. It is a neat visual metaphor for a playwright’s distant control, via text, of a performance, as well as a re-location of that control from the time of writing into the time of performance. The script is shown to be more of a launchpad than a blueprint, as the distance between Soleimanpour’s intentions and the actor’s interpretations is realised in real time, highlighting the variabilities and potentials for error when performing any script. The most crucial function of the livestream, however, is to establish Soleimanpour as *distant*. He is not absent, as in *Rabbit*, but the screen suggests that he is certainly not *here*, in the theatre, with us.

²⁹ Nelson Pressley, ‘Theater Review: Theater Alliance’s “White Rabbit, Red Rabbit”’, *Washington Post*, 5 December 2013. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/theater-review-theater-alliances-white-rabbit-red-rabbit/2013/12/05/b73b0610-5d00-11e3-8d24-31c016b976b2_story.html> [accessed 20 September 2021].

³⁰ Ian Youngs, ‘Playwright Nassim Soleimanpour Sees His Own Play’, *BBC News*, 26 February 2013. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-21577030>> [accessed 22 March 2022].

³¹ Pressley.

Once this dynamic is established, a twist occurs. The actor, following the script, walks off the stage and into the backstage area of the theatre, with their actions captured by a handheld camera and cast onto the backdrop of the theatre – replacing Soleimanpour’s own livestream – so that the audience can watch their journey. In this way, the audience witness the actor opening a door and discovering Soleimanpour to be in the venue after all, sitting alone in a small room. After a warm greeting, the playwright and the performer walk back to the stage together. On the two nights that I attended the performance, at the 2017 Fringe, the audience welcomed Soleimanpour to the stage with applause – as if he had only just arrived, or had completed a magic trick. For the rest of *Nassim*, Soleimanpour remains on stage, offering gentle guidance to the actor and leading the actor and audience through lessons in Farsi – all through the script, without the playwright once speaking out loud. The play culminates in a phone conversation with Soleimanpour’s mother at home in Iran, for whom the actor must perform a short children’s story in Farsi. This is when we learn that it is the show’s intended audience, rather than the playwright, that is hundreds of miles away.

Matthew Randle-Bent describes the play as creating a “dynamic relationship between the work of the live performer, those spectator-participants called upon to assist in the live performance, and the theatre machine – which itself represents the labour of the playwright”. My analysis re-frames this, and considers the “theatre machine” to be the sum of the relationship between the performer, audience and playwright – rather than simply the work of the playwright alone. I argue that, in *Nassim*, the “theatre machine” is intentionally designed to surpass Soleimanpour’s own role in the work: this turns the play itself into a form of digital distribution, as well as two performances. The first performance is the one that takes place in the theatre venue, via the playwright’s digitally distributed instructions, and then it becomes a rehearsal for the digital distribution of the second performance – the reading of the children’s story for Soleimanpour’s mother.

When *Nassim* begins, three elements of the performance are staged as *present*: the physical script that sits on the table as a materialisation of Soleimanpour’s authorial control; the performer, who emerges from a seat amongst the audience to take up their position on stage; and the theatre audience, who are in dialogue with the performer from the start. These elements are contrasted against Soleimanpour’s appearance via

livestream, which becomes secondary to the *present* elements. As I argued in the previous chapter, it has become commonplace to consider a livestream to be a secondary option or a solution to a problem: the play exploits the assumption that if Soleimanpour could be on stage, he would not be on screen. Once Soleimanpour arrives on stage in person, he continues to use only the printed script to communicate with the performer and the audience. This serves to emphasise the script as means of distribution, like the livestream was, as well as the foundations of a performance. At *Nassim*'s conclusion, his mother is brought into the performance space through a phone call: it is wholly possible that her voice has been pre-recorded, as the audience listens to her react to the performer's rendition of the story. *Nassim* is a play about staging distance and presence, and exploring what it means for specific elements of a performance to be far away from the stage. Soleimanpour's mother's role as the ultimate audience member re-locates the point of performance reception, out of the Scottish theatre and to her home in Iran. In doing so, it turns the entire performance up to this point into a rehearsal – for the reading of the story, but also in using theatre as a distribution method for bridging physical distances.

Soleimanpour's own description of the play uses an alternative metaphor, that of a machine. He compares writing *Nassim* to engineering, a field in which he worked prior to making theatre:

It's like, if you rent a new place, [you expect that] the building should stand. A toilet is a toilet. But [then] people move in, and they bring their own life. They change the building the way they want it. I just don't want it to collapse! If it [the play] collapses that's my fault; that's bad writing.³²

In this analogy, the play is a building that should be structurally sound – but also responsive to the life brought into it by the people who “move in”, like the performer and the audience. Soleimanpour describes his own role in terms of architecture and maintenance, more akin to a janitor than someone who lives in the building – an

³² Katie Hawthorne, 'Experimental Theatre at Edinburgh Festivals 2017', *The Skinny*, 2 August 2017. <<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-fringe/theatre/experimental-theatre-edinburgh-festivals-2017>> [accessed 4 June 2021].

essential but hidden contribution. In *Nassim*, he explores different ways that this paradox of authorial absence can manifest on stage.

I have already established that the staging of absence has been integral to Soleimanpour's work since *Rabbit*. Scholars have read this interplay of presence and absence in terms of the geopolitical contexts in which his work is performed, with Randle-Bent referring, rather bluntly, to the "overdetermined narratives of Soleimanpour's predicament in Iran".³³ He goes on to describe Soleimanpour's "restrictions" and "isolation" in scare quotes, suggesting that this biographical detail has distorted the reception of his work.³⁴ Greer expands on this theme, writing that "critical reception of the work has emphasised its status as a creative response to Iranian censorship ... [which] also serves the narration of the West as a space of free expression, mobility and cultural exchange that elides the stringent controls placed at its outer borders".³⁵ Greer notes, too, that after Soleimanpour was able to leave Iran, "the play [*Rabbit*] continues to be performed as originally written", requiring the audience to "acknowledge a gap of time and space between the act of authorship and the instance of the text's performance".³⁶ For me this does not, as Randle-Bent suggests, contribute to an overemphasis on the political and geographical context of Soleimanpour's work: as recently as 2019, Soleimanpour was unable to perform in the United Kingdom due to visa complications.³⁷ Instead, I argue that Greer's description of the staging of a "gap of time and space" between authorship and performance better encapsulates Soleimanpour's dramaturgy of absence.

For Greer, one such example of this "gap" can be found in the play's casting strategy. Marketing materials for *Nassim* emphasised the famous guest performers of Soleimanpour's previous plays ("including Sinead Cusack, Ken Loach, Whoopi Goldberg") as well as the element of surprise involved: "Just as each performer arrives unprepared on the night, audiences will also be surprised by who is performing

³³ Matthew Randle-Bent, 'A Machine Against Itself: Participation in the Theatre of Nassim Soleimanpour', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30.3 (2020), 398–407 (p. 399).

³⁴ Randle-Bent, p. 400.

³⁵ Stephen Greer, *Queer Exceptions: Solo Performance in Neoliberal Times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 136.

³⁶ Greer, p. 150.

³⁷ Giverny Masson, 'Nassim Soleimanpour's Show Cancelled at Home Due to Visa Delay', *The Stage*, 20 June 2019. <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/nassim-soleimanpours-show-cancelled-at-home-in-manchester-due-to-visa-delay>> [accessed 4 December 2021].

alongside Nassim”.³⁸ This expectation is heightened during the Fringe, when many other performers are visiting or working in Edinburgh. On the two occasions that I attended *Nassim* in August 2017, the performers were famous ventriloquist Nina Conti and well-known Scottish theatre maker Kieran Hurley – both of whom were also performing their own work at the Fringe. Greer labels the dynamic created by this casting process as a

dramaturgy of obligatory participation, both audience and actor ... called upon to authenticate the event through a mutual staging of liveness by appearing as themselves ... and as representatives of given roles in the theatrical process.³⁹

It is interesting that, for Greer, this staging of liveness requires friction between the audience and performers “appearing as themselves” and as theatrical “representatives”: it recalls Bolter and Grusin’s description of “hypermedia” as “the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real [in order to] evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response”.⁴⁰ In this way, the dual role of real *and* representative functions as an authentication of the actor’s immediate, unrehearsed response to the performance, as well as the audience’s role as both real people *and* an audience, as written into the script, and Soleimanpour’s role as both playwright and long-distance son. There are also moments in the play that can be read as direct staging of that “desire to get past” certain modes of representation, such as when the actor is instructed to walk away from the screen image of Soleimanpour, in order to locate the playwright in person and bring him back to the stage.

Many of the critics who reviewed *Nassim* agreed with Greer’s logic, that it is the gap between authorship, identity and performance roles that brings liveness to the play. Writing for *Exeunt*, Duska Radosavlkevic describes how the show “creates a sort of immediacy for the audience which is exciting and dangerous – together with the actor, we are in the same boat, discovering the piece together and admiring the way in

³⁸ Lorna Irvine, ‘Nassim’, *The List*, 23 August 2017.

<<https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/94772-nassim/>> [accessed 4 June 2021].

³⁹ Greer, p. 151.

⁴⁰ Bolter and Grusin, p. 53.

which the actor handles the unknown”.⁴¹ Like Greer, Radosavlkevic highlights the separation between the actor’s *job* in the performance and the visibility of the human labour required to fill that role. *Broadway Baby*’s critic similarly described how the actor “is not only performing but, and this is rare in theatre, she is also genuinely experiencing everything for the first time, just as the audience is. We see our own reactions all over her face.”⁴² *The Scotsman* also emphasised the role of the actor as/and the audience in the play’s presentation of liveness, writing that they work together to “create the show live on stage”.⁴³ These three reviews cite immediate, visible reactions as the authenticating factor of the performance’s liveness – aligned with Greer, Bolter and Grusin – but they also share an emphasis on the perception that it is the “first time”: language akin to Phelan’s insistence on a performance’s unique, unrepeatable existence.

However, Emily Jane Kerr, writing for *Broadway Baby* found this kind of liveness to be somehow untheatrical, writing that *Nassim* is “more of an event than theatre”.⁴⁴ Kerr’s five-star rating implies that this is not negative criticism, but it is striking that she found the play’s emphasis on immediacy from both the audience *and* the actor to result in a form of liveness not necessarily associated with the theatre. On the other hand, for Lyn Gardner in the *Guardian*, *Nassim* was an “unusually vivid celebration of theatre’s liveness”, writing that the play “uses presence – technological and physical – and absence to clever effect”.⁴⁵ Gardner does not query the theatricality of the way that liveness is staged in *Nassim*, and instead emphasises its relationship to presence and absence in a manner reminiscent of Phelan’s argument that “Presence is theatre’s promise as well as its doubt”.⁴⁶ But while Phelan’s logic depends upon her belief that theatre is ontologically finite, meaning that if a performance is live then it

⁴¹ Duska Radosavlkevic, ‘Edinburgh Fringe Review: Nassim at Traverse’, *Exeunt Magazine* <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/edinburgh-fringe-review-nassim-traverse/>> [accessed 4 June 2021].

⁴² Emily Jane Kerr, ‘Nassim: 5 Star Review’, *Broadway Baby*, 12 August 2017, <<http://broadwaybaby.com/shows/nassim/721688>> [accessed 4 June 2021].

⁴³ ‘Theatre Review: Nassim’, 11 August 2019. <<https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/theatre-review-nassim-1442947>> [accessed 4 June 2021].

⁴⁴ ‘Theatre Review: Nassim’.

⁴⁵ Lyn Gardner, ‘Nassim Review – Language and Life Lessons from a Vivid Iranian Voice’, *The Guardian*, 9 August 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/aug/09/nassim-soleimanpour-review-theatre-lyn-gardner-edinburgh>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁴⁶ Phelan, p. 121.

must eventually become absent, Gardner finds liveness to be caused by *Nassim*'s complex, often contradictory, staging of absence.

Previously in Part 1, I explored the role of disappearance in Auslander and Phelan's definitions of liveness, and discussed how, for Westerman and Reason, their approaches create an abstracted understanding of the "now" of performance. Westerman also argues that "if one contends that a work is never present, that it is always already inaccessible, the supposed singularity of 'the work itself' explodes into an infinity of pure subjectivism" – and this captures the shifts in roles, time and space that are built into the structure of *Nassim*.⁴⁷ In creating a performance that is as absent as it is present, Soleimanpour has created a theatre machine that distributes his play beyond the time and space of the stage.

2.2 Pathetic Fallacy: The Artist is Distant

Created by playwright Anita Rochon, *Pathetic Fallacy* was presented as part of the CanadaHub at the 2019 Fringe – a curated collection of performances supported by the Canada Council for the Arts.⁴⁸ Like *Nassim*, it is designed to be performed by a new actor each night and, like *Rabbit*, this dramaturgical design is politically motivated. The marketing materials describe how Rochon "set herself the challenge of creating a touring piece where no performer goes on tour" to avoid the carbon footprint incurred by travelling from Canada to take part in the Fringe.⁴⁹ The blurb continues:

[In] [e]ach show a different local stand-in takes on the central role [...]. The performer receives all their staging instructions live, standing in front of a temperamental broadcast media green screen. It's an original collision of DIY cinematography, action film, choreography, a gallery talk and weather forecasting – all with the immediacy of live performance.⁵⁰

Rochon's desire to perform, but not to travel, is central to the play's discussion of humankind's complicated relationship to climate change. The *Guardian* included it in an article titled "Eco-venues and no-flyer zones: Edinburgh Fringe tackles the climate

⁴⁷ Westerman, p. 194.

⁴⁸ CanadaHub, *CanadaHub*, <<https://canadahubfringe.com/>> [accessed 8 December 2021].

⁴⁹ Chop Theatre, *Pathetic Fallacy*, <<https://thechoptheatre.com/plays/pathetic-fallacy/>> [accessed 4 October 2021].

⁵⁰ Chop Theatre.

crisis”, acknowledging how the framing of the performance encourages the theatre industry and audiences alike to consider the environmental impact of the festival and its continual growth, year on year.⁵¹ Rochon’s “challenge” also speaks to the pressure on theatre makers to *be there* at the Fringe, in terms of career development; CanadaHub is even marketed as an opportunity for programmers to discover “tour-ready artists”.⁵²

I watched *Pathetic Fallacy* on 14 August, when Canadian comedian John Hastings was the “stand-in” performer. Hastings had his own show at renowned comedy venue Monkey Barrel at the 2019 Fringe and, as with the surprise guests who took part in *Nassim*, there is a notable degree of self-promotion involved in a Fringe performer guest-starring in someone else’s production. The irony that our “stand-in” for Rochon should also have travelled to Edinburgh from Canada went unaddressed, but it also served to highlight the futility at the heart of the play: if only one woman refuses to attend the Fringe, how much difference does it make? Moreover, it challenges the framing in this thesis of the Fringe as a “local” event, an idea that I explore further in Part 3. Later, when *Pathetic Fallacy* toured to major international cities, like Hong Kong, performers truly local to those theatre industries were recruited as the “stand-ins”. It would have made for a more powerful message if, during the Fringe, only Edinburgh-based artists had been cast to perform in Rochon’s place.

Pathetic Fallacy has a minimal set, clearly designed to facilitate touring. There are three main elements: a large greenscreen, in front of which the performer must stand, and a video camera that captures the performer’s actions; a small screen that faces the performer, upon which they receive Rochon’s instructions; and a third screen, facing the audience, onto which visual effects and the footage from the green screen are projected. As the marketing blurb describes it, there is a pointedly DIY, ramshackle aesthetic to the way in which this technology-heavy staging is presented, and the visual effects – including a charming, glitchy moment in which the night’s performer meets

⁵¹ Catherine Love, ‘Eco-Venues and No-Flyer Zones: Edinburgh Fringe Tackles the Climate Crisis’, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/aug/02/edinburgh-fringe-climate-crisis-shows>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁵² CanadaHub.

a pre-recorded version of Rochon on an airplane, via greenscreen, feel homespun and intimate.

The most important point of difference between *Nassim* and *Pathetic Fallacy* in terms of their staging of liveness lies in the presentation of the actor's performance instructions. *Nassim* conjures a sensation of immediacy by revealing the performance instructions to the audience and the actor simultaneously, whereas only the performer can see the instructions in *Pathetic Fallacy*. This means that the audience is left to guess at what those instructions might be, and to imagine the extent to which the performer is interpreting them. We still see the facial response of the performer, as they read the instructions for the first time, but the mutual experience that proved so important to the reviewers of *Nassim* is absent. Instead of feeling "in the same boat" as the actor, several critics described a sensation of distance between their own, and the actor's, experience. *Broadway Baby* wrote that the combination of performance instructions and the pace of the pre-recorded material result in "pretend 'Anita' doing little more than trying to keep up".⁵³ A critic for *The Arts Desk* agreed, describing elements of the performance as "manic" and "farcical" as "Rochon's victim attempts to keep up with her clearly elaborate instructions".⁵⁴ Unlike in *Nassim*, where the pace was conducted by Soleimanpour in response to the performer's actions, *Pathetic Fallacy*'s instructions seem to have taken the form of a rolling autocue, and were therefore structurally unresponsive, irrespective of the performer's actions. This resulted in other critics failing to recognise the "stand-in" as a performer at all. *The Independent* wrote that *Pathetic Fallacy* "isn't really 'performed' at all",⁵⁵ while *The Reviews Hub* considered there to be "little space for meaningful involvement" for the performer, "amongst the pre-recorded content".⁵⁶

⁵³ Paul Cockburn, 'Pathetic Fallacy: 3 Star Review', *Broadway Baby*, 13 August 2019. <<https://broadwaybaby.com/shows/pathetic-fallacy/746328>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁵⁴ David Kettle, 'Edinburgh Fringe 2019 Reviews: Deer Woman / Pathetic Fallacy / Blind Date', *The Arts Desk*, 9 August 2019. <<https://theartsdesk.com/theatre/edinburgh-fringe-2019-reviews-deer-woman-pathetic-fallacy-blind-date>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁵⁵ Dave Pollock, 'The Best Summerhall Productions at this Year's Edinburgh Fringe Festival', *The Independent*, 13 August 2019. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/edinburgh-fringe-festival-2019-summerhall-review-everything-i-see-i-swallow-hold-on-let-go-pathetic-fallacy-a9055751.html>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁵⁶ Gareth Davies, 'Pathetic Fallacy – CanadaHub, Edinburgh', *The Reviews Hub*, 3 August 2019. <<https://www.thereviewshub.com/pathetic-fallacy-canadahub-edinburgh/>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

These descriptions of *Pathetic Fallacy* sound similar to a charge Randle-Bent levels at *Nassim*, that “the performer’s labour [...] need not be specialised, for they serve only as prosthesis for the machine”.⁵⁷ To an extent, this is truer of *Pathetic Fallacy* than *Nassim*, as the performer’s role is more clearly determined as a prosthesis. Throughout, the “stand-in” refers to themselves as “Anita”, emphasising themselves as a humble delegate for the absent Rochon. This direct admission of a lack of autonomy is in stark contrast to the time and space given to the performers and their emotional responses in *Nassim*, who are, moreover, only required to perform as themselves. In this way, each performer in *Pathetic Fallacy* has a triple role: as a named, established performer in their own right; as a human beyond their role as actor; and as “Anita”. Where Greer found a productive “gap” between authorship, identity, and performance in Soleimanpour’s work, *Pathetic Fallacy* does not provide the same space for the tension between these roles to be explored. Still, although *Pathetic Fallacy* repeatedly tells its audience that the “stand-in” is simply a delegate for Rochon, it is clear that this is untrue. The show’s logic openly requires a performer who is demonstrably *not* Rochon, as its premise relies entirely on Rochon’s absence. It is the moments in which the performer is permitted to be both “Anita” and themselves that *Pathetic Fallacy*’s staging of distance is most nuanced.

In these brief moments, Rochon’s distance is staged similarly to Soleimanpour’s. She is accessible only through a screen, where distance is presented as an obstacle that digital technology can overcome. Her moments of encounter with the performer, first in a green-screened airplane and later in a café, create a mediatised space akin to Greer’s visible “gap” between the time of authorship and moment of performance. This is even more marked than when the performer first encounters Soleimanpour in *Nassim*, as Rochon’s presence is pre-recorded and thus a documentation from pre-performance. *Pathetic Fallacy* goes further, too, in presenting technology as a solution: it is not only a solution to an absent playwright, but it becomes a symbol of salvation for the Fringe’s (and thus the theatre industry at large) ever-growing carbon footprint.

⁵⁷ Randle-Bent, p. 402.

At *Pathetic Fallacy*'s conclusion, the performer picks up the phone and speaks with Rochon. As with Soleimanpour's mother, this conversation could of course be pre-recorded, but it is staged as if in real time. This shift in temporality is particularly enhanced, given that the 'real' Rochon has, until now, only appeared in the play as a figure from the past. Rochon asks the performer how the performance went, as if gathering post-show directorial notes, and thanks them for 'being' her. It becomes a moment of severance, where the performer is finally released from their labour as "Anita", as well as a symbolic bridging of the distance in geographical and temporal terms between Edinburgh and Canada.

2.3 Conclusion

Some weeks after I attended *Pathetic Fallacy*, I learned from a colleague that Rochon had, in fact, been in Edinburgh for much of the Fringe. This does not change the point of the work – the theatre industry has much work to do, regarding its environmental impact – but it does raise an important question: what is there to be gained by using digital distribution technologies to stage geographical distance? In *Nassim*, Soleimanpour reveals distance to be a staging device, exploring first the consequences of a distant playwright before concluding the performance with a distant audience. In this way, he begins by using digital distribution technologies to stream his performance to the stage, in Edinburgh's Traverse theatre, and finishes by streaming from the Traverse, with a nuanced exploration of the power dynamics therein. Rochon, on the other hand, never reveals her proximity to the Edinburgh stage, even though such a revelation might have strengthened the ethical dilemma central to *Pathetic Fallacy*. This speaks to her desire to truly be able to send the play around the world without her, like Soleimanpour did with *Rabbit*, but it also creates a slightly different hierarchy of liveness within the play.

I have established, in Part 1, that co-presence in time and space remains the most economically and socially valued form of liveness in the theatre. In *Nassim*, this form of liveness is used as leverage: in the middle of the play, the author, the performer and the audience share in this form of liveness, but Soleimanpour emphasises its value by limiting it. However, by using streaming technologies at the play's emotional climax – the phone call with his mother – he also proves that meaningful connection

can occur through other modes of liveness, and this stands as a gentle challenge to the prioritisation given to a form of liveness that involves *being there*. In *Pathetic Fallacy* Rochon uses a comparable hierarchical structure, with the performance's resolution being similarly found in a supposedly long-distance phone call, but without a moment in which that fully co-present form of liveness is ever on stage. The play frames this decision as unfortunate but morally essential, and in doing so creates a romanticised perspective on total co-presence that implies it to be the most valued form of live performance. This is a more conservative hierarchy of liveness than in *Nassim*, despite *Pathetic Fallacy* relying fully on digitally distributed performance to achieve this.

Throughout Part 1, I have considered why, when, and how digital distribution technologies are used in the theatre: the answer is almost always when a bridging of time and space is required. In the United Kingdom's livestreaming industry, this has created a tiered marketplace of live experience organised by proximity to a performance that is labelled as the 'original'. In this marketplace, distance is bridged but always acknowledged – the closer a consumer comes to that original performance, in terms of time and space, the more expensive the price of access. At the Theatertreffen, digital distribution technologies are used to separate audiences in terms of social currency, from underwhelming public outreach initiatives to under-promoted livestreams reserved for an in-the-know clientele. In both these examples, digitally distributed theatre is presented as a secondary option to the primacy of the live experience as it is traditionally understood. This defensive reflex reinforces the cultural and economic value of that kind of liveness, reiterating the cultural importance of festivals like the Theatertreffen and theatre companies like the Royal Shakespeare Company. However, these stratified systems of valuation both prove and disprove Phelan's theory of limitation: it is clear that emerging distributive and reproductive modes of performance *can* carry similar social and financial values to that of traditional modes of live performance, provided that these emerging modes of performance exist within a hierarchy of limitation and ephemerality that ranks certain experiences to be 'more live' than others.

This is where Abbott and Read's description of "labelling as live" proves so useful. We know that there is demonstrable power and value in the marketing of a performance *as live*, particularly in contrast to other forms of performance, but it also

describes a wide-spread glossing-over of technological reality, in particular the cognitive dissonance that streaming technologies operate in ‘real time’, without inevitable albeit minuscule delays in processing. I return to this idea in Part 3, where I discuss how a performance based between Theater Dortmund and the Berliner Ensemble strives to eliminate this delay through elaborate logistical planning.

In contrast to the market-place realities of “labelling as...”, I have also explored ontological approaches to defining liveness that argue for an indisputable, singular form of live performance. While there are clearly definable states of liveness in technological processes, we have seen how these processes are often not visible within presentations of live performance, and thus have little to do with the liveness of the theatrical experience. The visibility of the means of distribution can have an important impact on the experience of liveness, but this is different: it suggests that the staging of digitally distributive technologies is more important to the sensation of liveness than any ontological definition of liveness inherent in these technologies.

In this light, both *Pathetic Fallacy* and *Nassim* are edge cases – these performances take as a trope the mainstream, commercial ways in which digital distributed performance is experienced, and use this trope to subvert the expectations of their audiences. Both performances create illusions of presence and absence, exploiting market-based hierarchies to prove that digitally distributed performance can be used, not only to overcome issues of access, but also as meaningful dramaturgical tools. Soleimanpour and Rochon present digital distribution as both theatrical form and content, and explore how the act of livestreaming can be *staged*, rather than used as simply a mode of distribution for non-digital performance. Benjamin described one of the virtues of mechanical reproduction as permitting the work of art to meet its beholder halfway, and *Pathetic Fallacy* and *Nassim* intentionally sit in this half-way space.

I have also demonstrated, throughout Part 1, how digital distribution technologies are most often used to affirm centres of economic and cultural capital. This manifests differently in *Nassim* and *Pathetic Fallacy* – these performances use digital technologies to threaten absence and thus to reaffirm the importance of *presence* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, albeit in different ways. *Nassim* mimics and

then distorts the structures of power in the UK event cinema industry, where the centre of cultural prestige is the site from which performances are streamed outward. *Pathetic Fallacy* inverts those structures all together, and instead streams *towards* that centre of power. However, in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Pathetic Fallacy* reversed this dynamic. It was performed from Vancouver, where it was made, and by Vancouver-based performers, intended for an audience that artistic designer Candelario Andrade described as “a world that’s not allowed to travel at all”.⁵⁸ Andrade went on to explain how they were “showing it to the world and anyone can connect and watch it, whereas before, the show travelled to everyone”.⁵⁹ This reversal of the streaming from/to directionality is akin to the final scene in *Nassim*, in which the audience becomes the distant element. It also demonstrates how *Pathetic Fallacy*, prior to the pandemic, appealed to, rather than disrupted, centres of hegemonic power in the theatre industry.

Part 1 captures the theatre industries of Berlin and Edinburgh prior to the livestreaming turn brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it shows how digital distribution technologies must not be considered uncritically to be solutions to short-term obstacles to co-presence. More than any other form of digitally aided performance explored in this thesis, digital distribution is leveraged to maintain long established, albeit contrasting, hierarchies of power in these two cities.

⁵⁸ Janet Smith, ‘The Chop Theatre Weathers 2020 with an Even-More-Relevant Pathetic Fallacy’, *Stir*, 1 November 2020. <<https://www.createastir.ca/articles/pathetic-fallacy-chop-theatre-rumble-theatre>> [accessed 8 December 2021].

⁵⁹ Smith.

PART 2: DIGITAL MEDIATION

“We are completely outside ourselves and the world is completely inside us” – Holly Herndon, *PROTO* (2019)

1. Introduction

To what extent is liveness an experiential, participatory experience? Chapters Four and Five examine how performances can use digitally mediating technologies to invite an audience member to co-produce different forms of theatrical liveness. During the period of my research, digitally mediated participation was a common form of digitally aided performance in both Edinburgh and Berlin, with a noticeable number of performances claiming to offer highly individualised, subjective experiences through the use of digital technologies. I discuss how such performances stage different forms of liveness in order to shape the contributions of their audiences, and investigate why these performances seek to centre – or to appear to centre – the subjective experiences of those audience members. To do so, in Chapter 3 I draw on theories of immersion, participation, digital hybridity, and the cyborg body, and place these productions in the context of wider cultural conversations regarding agency, ethics, the so-called experience economy, and neoliberal dramaturgies.

The accompanying case studies, in Chapter 4, are divided into three sections. The first considers digitally mediated, highly individualised theatrical experiences in Edinburgh and Berlin and explores the potential correlation between such experiences and a neoliberal performance ethos, with particular reference to the work of Adam Alston. The second examines two productions that use messaging platforms to position their audiences as individuals within a group and argue that sensations of introspection and self-awareness are used to create an experience of liveness. The third section analyses two productions that use artificial intelligence to place their audiences at the heart of the show, in turn provoking questions regarding data privacy, creative labour, and the subject/object binary.

Chapter 3: “This live(d), *praesent* experience”

1. An Invitation

It is impossible to analyse the inner world of an audience member, but Josephine Machon’s influential work on the sensations of immersion depend on a conceptual understanding of the imaginative potential inside every theatre participant. She writes,

The direct participation of the audience member in the work ensures that she or he *inhabits* the immersive world created. This live(d), *praesent* experience, the participant’s physical body responding within an imaginative environment, is a pivotal element of an immersive experience.¹ (original emphasis)

Here, Machon describes a kind of participation that is both imaginative and physical, and which results in a supposed *inhabitation* within the performance for the audience member. For Machon, this is a heightened form of lived experience: one that is both *live* in the theatrical sense, but so rooted in the “participant’s physical body” that it is also *lived*. In this chapter, I analyse Machon’s correlation between liveness and livedness, and explore performances that use digital tools or digitally mediated environments to invite their audience members to participate in such a way. Machon describes this heightened sensation as *praesence*: she refers to Elaine Scarry’s explanation of its etymology, “from *prae*-sens, that which stands before the senses” as well as the way the word’s Latin roots emphasise a “tactile” quality, which resonates with the importance Machon places upon physical, bodily sensations.² Although Machon does not explore this, the word shares a striking similarity with the German word *Präsent*, which contains the sense of being seen to be present, as well as the state of being alert: this is both a physical and mental kind of presence, as well as one that appears to require the presence of a witness to constitute it. This extra layer of meaning, of needing an external witness in order to witness one’s own introspection, is kept in mind throughout my own application of *praesence*.

¹ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 68.

² Machon, p. 44.

My research into these subjective experiences is underpinned by Gareth White’s writing on the theatrical invitation, which I briefly introduced in Chapter One. His 2013 monograph *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation* describes how “explicitly framed invitations” can be used to encourage certain responses and behaviours in theatre audiences, particularly in theatrical forms which claim to offer heightened degrees of agency and autonomy to their audiences, such as immersive or participatory theatre – although these invitations are present in “‘conventional’ audience-performer” relationships, too.³ White argues that, at the time of writing, “fashions for ‘immersive’ theatre and ‘one-to-one’ theatre are in the ascendent”⁴ and I build on this to apply his theoretical framework to emerging forms of digitally mediated theatre, many of which operate on similar principles.

White outlines five different kinds of invitation: the overt invitation which should be “explicit” and clear, even if it is as subtle as “the initiation of an ‘oh no he doesn’t!’ [...] in a British pantomime”; an implicit invitation, which can be “ambiguous”, without any formal announcement, and which White finds to often “reveal risky situations and changing power relationships”; the covert invitation, which “relies on [...] deception: that the action anticipated will not become a part of the theatrical performance”; and the accidental and uninvited invitations, which sit on a spectrum from genuine misinterpretation to deliberate interjection.⁵ These categories provide a useful framework for analysing audience participation from a dramaturgical perspective. Rather than attempting to quantify or qualify the myriad potential audience responses to a certain performance, I examine digitally mediated participation by considering how performances use digital technologies to pose participatory invitations.

This structured approach allows me to interrogate the structures for participation embedded within each performance, and also to evaluate my own role as an audience member within many of these performances. Lavender holds that a researcher does not “have to see a piece of theatre in order to write about it” and whilst my case-studies focus primarily on performances that I have personally experienced,

³ White, p. 15.

⁴ White, p. 2.

⁵ White, pp. 40–42.

I do not seek to quantify or generalise the responses from any other audience member.⁶ Focussing on how participatory invitations function, and the kinds of response these invitations are searching for, rather than a specific audience's individual responses to those invitations, assists me in my evaluation.

However, I diverge from White's supposedly "simple" definition of audience participation as "the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of the performance" as I maintain it has more to do with the behaviours it excludes, rather than what it includes.⁷ White intentionally discounts any "emotional and intellectual engagement" on the part of the audience member, as well as any "ritual activity" like "applause, laughter and the vital choice to attend a theatre event in the first place".⁸ My case studies, however, reveal these activities to be loaded with meaning in a digitally mediated context, and also complicate a straightforward understanding of the "action" of a performance. I do, however, concede with his view, again in relation to immersive theatre specifically, that "to be inside the work, not just inside its physical and temporal space but inside it as an aesthetic, affective, phenomenological entity gives a different aspect to the idea of a point of view, and of action" and it is in this spirit that I approach all of the performances included in Part 2.⁹

This discussion is partly inspired by Rimini Protokoll's *Unheimliches Tal* (Uncanny Valley), first performed in Munich in 2018, in which a robotic double of the writer Thomas Melle delivers a talk to an audience on behalf of the author. Questions of (a)liveness and presence are at the heart of the show, with the visible absence of Melle underscored by the often spot-lit presence of Melle's robotic stand-in. The Melle-Robot performs a monologue written by Melle, in the first person, which self-consciously describes the robot as a "theatre machine". In the closing moments of the performance, Melle – via the Melle-Robot – explains that the audience are welcome to clap, provided they acknowledge that they are clapping for *themselves*, as Melle is, evidently, not in the building. In a recording of the performance that Rimini Protokoll

⁶ Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.4.

⁷ White, p. 4.

⁸ White, p. 5.

⁹ White, p. 17.

shared to the online video platform Vimeo, there is a delay of just a few seconds before members of the audience do, indeed, applaud themselves. This reflexive mechanism is designed to draw each audience member's awareness to their own presence within the auditorium, and to ask them directly if they think that their presence, their aliveness in the face of this robotic theatre-machine, deserves applause. In this instance, many of the audience answer: Yes.

This is a clear illustration of the audience as a self-aware public body of present bodies, and the applause can be seen as an indication of *praesence*, in itself a response to the overt invitation to applaud set by the Melle-Robot. It is also an example of the prioritisation of the conventions of 'live' performance over the programmed or the mediated, even if the event of post-show applause is so predictable as to be pre-programmed. That said, the applause is an outward sign that at least some members of the audience, on that particular night, are consciously experiencing themselves as participants within an imaginative environment, as a result of that direct, and caveated, invitation extended by the Melle-Robot. I argued above for the inclusion of "ritual" behaviours like applause within White's framework of invitations, and this performance demonstrates precisely why those behaviours should not be overlooked as a form of active participation, as well as a potential outward indication of a heightened, inward sensation of liveness. The invitation, in this instance, functions as a request to confirm the end of the performance, but more importantly to confirm that the audience has understood, and agreed with, the role they have been cast in by the Melle-Robot – the role of witnesses, 'present' to confirm the presence of others, and thus constituting the event-status of the performance. It is important to note, too, that while Machon's use of *praesence* is directly linked to her work on immersive theatres, I apply it to a broader range of performance styles than she might consider to be immersive by definition. Rather, the performances in this thesis use structures of immersion to invite their audiences to experience sensations of *praesence*.

Machon's monograph *Immersive Theatre* (2013) is a cornerstone for contemporary theoretical approaches to immersive experiences. She describes how "immersive" as an adjective for describing, labelling, and marketing theatre is growing increasingly popular, and notes that this trend has emerged alongside the rise of "digital

performance practice since the early 1990s”.¹⁰ Machon cautions the reader that an immersive performance is not one “simply because it happens to involve a sequence of audience participation at some point in its proceedings, or because the design begins outside of the stage space in the foyer,”¹¹ and instead offers three categories for identifying and labelling immersive forms of performance.

Immersion as absorption. The theatre event is able to engage the participant fully in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest.

Immersion as transportation. Where the audience-participant is imaginatively and scenographically reoriented in another place, an otherworldly-world that requires navigation according to its own rules of logic.

Total immersion. Involving both of the above and leading to an uncanny recognition of the audience-participant’s own *praesence* within the experience. Where total immersion occurs, there is always the experience of formalistic transformation in that the audience-participant is able to fashion her own ‘narrative’ and journey. Certain events may enable emotional or existential transformation to occur due to the ideas and practice shared.¹²

These categories are designed to differentiate between possible sensations within immersive experiences, as well as to delineate increasing degrees of immersion. Machon goes on to clarify that any immersive performance “exist[s] at some point between these three criteria, total immersion being the most intense state experienced”.¹³ This statement retrospectively reveals that her categorisation is based purely upon the intensity of the audience’s experience, rather than on a specific kind of theatrical space or dramaturgical decision. Moreover, it positions *praesence* as Machon’s ultimate measure of immersion.

¹⁰ Machon, p. 64.

¹¹ Machon, p. 57.

¹² Machon, pp. 62–63.

¹³ Machon, p. 63.

This is where my use of *praesence* differs from Machon's. I argue that conceiving of *praesence* in terms of totality is reductive, and that the quest for a satisfactory scale of measurement for the degree to which an audience member experiences 'immersivity' verges upon the impossible. Instead, this chapter focuses more deeply on the connection made by Machon between agency and *praesence*: it is only in the final category of "Total immersion" that an audience member is "able to fashion her own 'narrative,'" in contrast to the actions, imaginative and otherwise, involved in defining the former two categories. In this way, Machon distinguishes between an action that shapes a narrative, and thus results in *praesence*, and actions that aid the audience member in feeling absorbed or transported within the performance. Throughout Part 2 I argue the opposite – that there is rarely a straightforward correlation between an audience member's narrative-shaping agency, and the extent to which that performance can be considered immersive. Moreover, Machon's monograph does not explicitly consider the impact of emerging digital technologies on approaches to immersivity in the theatre, and many of the case studies that follow this chapter provide concrete challenges to long-held correlations between immersion, interactivity and agency in the field of theatre and performance studies. Before considering those case studies, however, I explore the idea that the ability to shape a performance creates what I call 'immersivity', a sensation of immersion, and vice versa, in the emerging field of digitally mediated, participatory performances.

2. Defining Digitally Mediated Participation

I use the term "digitally mediated" to describe a type of performance that foregrounds a distinctly mixed-media experience for its audiences, and in this chapter I focus specifically upon digitally mediated performances that use digital technologies to facilitate, or invite, participatory action from those audience members. In my conceptualisation of a digitally mediated, participatory experience, I draw on Andy Lavender's work on theatres of engagement and theatres of hybridity. Lavender writes, in *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (2016), that his usage of "engagement" is far broader than is common within theatre and performance scholarship. He historicises it thus: "After the clarion calls of modernism, and the absences and ironies of postmodernism, come the nuanced and differential

negotiations, participations and interventions of an age of engagement.”¹⁴ His “age of engagement” does not take into account any form of digital engagement, and thus I add an extra layer of historicisation to Lavender’s work: the ways in which he defines engagement can be applied to many forms of digitally aided performance and these performances, in turn, are creating additional definitions of engagement in the theatre.

In *Theatres of Engagement*, Lavender proposes three key definitions for a theatre of engagement. First, his argument that engagement “conveys a sense of component parts coming together in order to *work*”. Second, Lavender uses it to define a “set of performances that are turned towards their society, deliberately invested in social process”. Third, he writes that a theatre of engagement often includes “a mode of involvement on the part of individual spectators... who become participants in some performances in this field”.¹⁵ I draw on the first and third of these definitions to conceptualise a ‘working’ engagement founded on component parts, with the (potential) involvement of individual spectators forming one or more of those components. Lavender then summarises that “our contemporary theatres of engagement [...] arise when we observe a sharpened focus upon actualities (of situation, the body, the moment) framed within spaces and scenes of mediation that are also sites of encounter and experience”.¹⁶ This “sharpened focus” upon a sense of *now* creates a heightened sensation of place, the body, an experience, in a manner strikingly similar to Machon’s *praesence*, and so I take these elements, alongside Lavender’s theorising of hybridity, which he has already hinted towards in his discussion of “component parts”.

As a term, hybridisation has proved divisive within theatre studies. Lavender gives a historical overview, beginning with Jacques Rancière’s description, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, of how “the idea of hybridization of artistic means [is] appropriate to the post-modern reality of a constant exchange of roles and identities, the real and the virtual, the organic and mechanical and information-technology prosthesis”.¹⁷ In Rancière’s approach to artistic hybridity, the component parts remain

¹⁴ Lavender, p. 21.

¹⁵ Lavender, p. 26.

¹⁶ Lavender, p. 26.

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), p. 21.

visible through a “constant exchange”, and this negotiation is what defines an experience as hybrid. However, Lavender proceeds to explain how connotations of unnaturalness have turned scholars and practitioners against using ‘hybrid’ or ‘hybridity’ as an adjective to describe theatrical forms that are enmeshed with/in other forms of media, containing as it does the suggestion that that theatre does not, ontologically speaking, already contain multiple media. Lavender prefers framing hybridity as a noun rather than an adjective, using a “theatre of hybridity” to describe theatre that uses “blended processes and forms” to create, what he perceives to be a Deleuzian “*effect of becoming*” (original emphasis).¹⁸ This constant becoming is similar to Rancière’s “constant exchange”, and it is with this concept in mind that I explore the component parts and constant negotiations within the digitally hybrid performances in this thesis. This is not to imply that all theatre does not have the potential to be hybrid, but to focus more clearly upon the component parts that work together, in negotiation, to create an invitation for an audience member to participate in a digitally mediated manner. The case studies following this chapter utilise a broad range of digital media (from messaging platforms to virtual reality) but they share this sense of constant negotiation, and particularly so because they use their “blended processes” to invite their audience members to be at the centre of the experience.

For Giannachi and Kaye, whom I have previously discussed in the Introduction, the phenomenon of presence is shaped by a similarly hybrid approach to the mediation of an audience member’s experience. They observe that

the representation and mediation of the body and the shaping of the viewer or visitor’s encounters with its signs and traces have invariably aligned phenomena of presence to engagements with processes of performance and notions of performativity¹⁹

Although their use of presence is not in conversation with Machon’s *praesence*, Giannachi and Kaye suggest that when an audience member (labelled, in this instance, as a viewer or a visitor) becomes aware of their own mediation and engagement within the performance, these moments are examples of presence, performance and

¹⁸ Lavender, p. 26.

¹⁹ Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 1.

performativity. This positioning of the participant as aware of, and therefore able to (re)shape, their own experience, is not precisely the same as Machon's definition of *praesence* as agency, but the sense of self-awareness and the suggestion of control is certainly similar. I discuss the role of the body in mediated experiences more explicitly later in this chapter, but first I examine this recurring notion of immersion and participation as a form of agency for the audience member, and what it means for a theatrical experience to become a contested site of autonomy and authorship.

3. Staging Agency: Power and Potential in Immersivity

Punchdrunk is the world's most prominent immersive theatre company. Its flagship show, *Sleep No More* (2011), has become a global blockbuster with record-breaking runs held in London, New York and Shanghai. A loose interpretation of *Macbeth*, *Sleep No More* explicitly invites its audiences to choose their own paths through an expansive, five-floor set, dressed like the interior of a glamorous, faded hotel: the show begins by distributing playing cards to each participant, and these cards determine when each participant is taken from the lush lobby bar, into a lift, and instructed to get out on a certain floor by a member of staff. These cards function not only to separate any audience members who may have arrived in a group, but to create the sensation of game-playing and the idea that each audience member must make their own luck. Moreover, all participants must wear identical white masks that cover their eyes and nose, resulting in an eerie anonymity amongst the performance's often dark corridors. The rules for engagement are explained in the lift in New York, and written on the back of tickets in Shanghai, and these rules permit the audience to rummage through the intricate details hidden in each room, and to interact with the cast as much as they wish, provided that they remain silent throughout the performance.

These are broad, open-ended invitations, and so vast is the scope of the participatory potential within the performance that many fans have become completists; devoted Punchdrunk-goers often swap tips and tricks online, in such spaces as Reddit forums or private Facebook groups, in order to fully 'complete' the show. Completion, on these terms, would mean that an audience member had discovered or engaged with every opportunity possible within the framework of the

show. Some audience members report, anecdotally, that they have attended *Sleep No More* upwards of fifty times in order to do so, at great expense: tickets for the New York production typically cost upwards of one hundred dollars, with the opportunity to add champagne and skip the entrance queue for an additional two hundred dollars. However, this impetus towards ‘completion’ is complicated by factors beyond the fans’ control: a changing cast, malleable story lines and the creation of a franchise (the Shanghai production is different from the New York one) make it difficult for fans to truly experience *everything*.

Still, the same could be said of any performance style: it is simply not possible to totalise any experience in this way. But the intentionally disorientating, gamified structure of *Sleep No More* rewards the knowledgeable or experienced participant, and financial investment in the form of repeat attendance can result in knowing how to be in the right place, at the right time, to receive a coveted one-on-one experience between a performer and an audience member. Moreover, the sheer scale of the set, coupled with and the time limit of the production, encourages a repeat visit. I attended the Shanghai *Sleep No More* in July 2019, and after spending over two hours exploring the fictional hotel, I had failed to discover an entire floor of the building. I learned this afterwards when I compared my experience to a friend’s.

Adam Alston has written extensively on the individual entrepreneurialism that is at the heart of *Sleep No More*, and he argues that although the show appears to reward exploratory, imaginative and intrepid audience behaviours, it cannot be said to result in actual autonomy or agency. He cites W.B. Worthen in describing *Sleep No More*’s invitation to explore as a “mirage” and a “fictional interpretive ‘freedom’”.²⁰ For Alston, *Sleep No More*’s vast, complex environment promotes an

inherent disparity which occurs as the consequence of luck and being in the right place at the right time on the one hand, and entrepreneurial participation on the other: that is, acting upon entrepreneurialism, a

²⁰ Adam Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value: Risk, Agency and Responsibility in Immersive Theatre’, *Performance Research*, 18.2 (2013), 128–38 (p. 137).

quintessentially neoliberal ideal, in order to capitalise on the range of encounters on offer.²¹

It is certainly fair to say that Punchdrunk capitalises on the sheer “range of encounters” within *Sleep No More*’s fictional world, and that although the show extends many invitations, it presents just as many missed opportunities. Some of these missed opportunities are purposefully staged – the glimpse of a character running between rooms, for example, intentionally losing their audience in the hotel’s maze – and others are discovered afterwards, in conversations between participants. Although I did not find the hotel’s top floor, I was standing by a fountain when Lady Macbeth tenderly stroked my face: another participant called me ‘lucky’, implying that I had unlocked an opportunity through a fortuitous combination of time and place. Still, we cannot say for sure that my experience is straightforwardly replicable: should a participant stand by that fountain all evening, in the hope of experiencing that specific encounter? Here the entrepreneurial spirit that says that any audience member could experience *all of the show*, should they try hard enough, is confronted by the malleable nature of performance. It creates an interesting juxtaposition with Phelan’s argument that performance is inherently unrepeatable: *Sleep No More* must both be predictable enough to imply the potential of gaming the system, and fluid enough to keep customers guessing. Alston reminds us that even if the audience member is permitted to choose their own path, Punchdrunk has drawn the map *and* set the toll-charge.

Machon’s definition of immersion is similarly structured by “rules of engagement”, which, she writes, could be “written, verbal or unspoken contracts” that help to keep the participant safe, and to “embrace the impromptu possibilities proffered by the event itself”.²² However, there is no guarantee that an audience member will uphold their side of a contract. One of *Sleep No More*’s rules forbids audience members from touching the performers, but despite these explicit verbal and written conditions of entry, there have been disturbing reports of abusive audience behaviour. *Buzzfeed* published a high-profile investigation into sexual assault allegations made by

²¹ Alston, ‘Audience Participation and Neoliberal Value’, p. 137.

²² Machon, p. 40.

Punchdrunk staff in New York and reported seventeen confirmed incidents at the time of publication.²³

There is an obvious and important difference between a performance offering seemingly “impromptu possibilities” and a performance that permits its participants to act as if everyday rules do not apply. Clearly certain degrees of immersion, as found in performances like *Sleep No More*, require even more concrete forms of contract between the audience and the performer. *Sleep No More* employs the fiction that each audience member is the author of their own story and encourages its audiences to be bold in their engagement with the production, but these factors combined with anonymity and a possible sense of individual competition appear to create an environment that throws into relief the questions of consent and culpability. Issues of agency, anonymity and consent arise throughout the following case studies, and the challenge of inviting, and limiting, certain participatory behaviours is just as vital to performances which mediate those behaviours through digital technologies.

Due to the contradictions in offering supposedly unlimited participatory opportunities to an audience, I proceed with Machon’s notion of *praesence* in a modified way. Rather than using her three categories of immersion to pinpoint specific emotional and experiential responses in audience members or correlating degrees of immersion to an audience member’s agency within that performance, I use them to describe an experience that is self-conscious. Machon writes that a “deep involvement” can result in an experience that is “understood in its fullest sense, to feel *feelingly* – to undergo”.²⁴ This definition does not centre agency in a way that implies audiences can, or should be allowed to, shape the fundamental structures of a performance, but it does suggest a form of autonomy that encourages the audience member to take responsibility for, and ownership over, their emotional and bodily experiences during a performance. The relationship between rule-setting and personal autonomy that Punchdrunk’s performances put to the test is just as much a challenge in performances that use digital technologies to mediate the role of the audience, and I revisit this

²³ Amber Jamieson, ‘Performers and Staffers at “Sleep No More” say Audience Members have Sexually Assaulted them’, *BuzzFeed News*, 6 February 2019. <<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/amberjamieson/sleep-no-more>> [accessed 31 May 2019].

²⁴ Machon, p. 22.

dynamic in the second set of my case studies, which examines performances that use textual instructions and messaging interfaces to set boundaries with, and encourage certain behaviours from, their audiences. I also explore the inverse of this dynamic in my analysis of *Spawn* and *You Are Out There*, which encourage and exploit the trust placed in them by their audiences. The shifting power dynamics explored here are also pertinent to the discussion of Pokémon Go in Part 3, which considers the rules and responsibilities of engagement when the audience's actions are set within public spaces.

4. The Body as the Stage

The role of the body is central to this chapter, from the body (singular, individual) of the performer or audience member to the collective bodies (plural, mass) of audiences attending a performance on any given night. Machon's description of a "live(d) *present* experience" is based upon "the participant's physical body responding within an imaginative environment," and I build on this to consider how bodily experiences and responses are mediated through digital tools, and how bodily contributions from the audience are invited, emphasised, or even documented through digital tools of mediation embedded within the dramaturgy of a performance. I continue to focus on the requests and invitations extended to audience members in this chapter, but some modes of digitally aided performance make it impossible, or at least reductive, to insist on a separation between performer and audience at all. It is also essential to consider the assumptions that performances can make of their audiences' bodies, and to examine the ways in which participatory invitations can become the very opposite: a barrier to accessibility.

We have already explored Bolter and Grusin's approach to (re)mediation in depth, in Part I, but their positioning of the audience in what they describe as a "virtual theatre" is helpful here. They write, "in the world of virtual theatre, the work of art *and* the viewer are mediated", concluding that "in other words, the medium of virtual theatre is always also its content".²⁵ Although their understanding of what might constitute a virtual theatre is far removed from contemporary integrations of virtual

²⁵ Bolter and Grusin, p. 5.

and augmented technologies within the theatre, this reformulation of McLuhan's famous aphorism is key to this chapter's exploration of the body and the bodily within digitally mediated theatres: in this sense, each audience member's subjective, individual experience is both the medium and the message. Subjectivity is at the heart of any form of theatre, but this chapter argues that digitally mediated theatre often emphasises that fact, revolving around highly individualised – or the suggestion of highly individualised – experiences.

Gabriella Giannachi's monograph *Virtual Theatres* (2004) provides an invaluable introduction to the historical position of the virtual within theatre and performance studies, even though it is important to note that the term "virtual theatre" has since changed in meaning, due to the emergence of virtual and mixed reality technologies. Giannachi is not speaking of theatre which uses virtual technologies as the wider industry currently understands them, and I will return to virtual reality technologies later in my case studies. Giannachi writes that,

virtual theatre consists of a performative component, which is unique in time, and a remediated component, which is more or less permanent. This means that virtual theatre takes place through the viewer's "performance" of the work and its disappearance into memory (of both the viewer and, on occasion, the work itself). However, this also means that, because virtual theatre takes place through a process of remediation, the environment in which the performance takes place is disappearing both in the sense that it is deteriorating *and* because it consists of a discontinuous, "unreal" and yet live simulation. At the same time, its ability to remediate also suggests that virtual theatre is continuously (re-)arriving, (re)appearing as a fresh carnival of hyper-real signs.²⁶

For Giannachi, a virtual theatre is not defined by specific technologies or techniques employed, but by conceiving of the performance site as a continuously remediated environment. The differentiation that she finds between a 'unique' performative component and a 'permanent' remediated component will be challenged in the following case studies, as I argue that acts of remediation can also be performative.

²⁶ Gabriele Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 6–7.

However, Giannachi's description of a "live simulation" contains within it the suggestion that liveness can indeed be simulated, as well as the notion that the process of simulation is current and ongoing. It is possible to describe any theatrical act, performed more than once, as a re-appearance of sorts, but Giannachi's addition of "hyper-real signs" implies that, for her, a virtual theatre must draw attention to this oscillation between disappearance and emergence by staging sensations of the "hyper-real". This is reminiscent of Machon's description of a "live(d)" experience and brings greater depth to the duality already suggested by the parenthesis within Machon's term. On the one hand, we have the "live"-ness of the performance (simulated or otherwise), and on the other we have the "lived" experience of the audience member. Together, this speaks directly to Machon's concept of immersion as an act of inhabitation.

The centrality of the audience member's bodily experience within Giannachi's definition of a virtual theatre is linked to the importance she places on historical and theoretical conceptions of the cyborg. *Virtual Theatres* opens with a history of biomechanics within performance: Giannachi describes Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus ballet as a manifestation of the "architectural biomechanical body of the Bauhaus" and references Sue-Ellen Case's argument that Schlemmer's choreography and costuming creates an extension of bodily gesture that "[resembles] the image of the computer mouse as an extension of the arm, which transforms today's computer-user into a cyborg".²⁷ Such similarities between performance (on stage) and the performance between a user and a technological interface have been explored by theorists such as Brenda Laurel in the early to mid-1990s, and in particular Giannachi draws on Donna Haraway to position the performer's body as the literal, bodily site of any performance. She references Haraway's description of a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction," and reflects that Haraway "presented the cyborg not only as a hybrid of organic, biological and non-organic forms, but as a creature able to bridge the gap between the real and representation".²⁸ Both scholars use liminal metaphors to describe the cyborg as a hybridised state of being, and this way of thinking – of the cyborg as both a lived

²⁷ Giannachi, p. 1.

²⁸ Giannachi, p. 46.

reality and as a metaphor²⁹ – explains why Giannachi finds the concept so central to her definition of a virtual theatre as hyper-real.

I diverge from Giannachi on matters of the audience, however. She describes how “the viewer is drawn directly into the performance and thereby becomes the last prosthetic component, both literally and metaphorically, of the performer’s modified body” but, somewhat contradictorily, also argues that “cyborg theatre always takes place through and on the body of the performer”.³⁰ As I explore in the following case studies, virtual reality technologies often position the viewer’s body in the centre of the experience, with the performance revolving around them. What is more, the enormous growth in wearable and hand-held technological devices has made us accustomed to being the protagonist in our own tracked, quantified and “modified” bodies,³¹ and this has, necessarily, impacted the shape of contemporary versions of Giannachi’s cyborg theatre. Mediated by such technologies, theatres are now able to “take place through and on” the bodies of their audiences. Rather than becoming the “last prosthetic component”, audiences become the sites of their own, individual, performances.

I argue, in line with Machon, that the audience member is always a body of and in performance. This, in turn, resonates with Erika Fischer-Lichte’s interpretation of Judith Butler’s writing on performativity. She cites an oft-quoted phrase from Butler’s 1988 essay ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution’, which reads, “By dramatic I mean... that the body is not merely a matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body.”³² For Fischer-Lichte, the key argument, here, is that materiality emerges from the “repetition of certain gestures and movements” which constitute identity in a way that is both bodily and social.³³ She moves towards a dual application of Butler’s performativity, in which theatre takes place with/in an audience member’s body and,

²⁹ Giannachi, p. 46. Borrowed from Hayles’ description of a cyborg as both “entities and metaphors” in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).

³⁰ Giannachi, p. 43.

³¹ Mary Griffiths and Sean Cubitt, ‘Mobile/Audience: Thinking the Contradictions’, in *The Mobile Audience: Media Art and Mobile Technologies*, ed. by Martin Rieser (Rodopi: 2011), 81-95 (p. 83).

³² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. by Saskya Iris Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 27.

³³ Fischer-Lichte, p. 27.

as a result, creates a heightened sense of the performance as an *event*. However, she reminds the reader that

individuals alone do not control the conditions for the processes of embodiment; they are not free to choose what possibilities to embody, or which identity to adopt. Neither are they wholly determined by society. [...] Butler's concept of performative acts reaffirms their capacity to collapse dichotomies, already recognized by Austin.³⁴

Here, embodiment is influenced by broader social constructs – and vice versa – revealing a clear parallel between Butler's work and Fischer-Lichte's approach to the theatre, in which “the conditions for embodiment thus coincide with the conditions of performance”.³⁵ Fischer-Lichte adds that Butler speaks of “everyday life” rather than “aesthetic processes”, but as both Butler and Austin see “performative acts as ritualized, public performances”³⁶ it makes sense, as she puts it, “to root an aesthetics of the performative in the concept of performance”.³⁷

To do this, Fischer-Lichte turns to Max Herrmann, a founding scholar of theatre studies, and his understanding of theatre as “social play – played by all for all”.³⁸ Here she finds a lack of “subject-object relationship” between actor and spectator, and instead affirms the importance of “bodily co-presence [...] between co-subjects”.³⁹ For Fischer-Lichte, this is a similarity shared between Herrmann and Butler: “He moved away from the body as a carrier of signs to embrace the ‘real’ body. We can assume that, much as Judith Butler, Herrmann saw expressivity and performativity as mutually exclusive opposites.”⁴⁰ In the period of digitally mediated, participatory theatre in Edinburgh and Berlin that is documented by this thesis, audiences members are often required to participate with their ‘real’ bodies, providing a moment of physical action that has the effect of (re)constituting the act of performance. We will, for instance, see this in the participatory actions asked for in *Flight* (silence, stillness, listening,

³⁴ Fischer-Lichte, p. 27.

³⁵ Fischer-Lichte, p. 28.

³⁶ Fischer-Lichte, p. 28.

³⁷ Fischer-Lichte, p. 29.

³⁸ Fischer-Lichte, p. 32.

³⁹ Fischer-Lichte, p. 32.

⁴⁰ Fischer-Lichte, p. 35.

looking), *User Not Found* (clicking a button, scrolling a screen) and *Spawn* (repetitive vocal exercises). Fischer-Lichte summarises this point by bringing the contributions of individual bodies together to form a mass, an “everyone”: “What matters is the fact *that* something occurs and *that what* occurs affects, if to varying degrees and different ways, everyone involved.” (original emphasis)⁴¹ Fischer-Lichte thus grounds her aesthetics of the performative in individual bodies acting in a public, social context, rather than in what those actions may be. In my case studies, I take this one step further, to explore the relationship between the actions invited by a performance and the role of the individual within the “everyone” of the audience. Fischer-Lichte’s reflection on the dissolution of the subject-object formation of the theatre will become particularly relevant in the following case studies, as well as throughout Part 3.

5. Experience as an ‘Event’

The notion of the “event” is important to Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetics of performance. She writes that “performance is regarded as art not because it enjoys the status of an artwork but because it takes place as an event”.⁴² Her “specific mediality” of performance requires both a “given period of a shared lifetime” and an “encounter [which] produces the event”,⁴³ which is reminiscent of Machon’s description of participation as inhabitation, as well as Giannachi’s perception of the body as the site of performance. More broadly, it is also similar to Phelan’s proposal that performance can only exist within a limited “time/space frame”,⁴⁴ and Brook’s use of “engagement” to describe a theatrical encounter. However, whilst Fischer-Lichte’s description requires the same theatrical ingredients as Phelan and Brook, she finds the “art” of performance in its event-status, rather than in its unrepeatability or a shared time and space.

Fischer-Lichte’s event is constituted by three factors: “the feedback loop’s autopoiesis”, “a destabilization... of binary oppositions” and “situations of liminality

⁴¹ Fischer-Lichte, p. 36.

⁴² Fischer-Lichte, p. 35.

⁴³ Fischer-Lichte, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Phelan, p. 149.

that transform the participants of the performance”.⁴⁵ Most important to this chapter is the feedback loop, described as a process in which “all participants always act both as subjects *and* objects”(original emphasis).⁴⁶ The subject-object relationship is one such binary that Fischer-Lichte insists that a performance must destabilise, or even destroy, and she describes how “‘subject’ and ‘object’ [...] merely mark different states or positions of the perceiving subject and the object perceived”, rather than the “fundamental [...] opposition that philosophy and the history of ideas so ardently insist upon”.⁴⁷

For this opposition to be destroyed, however, “particular attention” must be granted by the audience. Fischer-Lichte argues that performance brings about “an extraordinary state of permanently heightened attention in the spectator, transforming what has been ordinary into components of aesthetic experience”,⁴⁸ but concedes, too, that “individual spectators possess their individual economy of attention, which will prevent them from being permanently alert”.⁴⁹ Still, this heightened concentration or attention, which she defines, via Seitter, as a “relatively strong inclination of consciousness towards an object or an issue of any kind”, is essential to Fischer-Lichte’s concept of an event: it must form the basis of the encounter between audience and performance.⁵⁰ In many ways it is akin to the dynamic I have already explored between Machon’s *praesence* and the German term *Präsenz*: it requires a committed imaginative engagement from the audience, as well as a dynamic that involves a mutual witnessing – to be seen to be seeing.

Fischer-Lichte also roots her notion of the event in the history of post-1960s performance art, describing “the urge to resist the production of artworks as marketable artifacts and commodities and instead replace them with fleeting events which nobody was able to buy and store away in a safe or display in their living room”.⁵¹ In this case, she writes, “the ephemerality of the event, its uniqueness, and singularity became a

⁴⁵ Fischer-Lichte, p. 163.

⁴⁶ Fischer-Lichte, p. 172.

⁴⁷ Fischer-Lichte, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Fischer-Lichte, p. 168.

⁴⁹ Fischer-Lichte, p. 167.

⁵⁰ Fischer-Lichte, p. 167.

⁵¹ Fischer-Lichte, p. 162.

focal point”.⁵² However, similar factors of heightened attention, feedback loops and the destabilisation of the subject-object binary comprise the foundation for the so-called experience economy – an industry of events advertised on the strength of the *experience* on offer to audiences. Coined as a catch-all term for a wide range of purchasable experiences that could include virtual reality perfume adverts, themed bars, escape rooms, or mixed-media walking tours, published scholarship on the experience economy includes studies on cruise ships,⁵³ Korean casinos,⁵⁴ and hiking centres in the UK,⁵⁵ with a clear emphasis on the sector’s relationship to tourism. For Adam Alston, the experience economy is the “objectification of experience as art,” and a symptom of accelerating capitalist demands to “make more, do more, feel more, and to feel more intensely”.⁵⁶ It also destabilises Fischer-Lichte’s own binary between marketable artifact and fleeting event: the experience economy turns fleeting, ephemeral experience into the artifact on sale.

Alston argues that immersive theatre scholarship offers a framework for conceptualising the elements used to build a marketable, consumer-focused experience, but draws an ontological difference between the two. For Alston, in immersive theatre it is the production and performance that is the artwork, and in the experience economy, it is the sensations “produced within the body and constituted by the audience as *art* in dynamic relation to an immersive environment”.⁵⁷ This discovery of the artwork within the body of the audience member is redolent of the approaches taken by Machon and Giannachi and has a distinctly democratic tone. This contrasts Alston’s more pessimistic perspective that such an emphasis on the audience’s body in the experience economy is marked by “superficiality and reproducibility”.⁵⁸ It becomes clear that there is no such precise line between events in the experience economy and immersive theatre, particularly when Alston goes on to

⁵² Fischer-Lichte, p. 162.

⁵³ Jinsoo Hwang and Heesup Han, ‘A Study on the Application of the Experience Economy to Luxury Cruise Passengers’, *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 18.4 (2018), 478–491.

⁵⁴ Changsup Shim, Eun Ji Oh, and Chul Jeong, ‘A Qualitative Analysis of South Korean Casino Experiences: A Perspective on the Experience Economy’, *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 17.4 (2017), 358–371.

⁵⁵ David Gibbs and Lewis Holloway, ‘From Experience Economy to Experience Landscape: The Example of UK Trail Centres’, *Area*, 50.2 (2018), 248–255.

⁵⁶ Alston, p. 4.

⁵⁷ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Alston, ‘Audience Participation’, p.131.

argue – without clarifying to which he is referring – that the “non-reproducible element comes largely from the consumer narcissistically investing their own personality and desire”.⁵⁹ After all, this thesis has already explored the fluid relationship between performance and reproducibility, and there is no objective means of determining the “superficiality” of any performance or experience.

More interesting is the notion that art found in the bodily responses of its audiences, rather than in the production itself, is superficial. Alston labels this form of spectatorship as a form of “narcissistic participation,”⁶⁰ and claims that

[n]arcissistic participation is predicated on the productive potential of an audience member as an experiencing and potentially acting and interacting subject who renders their corporeal self as part of an artwork, in relation to an environment that assigns to audiences such an aesthetically productive role.⁶¹

Alston seems to define narcissism, in this instance, as self-awareness: an audience member who is conscious of the potential actions and outcomes available to them, within a performance environment. This “potential” is comparable to White’s notion of the theatrical invitation, in that specific behaviours and responses do not need to occur in order to be an integral part of the production, and the audience’s experience within that production. There is an enjoyable, thrill-seeking element to Alston’s narcissistic participation, too, which aligns with his conceptualisation of performances that encourage entrepreneurial individualism in their audiences, as I have already discussed in this chapter’s analysis of *Sleep No More*. Perhaps, then, it is fair to draw a line between immersive theatre and experience economy events on this basis: the former encourages group immersion, and the latter is focussed predominantly on individual sensation. I continue to explore the ethics and aesthetics of this differentiation in the following case studies, bearing in mind Alston’s observation that “[t]he reflection appears unique to each participant, but the mirror remains the same”.⁶²

⁵⁹ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 11.

⁶¹ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 11.

⁶² Alston, ‘Audience Participation’, p. 131.

This chapter has demonstrated how questions of bodily experience, agency and control are central to discussions of participation in the theatre. Fischer-Lichte's observation that social contexts shape, and are shaped by, performative bodily acts is reminiscent of danah boyd's work on 'Structures of Participation in Digital Culture' (2008), in which boyd writes that "digital networks will never merely map the social, but inevitably develop their own dynamics through which they *become the social*" (original emphasis).⁶³ In the following case studies, I examine how these same questions manifest in digitally mediated spaces, but also the ways in which new dynamics are created in these spaces that have implications for all forms of theatre. In fact, it is in these digitally mediated spaces, which are in continual process and negotiation, that Fischer-Lichte's definition of a looping, self-reflective event, and Machon's concept of a live(d) experience, can be most fully understood as constituting an (a)live event.

⁶³ danah boyd, "'None of This Is Real.'" Structures of Participation in Digital Culture', ed. by Joe Karaganis, *New York: Social Science Research Council*, 2008, 132–57 (p. 132).

Chapter 4: Case Studies in Digitally Mediated Participation

1. Introduction

These case studies explore performances that use digital technologies to mediate the audience's experiences, or the audience's role within the performance. I continue to draw on the work of Machon and Fischer-Lichte to examine how these forms of digital mediation create, or foreground, different forms of liveness, and focus in particular on how these livenesses are used to create both collective and individual experiences for the audience. The case studies in this chapter raise questions regarding agency, autonomy, surveillance, the ethics of participatory labour and the use of personal data. They also speak to issues regarding the availability and accessibility of the technologies involved, the relationship between these technologies and forms of digital reproduction, and the increasing popularity of events related to the experience economy which, as Alston has suggested, use the emotional responses of their audiences to create a sense of uniqueness in an otherwise highly controlled environment. Throughout, I am particularly interested in the role of the audience member and how, and why, the audience member is often cast as both the subject and the object within digitally mediated performances.

The first set of case studies considers two Edinburgh-based performances that purport to offer experiences related to fear and trauma for their audience members. One uses virtual reality and the other uses total darkness, but both create highly individualised, emotionally driven experiences that cast the audience member as the protagonist. Robert Hassan has criticised the notion, often used as a marketing tool, that technologies like VR can provide a shortcut to the creation of empathy, and I consider these performances in light of his argument that "the spectacle-generating power of the digital [...] subordinates the human scale, the proportional context, the

analogue subjective experience”.¹ The second set of case studies examines productions that employ smartphones and messaging platforms to extend participatory invitations to their audiences, whilst toggling between speaking to the audience member as an individual, versus as part of a collective audience body. These phone-based productions position their audience members as potential co-authors and use sensations of intimacy and isolation to create an experience of liveness. The final set of case studies explores performances in Berlin that require their audiences to contribute forms of personal data: in the first instance, audiences volunteer their voices to train a neural network, and in the second, an avatar is created through the misuse of audiences’ personal identification cards. My juxtaposition of these productions allows me to explore the difference between using digital mediation to create experiences of self-awareness and self-surveillance: what does it mean when the spectators’ opportunity to explore their own role, their own *praesence*, within the performance is enforced, rather than invited?

2. Mass-Produced Individuality in Digitally Mediated Experiences

I previously discussed Alston’s criticism of the experience economy as the “objectification of experience of art,” and his description of its demands on the audience to “make more, do more, feel more, and to feel more intensely”.² In this set of case studies, I explore this criticism in more depth, through two productions that claim to create extreme *experiences* for their audience members. Alston’s analysis implies that such experiences are in some way anti-theatrical or even anti-intellectual, due to an emphasis on the intensity of the experience over its quality. But it also raises the question: is it possible to objectify experience – or even to quantify it? He clearly believes in a theoretical difference between an art experience and the objectification of that experience, but even if the ‘object’ in question is no longer the artwork but the audience’s experience in relation to it, those experiences remain individual.

¹ Robert Hassan, ‘Digitality, Virtual Reality and The “Empathy Machine”’, *Digital Journalism*, 2020, 195-212, (p. 205).

² Alston, p. 4.

Moreover, he suggests that such experiences are close to mass-produced, as the “non-reproducible element comes largely from the consumer narcissistically investing their own personality and desire”.³ I have discussed reproducibility and its relationship to liveness in depth in Part 1, but Alston’s location of the non-reproducible element, and thus its liveness, in the audience’s own experience is central to the following case studies. It is particularly interesting considering Phelan’s insistence that performance exists only in the moment, given that audience members tend to live on, after the performance has ended. Memory, as well as audience-led forms of performance documentation, has been discussed extensively by scholars such as Daniela Salazar, Panayiota A. Demetriou and Joanna Bucknall and Kirsty Sedgman in the edited collection *Documenting Performance: The Context & Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving* (2017), but this is not the point that I wish to pursue.⁴ Instead, I consider the ways in which such emphasis on experience can create a market for more easily reproducible performance, in terms of staffing and production costs, as well as the ramifications of marketing a performance based on supposedly quantifiable emotions. I am interested, too, in how these performances claim to centre each audience member as an individual, as the sole protagonist within a larger group. If the emotion is the ‘object’ then who, or what, is the subject?

2.1 Dealing in Fear: *Flight* as Experience Machine

Flight is performed in total darkness, inside a shipping container that has been designed to imitate the interior of an airplane. On entering the container, each participant swaps their ticket for a boarding pass and walks down the aisle to take their allocated seat, which is equipped with a set of headphones. Whilst the audience find their seats, overhead screens display a glitchy, eerie pastiche of the safety briefings typically performed by stewards before a flight. Then, the lights go out.⁵

Created by UK-based theatre company Darkfield, *Flight* premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2018 as part of Summerhall’s Fringe programme. Following *Séance* (2017) and preceding *Coma* (2019), *Flight* is one of a series of productions

³ Alston, p. 4.

⁴ Sant.

⁵ I attended *Flight* on 28 August 2018.

built to a specific brief: Darkfield’s website describes these shows as “individual theatrical experiences in shipping containers that explore fear and anxiety [...] [employing] binaural sound, pitch darkness and movement to situate each audience member at the centre of an evolving narrative”.⁶ My analysis of *Flight* revolves around this notion of an “individual” experience, the way that Darkfield uses technology to create the sensation that each audience member is “at the centre” of the story, and the logistics behind creating a performance that focuses on specific emotional experiences. I consider, too, the implications of Darkfield’s description of *Flight* as a “theatrical experience”, rather than as a performance, or indeed as either theatre *or* an experience.

The show’s marketing material intentionally exploits a common source of anxiety – a plane crash. The blurb published in Summerhall’s programme warned, tongue-in-cheek, that “[i]n the unlikely event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure alternative scenarios will be provided. Next of kin will be provided [...] We’re not responsible for your final destination”.⁷ Alluding to potentially catastrophic in-flight disasters, as well as hinting towards the fatalities of the popular horror film series *Final Destination*, Darkfield’s framing implies that the event inside the shipping container is suitable only for particularly intrepid participants. Like *Séance* and *Coma*, *Flight* took place on a patch of ground in front of Summerhall, with the distinctive shipping container (and queues of punters waiting to enter it) highly visible to anyone walking past on the pavement. Akin to lines of customers waiting to ride a rollercoaster, this prominence contributed to the framing of *Flight* as an extreme experience, something to nervously anticipate. Even more explicitly, after the lights go out, a foreboding voice informs each audience member, via their headphones, that they alone are sitting in the “lucky” seat.

Co-creator David Rosenberg explained, in an interview I conducted for *The Skinny*, that the use of total darkness is intended to create “this gap that the audience can find themselves inside. It’s a way for them to become the protagonist”.⁸ He argues

⁶ Darkfield, *Darkfield* <<http://www.darkfield.org/>> [accessed 30 May 2019].

⁷ Summerhall, *Events Archives, Summerhall – Open Minds Open Doors* <<https://festival19.summerhall.co.uk/events/events/>> [accessed 1 June 2019].

⁸ Katie Hawthorne, ‘Edinburgh Fringe 2018: Multimedia Theatre’, *The Skinny*, 30 July 2018. <<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-fringe/theatre/technically-intimate>> [accessed 30 May 2019].

that the removal of visual aids is intended to centre the experience within each audience member's own imagination, and to emphasise each participant's individual, creative contributions to the production. For Rosenberg, the power of the imagination is "better than VR", because each audience member can picture a scene, situation, or fear that is unique to them. Alston initially suggests a similar line of argument in his chapter 'Theatre in the Dark: Spectatorship and Risk in Lundahl & Seidl's Pitch-Black Theatre', where he writes that such theatre "thrives on the incessant productivity of spectators [...] involving them, willingly or unwillingly, in the unfolding of a performance".⁹ He also offers a "potted history" of the use of darkness as an aesthetic tool (in anticipation of his later book, *Theatre in the Dark* [2019], co-authored with Martin Welton) that considers how darkness can "[risk] romanticising visual impairment" and why an "exhilarating experience of looking in and at darkness comes with the promise of unimpaired vision returning after the performance – for sighted audiences".¹⁰ This is particularly relevant to productions that claim to offer experiences that approximate sight deprivation, an ableist trend that I return to, in a different form, in my discussion of supposedly "empathetic" VR experiences.

The casting of each individual audience member as the protagonist also has implications for the dynamic of the audience as a group. The presence of other people as passengers on the plane is essential to *Flight*'s narrative: it is difficult to accept that you, alone, have been picked out as "lucky" without other people who are thus unlucky. Foley sounds of movement in the cabin, hushed discussions and the cries of small children are coupled with tactile transducers – the creation of inaudible vibrations – to suggest that other audience members are changing seats and moving around the cabin, and that only you are sitting still. Only by taking the headphones off could an audience member discern the physical reality of the situation, and even then the blanket of darkness would prevent full verification. Rosenberg acknowledges this, reflecting that *Darkfield* is "interested in when audiences are both alone and together, and headphones create this: an isolated experience, but [the play] doesn't make sense unless you're still aware of the group that you're with".¹¹ This oscillation between the

⁹ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 75.

¹⁰ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 81.

¹¹ Hawthorne, 'Edinburgh Fringe 2018'.

emotionally heightened audio reality of a plane cabin in disarray and the rational reality of sitting amongst silent fellow audience members in a shipping container next to a busy road, demands that the spectators each perform two roles: firstly, as the protagonist in their own narrative, and secondly, as a member of a collective audience, whose silence, stillness and physical presence is essential to maintaining the fiction. However, the binaural sounds (recorded spatially, likely from a seat in the centre of the space) also have the potential to fracture this illusion, depending on the seat in which the audience member sits. For instance, the sound of a baby crying from the seat just behind you is less persuasive if the audience member knows that they are sitting in the container's final row.

This emphasis on individual exceptionalism is fundamental to *Flight*, particularly as it becomes less about a disaster, or the potential of one, and more of a surreal philosophical exercise that evokes Schrödinger's cat. Still, some critics were disappointed that *Flight* was not, in fact, all that scary. *The Scotsman*'s 'newsroom' reviewed *Flight* on the basis of its promised horrors, writing that it is "tightly wound and tense – not a full-on horror experience (there are no jump scares or bloody gore effects here)"¹² while Natasha Tripney, writing for *Fest* magazine, argued that the show did not generate "an intense enough level of anxiety" and that "the fear is more in the idea than in the experience".¹³ This separation between idea and experience goes some way to confirm Rosenberg's theory that the audience member's own imagination is the most vivid component of the production, but it also acts as a reminder that "intensity" of experience is a difficult barometer by which to measure, or advertise, a production. It speaks to Alston's concern, too, that such experiences are only non-reproducible by virtue of the "consumer narcissistically investing their own personality".¹⁴ As I have already discussed, Alston uses "narcissistic" as a label for a specific form of participation that is based upon the "productive potential" of an audience member, in terms of "potentially acting and interacting" but also in terms of

¹² 'Theatre Review: Flight, Summerhall', *Scotsman*, 9 August 2018.

<<https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/theatre-review-flight-summerhall-1427083>> [accessed 14 March 2022].

¹³ Tom Wicker, 'Review: Flight by Darkfield', *Fest Magazine*, 4 August 2018. <<https://www.fest-mag.com/edinburgh/theatre/104671-review-flight-by-darkfield>> [accessed 31 May 2019].

¹⁴ Alston, *Beyond*, p. 11.

a production that “assigns to audiences [...] an aesthetically productive role”.¹⁵ This is certainly applicable to *Flight*, which casts its audiences in both “narcissistic” roles, and to Darkfield’s use of this mode of participation to create a production that is, potentially, infinitely reproducible.

Ben Kulvichit, writing for *Exeunt*, judged *Flight* to be a “perfectly programmed high-art theme park ride, a reminder of one’s closeness at all times to death that spits you out into the sunlight feeling palpably, certainly, alive”.¹⁶ The review, in its emphasis on feelings of aliveness, shares the language used by Machon to describe performances that create a self-aware aliveness in their audience members, but it also speaks to Alston’s argument that such experiences are not art-objects, but instead objectify the emotions provoked in their audience members. In describing *Flight* as a “perfectly programmed [...] theme park ride”, the writer touches on the logistics that underpin the production. No actors are required for the performance of *Flight*, other than the collective audience body, and a concise run time of thirty minutes meant that *Flight* ran up to eighteen times a day during August 2018. Venue staff assisted audience members on their entry to the shipping container, like any other performance held at Summerhall during the Fringe, and a technical member of staff, presumably supplied by Darkfield, was in attendance to trigger the light, sound, and vibrational requirements of the show. In the heightened economic context of the Edinburgh Fringe, where the cost of human labour is a barrier to breaking even, particularly due to inflated accommodation and living costs in the city, this streamlined reproducibility is a smart way to turn a profit. *Flight*’s minimal requirements, in addition to its setting in a functional shipping container, makes it extremely versatile: it has since been delivered to the fields of Latitude music festival in Suffolk, shipped across the world to the Australian Fringe festivals of Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth, and staged in Seoul, South Korea.

During its run at Summerhall, a venue with a reputation for curating experimental and progressive forms of performance, *Flight* was listed as both ‘theatre’ and ‘event’. Summerhall most often uses its ‘event’ tag to advertise walking tours,

¹⁵ Alston, *Beyond*, p.11.

¹⁶ Ben Kulvichit, ‘Edinburgh Review: Flight at Summerhall’, *Exeunt Magazine*, <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/edinburgh-review-flight-summerhall/>> [accessed 31 May 2019].

networking events, public recording sessions for radio and podcasts, and, in August 2019, a series of virtual reality experiences hosted by the BBC. This uncertain identity confirms both Alston's and Fischer-Lichte's analyses of the status of an event: the prioritisation of 'experience' over dramaturgical form or content in the show's marketing material echoes Alston's concern that such an emphasis can displace the 'art', whilst Fischer-Lichte's argument is reflected in Darkfield's, and Summerhall's awareness of the importance of persuading audiences and programmers alike that these highly programmed, partially pre-recorded productions still qualify as a live event. However, as Rosenberg also implies, it is the presence *and* the *praesence* of other audience members that imbue *Flight* with a quality of liveness. *Flight* certainly objectifies the concept of imbuing certain emotions in its audiences, but its use of technology to harness the imaginative labour and physical presence of its audiences, and thus to minimise its logistical and production costs, is what makes it successful in the capitalist, entrepreneurial context of the Fringe, and indeed the experience industry more broadly.

2.2 Selling Authenticity: *Familiar Stranger* as Empathy Machine

Telling the story of a fictional war veteran returning to civilian life, *Familiar Stranger* was a "new performance piece melding live theatre and virtual reality" presented as part of the 2018 Army@TheFringe programme.¹⁷ Created in collaboration between the Department of Computing Science at the University of Glasgow and coder collective RealRealReal, *Familiar Stranger* was hosted by the Army Reserve Centre in Edinburgh's New Town and staffed by real (real, real) soldiers. With a relatively sparse set-up – a ring of sixteen chairs and Oculus Go virtual reality headsets, the show ran three times a day for fourteen days.

Like *Flight*'s persuasively 'real' airplane interior, the physical context for *Familiar Stranger* was designed to persuade its audiences of the show's proximity to the real. But where, in *Flight*, that proximity was used to create a juxtaposition between real and fantasy elements, in *Familiar Stranger* it was intended to assure the audience of the authenticity of the experience at the heart of the story. When I attended it, on 22

¹⁷ Army@The Fringe, *Familiar Stranger – Virtual Realities*, <<http://armyatthefringe.org/familiar-stranger-virtual-realities/>> [accessed 2 June 2019].

August 2018, the Reserve Centre was bustling – but with business as usual, rather than with Festival activity. Unlike most buildings that become Fringe venues in August, the Reserve Centre bore little indication that it had become a theatre. From the foyer, audiences were led by a uniformed member of staff to a lavish ceremonial hall turned waiting room, and from there into a small office set up with the chairs and headsets required for the production. We were informed that, after the virtual reality experience, Sergeant Major Garry Worrall would meet us for a post-show discussion, based on his own experiences in the forces.

The website for the Army@TheFringe programme framed the production as a behind-the-scenes exclusive, stating, in all capital letters: “A REAL-LIFE ARMY RESERVE CENTRE, STAFFED BY SOLDIERS, OPENING ITS DOORS FOR FRINGE 2018”.¹⁸ This assertion was echoed in the press release published by the University of Glasgow, which promoted the show as an “insight into the experience of Army Veterans” and described Sergeant Major Worrall as an “*actual* career soldier” whose “*live* performance makes use of his ability to improvise, as he will not work from a script, but instead *engage* with the audience [...] as well as candidly discuss the Virtual Soldier’s journey” (my emphases).¹⁹ This statement relies on framing devices that we have encountered in Part 1 of this thesis, which use notions of engagement and spontaneity to imbue the event with a sense of liveness. Invoking liveness in this way also appears to be a device to confer theatricality upon the production, implying that the event is in its entirety an artistic performance, rather than a virtual reality experience followed by a straightforward discussion. It is important to note, too, that this press release emphasises Worrall’s own a-liveness, and the liveness of his lived experiences, over that of the ‘Virtual Soldier’.

In the performance that I attended, Worrall was indeed candid in his dismissal of the tone taken by the virtual reality experience, as well as the veracity of the story that it told. He criticised the creators for depicting the Virtual Soldier’s post-Iraq flat in a negative light, arguing that Soldier’s run-down, civilian kitchen littered with pizza boxes and empty beer cans affirms unfavourable stereotypes about life after serving in

¹⁸ Army@The Fringe.

¹⁹ Glasgow University, *VR Show Set to Offer Iraq War Veteran Insight*, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/archiveofnews/2018/august/headline_601365_en.html> [accessed 2 June 2019].

the forces. He also criticised the creators for not using the virtual technologies to depict the more “exciting” aspects of life in the Army. If he were to re-make it, he explained, it would certainly include a 360-degree shot of flying in a helicopter. His argument highlighted the lack of real, lived experience on the part of the virtual reality creators and created an interesting point of conflict between his personal opinions and experiences and those of the Virtual Soldier, whose traumatic, far less “exciting” experiences were clearly intended to foster empathy in the viewer.

In the virtual reality component of *Familiar Stranger*, the audience member floats through different scenes that are framed as memories, like the interior of a kitchen or an encampment in a desert-like landscape, with their gaze directed by the narrative of a ‘Magazine Soldier’ (voiced by Louise Oliver), who springs from the pages of an Army publication. The Magazine Soldier indicates, vocally, that attention should be paid to certain objects within each scene, and the audience member is limited to two forms of interaction: *where* they choose to look (and if they choose to follow the Magazine Soldier’s suggestions), and when to use a button on the Oculus’ handset to move from one scene to the next. Although each scene had the capacity for 360-degree viewing, the seating arrangement in the Reserve Centre prevented audience members from more easily making use of this range in perspective: I often found myself craning my neck to look behind me, and other audience members reflected on this in our discussion with Worrell. This restriction was seemingly unintended by the virtual reality creators, who perhaps had assumed their audiences to be standing, and it led to a direct clash of perspectives: the physical environment of the Reserve was superimposed over the virtual environment. It led me to miss an important recurring element – a floating washing machine, which haunts the audience as they travel between scenes and that is used as a metaphor to evoke the futility of washing away memories of the past. In the final scene, the machine is then joined by many other out-of-place objects from the soldier’s past, including a large tank, and these objects drift into view during a hallucinatory prize-giving ceremony in a town hall.

The virtual component of *Familiar Stranger* is evidently intended to provoke discussion about the difficulties faced by some members of the forces when they return to civilian life, rather than to provide an experience that promotes the potentially “exciting” aspects of service, as Worrall proposed. This disagreement over the function

of the virtual reality speaks to a broader trend in the mid- to late 2010s, when a considerable number of UK-based charities developed virtual experiences to encourage empathy (and donations) for their causes, from a hospital tour of Great Ormond Street²⁰ to ‘Limbo’, a VR film created by *The Guardian* to give its readers a “virtual experience of waiting for asylum”,²¹ or Greenpeace’s virtual reality depiction of deforestation in the Amazon, which was presented at major festivals like Glastonbury.²² Grant Bollmer, in the 2017 article ‘Empathy Machines’, discusses the troubling ethical implications of these claims to create empathy through the virtual embodiment of another’s lived experience. He writes,

[t]he language of empathy reproduced in contemporary discussions of VR, and digital media more broadly, presumes a specific kind of body and a specific definition of affect and affectivity – one that can properly transmit, interpret, and express emotional experience. Empathy, thus, unintentionally produces what Sara Ahmed (2010: 43) terms *affect aliens*, “bodies who do not share the affective direction” of those who they encounter, and thus “simply disappear from such a viewing point”.²³

Bollmer describes this disappearance as an “absorption” and, in the case of *Familiar Stranger*, this is deeply accurate.²⁴ The performance claims to bridge the distance of lived experience by selling the ‘authentic’ experience of a soldier to civilians attending the Edinburgh Fringe, but it focuses more on spectacle than perspective: in terms of the story’s narrative, it is never quite clear if each audience member is supposed to be receiving these memories *as if* they were their own, or if the audience is occupying the body of a soldier, watching on as that soldier looks back on their experiences. Moreover, the Virtual Soldier’s virtual body is never visible, no matter where the audience looks. There is no body visible at all, not even the ghostly hands that often

²⁰ Melanie May, ‘GOSH Charity Launches VR Hospital Tour to Show Impact of Funding’, *UK Fundraising*, 15 February 2019. <<https://fundraising.co.uk/2019/02/15/gosh-charity-launches-vr-hospital-tour-to-show-impact-of-funding/>> [accessed 2 June 2019].

²¹ Shehani Fernando and others, ‘Limbo: A Virtual Experience of Waiting for Asylum’, *The Guardian*, 5 July 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jul/05/limbo-a-virtual-experience-of-waiting-for-asylum-360-video>> [accessed 2 June 2019].

²² ‘Glastonbury Festival-Goers Get Virtual Reality Experience’, *ITV News* <<https://www.itv.com/news/westcountry/2017-06-23/glastonbury-festival-goers-get-virtual-reality-experience/>> [accessed 2 June 2019].

²³ Grant Bollmer, ‘Empathy Machines’, *Media International Australia*, 165.1 (2017), 63–76 (p. 64).

²⁴ Bollmer, p. 64.

become visible in virtual reality experiences when the user needs to be able to see their handheld controls. This creates a double disappearance: both the Virtual Soldier and the audience member are invisible, from any viewing point, and the “affective direction” becomes unclear.

Bollmer has described virtual reality as a medium which “recedes from awareness”, citing Bolter and Grusin’s theories of remediation to explain how virtual reality technologies seek to become invisible tools of mediation, whilst simultaneously creating a new frame of context for the content that appears within it. Robert Hassan discusses this contradictory existence in ‘Digitality, Virtual Reality and the “Empathy Machine”’, and how the “alleged power” of virtual reality lies in the implication that “the distant and abstract can become real and tangible”.²⁵ Following Bollmer, he contests the medium’s supposedly empathetic possibilities, arguing that clichés such as “standing in the shoes of another” or “seeing through someone else’s eyes” serve only to valorise the “spectacle-generating power of the digital and therefore subordinat[e] the human scale, the proportional context, the analogue subjective experience”.²⁶ Although I do not agree that digital technologies serve only to generate spectacle, and that only analogue experiences can be proportional or subjective, Hassan’s criticism certainly rings true in relation to the use of virtual reality in *Familiar Stranger*.

The invisible Virtual Soldier is an accidental confirmation of Hassan’s argument that such clichés like “standing in someone’s shoes” are rarely accurate. Instead, *Familiar Stranger* creates a forced disembodiment, where the audience member is not bodily present in the virtual experience, and neither is the character they are potentially inhabiting. This turns the audience’s physical body, sitting on the chair in the Reserve Centre, into the site of the performance, as Giannachi describes. Moreover, following Machon, this virtual mode of creation pins the audience member in the direct centre of the narrative, as the 360-degree virtual environment revolves around the audience member’s gaze. This is different to other virtual environments which are explorable through movements made in physical space, or by steering the movements of a virtual avatar. Yet, this centring results in an experience that limits the

²⁵ Hassan, p. 196.

²⁶ Hassan. p. 205.

audience's perspective in both form and content, rather than the creation of a true experience of proximity to someone else's lived experience – were that even possible.

Although *Familiar Stranger* is not, and cannot be, successful on the grounds of providing an “authentic” experience of a veteran's lived experience for Fringe-goers, it still succeeds on other terms. The group viewing and discussion are just as much a component of the performance as the virtual material: Worrell asked, in turn, that each of the audience members compare their preconceptions of life in, and after, the Armed Forces with the storyline of the Virtual Solider, and it is here that the show more explicitly invites a self-awareness from its audience. Dr Julie Williamson, a lecturer in Human Computer Interaction at the University of Glasgow who worked on the project, describes the performance as a “social VR experiment”, remarking that “virtual reality is often viewed as a solitary activity, but I'm interested in exploring how we can use virtual spaces to enhance and expand shared experiences”.²⁷

In this case, the “shared experience” was not, in the end, a transfer of experience from a veteran to a civilian, but an exchange of perspectives between audience members. Each audience member plays a dual role as both witness and witnessed, subject and object, and creates the dual feedback loop integral to Fischer-Lichte's definition of an a-live event. As in *Flight*, *Familiar Stranger* proposes to centre each of its audiences in the middle of their own, individual experiences, but it is the mutual witnessing of a group dynamic that is most powerful in both shows – a dynamic more akin to the definition of the German word *Präsenz*, which I discussed in the previous chapter, than to Machon's more introspective concept of *praesence*.

It is fitting, then, that Hassan argues that “intimacy with one's self cannot be a basis for the emotion of empathy, unless it's of the narcissistic kind”,²⁸ which, in turn, evokes Alston's description of this mode of participation as “narcissistic”. Although Hassan's implied moral judgement is not present in Alston's writing, the term certainly carries moralistic weight – narcissism is rarely considered to be a positive trait. Still, it is also inaccurate to conclude that either show encourages the audience to be a self-centred protagonist. In *Familiar Stranger* the audience body (plural and individual) is

²⁷ University of Glasgow, ‘VR Show Set to Offer Iraq War Veteran Insight’.

²⁸ Hassan, p. 205.

rendered invisible by the virtual reality experience, and *Flight*'s exploration of Schrödinger's thought experiment creates a similar potential for the erasure of the audience — at the show's dramatic peak, the lights flicker on to reveal a mirror held up to the audience, but the moment is so brief that the seats appear to be empty. The true fear in *Flight*, then, is the fear of being genuinely alone in an individual experience, while *Familiar Stranger* erases the audience's actual experiences in its desire for authenticity.

3. Phones on Stage: The Enduring Appeal of Being 'Alone Together'

Sherry Turkle's monograph *Alone Together* (2011) has influenced public and academic thinking about the social dynamics at play when people are online together, physically apart but remotely connected. Turkle writes that "technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude"²⁹ and argues that these boundaries are not just redrawn between a self and another, but between different states of the self: "I once described the computer as a second self, a mirror of mind", she writes, "[but] new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself, split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology".³⁰ The titular phrase has become a shortcut for describing this dynamic and the idea of a digital togetherness that is based just as much on humans engaging with themselves as it is on humans engaging with other humans. More than a decade since its publication, Turkle's text feels inevitably dated in its approach, not least in the separation she identifies between online behaviours and identities and what she labels as the "real". For instance, she writes how "Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These days, it suggests simulations that put the real on the run",³¹ but this ascribes intentionality to "technology" as if humans did not create these tools and, inadvertently, denies how online spaces reflect offline social dynamics, and vice versa.

Still, the question of the "real"-ness of online selves has proved a prominent theatrical theme in the late 2010s, in both Edinburgh and Berlin. It is key to the two

²⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p. 11.

³⁰ Turkle, p. 16.

³¹ Turkle, p. 1.

works in this set of case studies, *User Not Found* and *The Believers are but Brothers*, while Rosenberg also described *Flight*'s audiences as both "alone and together", and the theme occurs later in this chapter in *You Are Out There*, and again in Chapter 6's discussion of *Adam*. It was also present in many performances I could not include in this thesis, from Olivia Wenzel's *I yottabyte leben* (2018) to Hannah Khalil's *Metaverse* (2019), due to it informing only the content, rather than the form, of those performances. Even more broadly speaking, this division between technology and the digital, and 'reality', underpins much of the suspicion directed towards theatre that uses digital modes of distribution or mediation, as I explored in Part 1.

In this set of case studies, however, this theme contributes to the types of questions posed to the audiences, and the ways in which those questions are mediated. *User Not Found* and *The Believers are but Brothers* both use smartphones to explore the group dynamics in their audiences, as well as each audience member's individual relationship with the way they present and experience themselves online. Heather Horst, in the chapter 'Mobile Intimacies: Everyday Design and the Aesthetics of Mobile Phones', notes that many scholars have examined the mobile phone's facilitation of "intimate relationships" and "close connections" since the device became ubiquitous in the 1990s.³² However, Horst's own research focuses more specifically on the "*handheld* nature of mobile technologies, the implications of the hand for the kinds of mobile intimacies that develop, and the diverse practices and meanings that people attach to their mobile phones through an engagement with its materiality" – what she terms a "*mobile aesthetics*".³³ This handheld intimacy is used as leverage in both performances, to create a sense of familiarity and comfort as well as to disrupt those sensations. I explore how these devices become sources of theatrical liveness, in relation to and beyond their everyday functions.

3.1 "People Like Us": Choreographed Community in *User Not Found*

³² Heather Horst, 'Mobile Intimacies: Everyday Design and the Aesthetics of Mobile Phones', in *Digital Materialities*, ed. by Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardevol, Débora Lanzeni (London Routledge, 2016) pp. 159–74 (p. 160).

³³ Horst, p. 162.

User Not Found, by site-specific theatre company Dante or Die, premiered at the 2018 Festival Fringe as part of the Traverse Theatre's programme. It took place in the Jeelie Piece café, a mid-price, innocuous location for coffee and cake on the edge of the Meadows in central Edinburgh. Hosted by front-of-house staff from the Traverse, in addition to the Jeelie Piece's usual staff, audience members were given smartphones and headphones from staff wearing Traverse T-shirts, then directed to fill the café's tables as if they were regular customers and to order drinks if they wished.³⁴ Performed by Terry O'Donovan and directed by Daphna Attias, the play follows Terry – the name of the protagonist, as well as the performer – as he discovers that Luka, his ex-boyfriend of nine years, has passed away and he has inherited the responsibility of deciding what should happen to Luka's social media accounts. As the play puts it, should he “keep or delete” them?

At first Terry is hidden, sitting anonymously at table amongst the audience. His opening lines are delivered through the headphones, spoken hushed and low: “We come here. To be together. Alone together. Every day. Not everybody every day. But people like us every day.”³⁵ The close listening demanded by this whispered voice creates a sense of intimacy through the implied proximity of the speaker, and it places each audience member at the centre of their own experience. Although one can assume that every other audience member is hearing the same words, there is no way to be sure. This softly spoken introduction also underlines the social dynamics of a café setting: a place where people tend to be in proximity with others, but carry out individual, often introspective, activities like drinking a coffee, reading the paper, or working on an electronic device. It establishes a complicated definition of “we” that is explored throughout the play, speaking simultaneously to the “we” of the gathered audience, the “we” that implies a broader café-going public, and the more conspiratorial “we” that is shared between Terry and the listener.

The binaural soundscape contributes to this uncertainty: generic café noises are played in the background, but do not belong to the physical reality of the Jeelie Piece.

³⁴ I attended *User Not Found* on 7 August 2018.

³⁵ Chris Goode and Dante or Die, *User Not Found* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), p. 21.

The songs on the radio are different, and the usual sounds of milk frothers or coffee grinders are out of kilter with the actions of Jeelie Piece's barista. It creates a gentle dislocation between the aural world of the play and the specific space in which the audience is sitting, emphasising the performance as a self-contained universe that is simultaneously generic – it could be happening in any café, anywhere, any time. In correspondence, O'Donovan told me that this technologically amplified intimacy is designed to create the idea that his character is “kind of in your head; you're hearing all the details of the sound world that I'm in, and it's almost as if you have the same gaze”.³⁶ The “almost” is crucial, here, in separating *User Not Found* from the claims made by performances like *Familiar Stranger* and *Flight*: the “sound world” is a prompt to imagine the world from Terry's perspective, rather than a directive to fully inhabit Terry's world view and lived experiences. This assists the audience in embracing the intricacies of Terry's dilemma, as well as his grief, but it does not remove the audience's own experiences from the equation. Instead, it allows space for the audience to feel both individual and collective, to take on the central role in their own experience whilst playing the supporting role of “café goer” for the other audience members. Terry teases out this dynamic further, comically describing the “regulars” he encounters every day in his local coffee spot in such a way that implies they, too, are sitting in the Jeelie Piece with us.

Then the smartphones light up. This seemingly unprompted, yet synchronised, illumination immediately serves to distinguish these smartphones from the audiences' own, personal devices. Terry's phone is replicated across the devices, and the audience watch as he receives messages, selects apps, and scrolls through Luka's various social media accounts. It creates a layering of voyeurism: Terry feels anxious about the intrusion into Luka's personal space, and the audience, in turn, watches as Terry receives a series of deeply personal messages. As Horst reflects, the handheld nature of such a device is a driving factor in the close bond that can build between a person and their phone, and *User Not Found* exploits this by implying that every single audience member is holding Terry's phone in their hand. The same digital content could have been delivered in any number of ways, perhaps projected onto a wall in the

³⁶ Hawthorne, ‘Edinburgh Fringe 2018’.

café, but the play depends upon the intimate and disconcerting act of holding someone else's private life in your hand.

Yet, rather than the audience being free to scroll through Terry's phone, and to use it as they might a personal device, the interactions between the audience and these theatrical devices are limited. The audience watch as *Terry* uses the phone, his actions reflected on their screens, which creates a distanced relationship between the audience and their new devices. There is a pull and a push in this relationship, as many elements of *User Not Found* also depend upon common, every-day behaviours associated with personal devices: notification alerts are used to indicate when the audience should look at the screens, in concert with a subtle dimming of the lights on the café's tables. These alerts rely on deeply conditioned behavioural patterns and create a choreography of attention that signals when the audience should look away from Terry's occasionally extremely physical performance, and instead pay attention to the devices. This is what White might categorise as an "overt invitation": even though it is not verbally announced, it is an explicit signal to participate in a specific manner.³⁷

In the script, this choreography of the gaze is described in communal terms: "The ping of a text message arriving on Terry's phone. The phones of the audience light up with the same message" and, later, "Pings as we all get the text".³⁸ There is a unifying quality to this synchronicity – particularly as it is out of the ordinary for a group of strangers in a public place to all receive a notification at the same time – and it consolidates the audience as a collective, as well as reinforcing the 'correct' audience behaviour of checking the screens at the desired moment.

It is important that this reflexive, learned behaviour is established and encouraged in *User Not Found*, because it heightens the emotions at stake when the devices begin to behave in strange ways. For instance, the date and time on the handsets are initially in real time, but the display time fluctuates forwards and backwards as Terry's chronologies shift – six weeks earlier, several months later – and this creates the uncanny sense that the devices are more of a portal than a functional

³⁷ Goode and Dante or Die, p. 40.

³⁸ Goode and Dante or Die, p. 24-5.

phone. Both familiar and deeply strange, it creates a physical metaphor of the phone as an object that enables time travel through memory. As Terry's memories of Luka begin to fade, the social media sites visibly disintegrate; images blur and familiar functionality is replaced by confusion and illegibility. Dante or Die worked with app developers Marmelo to create the interface on these devices, which replicates an average smartphone interface aesthetically but not functionally. It is reminiscent of both iOS and Android devices, and the app gestures to popular social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter through colourways and formatting, without directly recreating those platforms. Echoing Terry's opening lines, it assists *User Not Found* in pointing to the world that it inhabits without being too specific.

The editors of *Digital Materialities* refer to Arjun Appadurai's influential 1986 work *The Social Life of Things* when arguing that such "objects are alive because they are interlinked with other objects and humans".³⁹ *User Not Found* establishes these devices as a-live through their personal value to Terry and Luka, but also challenges their "link" to real-world objects and humans by mimicking, rather than recreating, the familiar trappings of digital places and spaces. It is integral to the existence of these devices as theatrical objects, and the uncanny sensation that they are both of and not of the audience's lived experiences. It is no small task to build a fictionalised digital world in this way – which is why many of the other smartphone-based performances in this thesis use real digital places and spaces, like Instagram and WhatsApp – and it would not have been possible in *User Not Found* without the financial support of a host of arts and research institutions, ranging from Arts Council England to the Roundhouse and Southbank Centre in London.⁴⁰ The preface to the play text emphasises the research-driven approach taken by Dante or Die in its creation, and how it formed the basis of a collaboration with Professor Lib Taylor at the University of Reading on the topic of social media and contemporary performance, as well as other academics and researchers concerned with the study of death and society.⁴¹

³⁹ Sarah Pink, Elisenda Ardèvol, and Dèbora Lanzeni, *Digital Materialities: Design and Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 13.

⁴⁰ Goode and Dante or Die, p. 6.

⁴¹ Goode and Dante or Die, p. 11.

Although *User Not Found* is a cosy, intimate performance, the scale of it – from interactive lighting design to the carefully programmed phone-screen choreography – is deeply ambitious. The following case study, *The Believers Are But Brothers*, as well as many of the performances discussed in Part 3, requires audiences to use their own devices which, from my observations during this research period, is a less costly practice and thus far more common. Still, the unsettling voyeuristic implications of being given another’s phone in *User Not Found* is highly effective and contributes to a shifting collective dynamic of “we” that underpins the whole performance. Rather than trying to centre each audience member in their own experience, as in the previous case studies, *User Not Found* uses digital mediation to create a sense of communality that reaches beyond the audience sat in the Jeelie Piece, and towards a broader, compassionate notion of “People like us”, as Terry says at the beginning of the play.

In the final scene, Terry leads the audience through a series of actions that gently remove them from the fictional world of the play. He returns them to the collective gathering of the audience in the here and now, and then points towards the wider world, beyond the café’s window. “Can we just talk?” he says. “Do you want to take these off?” The stage directions note that “Terry leads everyone in taking off their headphones,” another example of the kind of explicit participatory invitation that runs throughout *User not Found*.⁴² Terry then encourages the audience to reach out to each other, physically, saying,

So listen: you don’t have to do this. This is just, I don’t know, just an invitation. If you’re sitting close enough to someone else [...] would you just maybe put your fingers on their fingers. Just gently. Just your fingers touching. You don’t have to. But if you’d like to make the offer to someone near you.⁴³

On the afternoon that I attended *User Not Found*, not every table of audience members chose to take up Terry’s invitation, or to extend their own. This speaks to the open-

⁴² Goode and Dante or Die, p. 98.

⁴³ Goode and Dante or Die, p. 99.

ended quality of such an invitation, that the action was not enforced and nor did it feel socially expected. More important than the connection between the audience members, however, which until this end-point has not been particularly developed, is the relationship between the audiences and their temporary devices. This moment, in reiterating the importance of the hand-held, is also a subtle reminder to put down these borrowed devices, as they no longer belong to the world of the audience. After using these devices to discuss physical a-liveness, digital life after death, and also to create specific moments of mediated participation, *User Not Found* sets a clear boundary: these devices are no longer live, and the performance has ended.

3.2 *The Believers are but Brothers: Performing Social Dynamics in the Group Chat*

A play about an “electronic maze of fantasists, meme culture, 4chan, the alt-right and ISIS” that seeks to “[envelop] its audiences in this digital realm”, *The Believers Are But Brothers* begins before the audience has entered the performance space. Whilst waiting in the queue for entry, each audience member is invited by the venue staff to add a specific phone number to their own phone’s contact list. They are then invited, by this phone number, to a group chat hosted on the popular messaging platform WhatsApp. Written and performed by Javaad Alipoor, and co-directed with Kirsty Housley, the play was first staged at the Transform 17 festival in 2017, before it completed a full run as part of the Northern Stage programme at Summerhall, during the Fringe in 2017.⁴⁴ That summer, *Believers* was awarded a Scotsman Fringe First and shortlisted for The Stage Awards in the category of ‘innovation’, reflecting how unusual this embeddedness of every-day technology in performance still was, in the mid-to-late 2010s.

In this case study, I focus on how *Believers* uses the infrastructure and affordances of the WhatsApp group chat as a dramaturgical tool to offer experiences of community, introspection, and fragmentation to its audiences. I explore a subsequent work by Alipoor in Part 3 – *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* – which is considered a sequel to *Believers* in its treatment of technology and

⁴⁴ I attended *Believers* on 25 August 2017.

society, rather than in terms of progressing a cohesive narrative, and I analyse its use of Instagram as a digital *place*, rather than as the digital mediation tool that WhatsApp is to *Believers*.

As the audience enter the theatre, its members are given the opportunity to be added to the WhatsApp group chat. The nature of WhatsApp means that every user can only see messages sent to the group, or the addition of any new members to the group, after they themselves have been added. This means that every single member of a WhatsApp group has a different, temporally specific, documentation of that group, depending on the order in which they are added, or removed, from that conversation space. As the venue staff work their way through the queuing audience, and early audience members begin to take their seats, the group chat fills up and conversation begins. It is important to note that it was not compulsory to take part in the group chat, and audience members were encouraged to share their screens with those who could not, or chose not to, take part in this digital conversation. Still, a 2017 study estimated that WhatsApp is used by “more than a billion people in more than 109 countries” and that “70% of the [...] users report using it daily”,⁴⁵ confirming that it was reasonable for Alipoor and Housley to assume that many audience members would already have prior experience with the app.

When I attended the show on 25 August 2017, twenty-five messages were sent in the ten minutes between my addition to the group and the beginning of Alipoor’s performance.⁴⁶ These messages ranged in content from a simple “hello” to Lionel Richie jokes and someone’s admission that they “had to get here really quickly. feeling v bloated” [sic], which received solidarity from another member: “I feel bloated too!!!”. One user left the group as quickly as they joined it – which other users are alerted to via a notification that “[phone number] left” – and others commented “Shocking someone left”, “How rude”, “Commitment issues” and “At least we still

⁴⁵ Cristóbal Fernández Robin, Scott McCoy, and Diego Yáñez, ‘WhatsApp’, in *Social Computing and Social Media. Applications and Analytics*, ed. by Gabriele Meiselwitz (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), pp. 82–90 (p. 82).

⁴⁶ I have used the transcript of the chat that remained in my WhatsApp messages, post-show, as the documentation that underpins much of my analysis in this case study. I have removed any personal or identifiable information when quoting the conversations that took place within that chat and I have since deleted the conversation from my phone – although it is fully possible that it still remains on the phones of other audience members who were present.

have eachother” [sic] “#Oneofus” [sic]. These casual, funny, friendly messages suggest the quick development of a sense of comradeship amongst the audience members in the chat, and this could reflect the common usage of WhatsApp as a mediating tool for entertainment and conversation amongst friends and family, rather than with strangers. Robin, McCoy and Yáñez even identify it as an application “that does not work if people important to us are not using it”, which could suggest that WhatsApp as a framing device enabled the *Believers* audience to feel that the group relationship was immediately somehow important, too.⁴⁷

Alipoor implicitly announces the official commencement of the show by moving to the front of the stage, taking out his own mobile phone, and visibly typing and sending a series of messages to the group:

12:51:07: Hi

12:51:07: Thanks for coming

12:51:10: Don't worry, I'll be talking to you soon

12:51:16: Keep your phone volume on, we don't need it to be silent

12:51:21: I'm sure you've used something like this before. WhatsApp, or Facebook messenger maybe. Maybe to organise a stag or a hen do. A birthday party or

12:51:27: A holiday or something. It's a really useful tool. You can broadcast to loads of people at once. And. Even though this is less relivent to planning your Aunty's 50th

12:51:29: FFS

12:51:31: RELEVANT

12:51:36: It uses peer 2 peer encryption. Which is why some governments don't like it. Anyway

⁴⁷ Fernández Robin et al, p. 89.

For some of this show I'll talk to you via this, so please leave your phone on. And if you notice someone without access to a phone, maybe share your screen with them⁴⁸

This kind of digital housekeeping is common in Alipoor's work; his later play *Rich Kids*, which I return to in Chapter 6, begins with similar instructions and reassurances about the role of technology within the performance. In *Believers*, this introduction establishes the use of the mobile phone as central to the play's form and content by acknowledging its central role in daily life. It is also integral in helping the audience to overcome the usual expectation in the theatre that all devices should be switched off or silenced: Alipoor is covertly acknowledging that *Believers* thwarts this convention.

When he texts, "I'm sure you've used something like this before", it is to assure audiences who are perhaps unfamiliar with WhatsApp but are accustomed to sending SMS messages or using similarly text-based communication tools. By referring to holidays, parties, and stag dos, Alipoor reminds the audience of the inherent social dynamics of chat groups such as these — familiar, conversational, intimate — and mimics the kind of language you might expect to find in such spaces, through his chatty, casual tone. This is developed further in his encouragement for audience members to share their phones with others, if necessary: it reaffirms a sense of community between the audience members.

The published script confirms that the spelling mistake of the word "relevant" as "relivant" is fully intentional, down to the exclamation of "FFS", an acronym for 'for fuck's sake'.⁴⁹ This appeals to the understanding of liveness that centres upon spontaneity and room for error which I explored in Part 1, and aims to convince the audience that Alipoor is typing to them in real time, and thus any other messages sent in the chat are similarly of the moment. I cannot be sure if these messages are not simply copy-and-pasted by another member of the production team into the chat, or if Alipoor is truly typing them out on stage; the script implies that the content of the text messages is precisely predetermined, with the published version matching the messages I was sent during the show, and this is in contrast to Alipoor's verbal address

⁴⁸ I have left all errors in the transcripts uncorrected.

⁴⁹ Javaad Alipoor, *The Believers Are But Brothers* (London: Oberon Books, 2018), p. 1.

to the audience, which is documented in the script as a series of bullet points to talk around, rather than specific lines of dialogue. Regardless of the logistics behind it, this brief, intentional error works to charm the audience, as there is an encouraging laugh when Alipoor raises his eyebrows and appears to correct the mistake – this also implies that the audience believes he is sending the texts himself.

However, *Believers* draws a clear line between the group chat and the stage as two different platforms for discussion. This separation begins with Alipoor’s promise that he’ll be “talking to [us] soon” – as in, he will be verbally communicating with the audience alongside this text-based conversation. It is a divide that *Believers* teases out, slowly at first, before using the group chat to discuss increasingly difficult topics and then actively introducing hostile and aggressive elements to the digital space. For instance, early in the play, Alipoor asks by text if anyone in the audience can tell him how many Muslims live in the UK and then, how many British Muslims have joined ISIS. A few tentative guesses are offered for the first question and after a pause he jokes that “lovely liberal audiences” are usually too hesitant to answer the second question. His remark gets a laugh. This interaction functions as a sort of training ground: it reiterates that the group chat should be an interactive space and develops the audience’s confidence in accepting the chat as a part of the show, either as a responder or a reader.

Later, Alipoor asks for the audience to describe, within the chat, the worst things that they have ever seen on the internet. The anonymity of the group chat is framed as an opportunity for confession, and the audience responds more quickly this time.

13:17:13: myself naked

13:17:16: A guy shooting himself in the head

13:17:16: Hahah

13:17:21: Very good work audience

13:17:23: Don’t hug me I’m scared

13:17:24: 2 girls 1 cup

13:17:26: efukt

13:17:26: Seen some pretty dank stuff

13:17:28: A guy cutting his dick off

13:17:31: The dankest

13:17:31: Walrus giving itself head

13:17:31: Fucking whiney feminists. You make shitty games nobody likes. That's it. Nobody will care when you die

The last message was sent by a crew member, rather than a member of the audience. I know this because, after the show ended, I compared the phone numbers used to add audience members to the group against those in the messages sent in the chat, curious to learn if any of the audience responses had been staged. The phone number that sent the “Fucking whiney feminists...” message also shared images to the group that embellished the show’s narrative but, during the fast-paced progression of the performance, it would have extremely difficult to discern this. It is an important theatrical moment in the play, as it escalates the tone of the admittedly dark game begun by Alipoor’s prompt, and it marks the first in a flurry of directly intimidating, violent messages sent to the audience. These messages accompany Alipoor’s on-stage discussion of Gamergate, a series of events within the gaming industry that are closely linked to the rise of the alt-right in online spaces, and this abrupt shift from gross but conspiratorial confession to the explicit incitement of violence is beyond the audience’s collective control, in a manner that violates the sense of community established at the beginning of the show. It also makes the identity of the group chat less certain, as the stories that Alipoor tells on stage begin to bleed into the space, as if they were occurring in real time.

Subsequent messages in the group chat mirror those that are sent to characters in the play, but this functions differently than in *User Not Found*. Rather than temporarily transforming each audience member’s device into the phone of that character, and thus framing the audience as intruding upon that character’s privacy, the violent messages feel like an intrusion into the *audience’s* collective space. This depends upon the sense of community and comfort established at the start of the play,

and directly implicates the audience members themselves, in addition to the fictionalised characters in Alipoor's story, as these messages remain on each audience member's device after the performance has ended. Unlike in *User Not Found*, where the smartphones are used as a portal into Terry's world, *Believers* uses the audiences' own phones to extend the liveness of the performance, and to invite the audience to carry the performance with them, in their pocket, after the theatre goes dark.

But like in *User Not Found*, Alipoor is careful to rebuild a sense of community at the play's conclusion, and to offer a gentle moment of reflection on the intense content of the show. Alipoor stands, once again, at the front of the stage, typing messages to the group chat:

13:47:42: So we end here, bodies in space

13:47:47: Screens glowing above, and screens glowing in our pockets

13:47:52: This is the ending I have written. I'd like to offer it to you

13:47:57: I'll send it a sentence at a time and I'd like you to read it Don't worry about the order, just shout one out when you feel like it

13:48:04: Group's have a way of working these things out ;)

13:48:08: Here we sit

13:48:14: In a world where there are more digital cameras than human eyes

13:48:21: We are fused into a machine of seeing, and recording and sharing

13:48:28: The tools we use have always shaped us

13:48:33: When Polynesian sailors set out to spread human history to the rest of the world, they gave up the straight backs of hunter gatherers

13:48:39: They craned their necks upwards and drowned in the soft light of the night sky

13:48:45: Now, we lose ourselves in the inky blackness of our screens

13:48:52: We hunch over screens and cripple our necks

13:48:59: But at the edge of our decaying bodies lies a network of power greater than any tyrant has ever dreamed

13:49:07: Here we sit

13:49:14: No light, but the soft yellow glow on our faces. Together in the dark.

13:49:26: This is the end of the show

13:49:36: Thank you

13:49:37: 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌

13:49:54: 👍👍👍👍👍👍

13:50:15: 🙌

13:50:26: Great stuff 🙌🙌

13:50:31: [REDACTED] removed [REDACTED]

13:50:36: [REDACTED] removed [REDACTED]

13:50:40: [REDACTED] removed [REDACTED]

13:50:41: [REDACTED] left

13:50:44: Bye

13:50:45: [REDACTED] removed [REDACTED]

This invitation to the audience, to read out loud, creates a collective ending to the performance that is dictated by both the pace of Alipoor's texts and the pace at which the audience members volunteer as readers. Like the culmination of *User Not Found*, it offers a transition from the digital space to the physical space, but it also requires the audience members to leave behind their role as group chat contributors and speak out loud, into the auditorium. It also requires teamwork, and timing: when I first saw the performance, audience members accidentally spoke over each other, pausing and apologising, before resuming the task. More revealing, though, is the use of the group

chat as a place to offer thanks, in addition to the customary round of applause. It indicates that the group chat has been fully and successfully integrated as a place for the audience within the production, separate to but just as important as the physical room.

The Believers Are But Brothers creates a shared, mediated space in a different way to *User Not Found*, which presents staged facades of those spaces as a set or a backdrop to Tony's performance. When our phones vibrate, or sound an alert, in *Believers* it is because someone – potentially another audience member – has sent a message to our own phones. In *User Not Found*, it is because that action was coded in advance, on a device that is more theatrical than it is personal. These are two different approaches to staging a sense of liveness that feels deeply familiar to anyone who uses a smartphone, but which have comparable results in the moment of performance, particularly in the creation of a mediated group dynamic that permits each audience member to contribute if, and when, they feel comfortable doing so.

4. Self-Aware Spectatorship and Self-Surveillance

These final case studies depend on an audience's contributions in a far more explicit manner, testing the limits of the role of the body in performance as depicted by Giannachi and Kaye, Machon and Fischer-Lichte. I examine Holly Herndon's *Spawn* and doublelucky's *YOU ARE OUT THERE*, two Berlin-based productions that use artificial intelligence to explore audience data and to put that data on stage – but with extremely different data collection methods, and in the service of contrasting theatrical narratives. These productions raise important questions concerning informed consent, authorship and agency, and the difficulties of making technological processes visible on stage. The case studies develop the role of the theatrical prosumer, but also indicate potential ethical and creative limits to this mode of participation.

In my discussion of Giannachi's cyborg theatre in Chapter 3, I noted that the market growth for personal technological devices that seek to track and quantify the actions of the human body has expanded the range of digital tools available to theatre makers who seek to mediate the bodies of their audiences. Giannachi's observation that theatre can now “take place through and on” its audiences is both accurate and

prescient, as this field continues to expand. This, in turn, has implications for Machon's description of *praesence* which requires "the participant's physical body responding within an imaginative environment" and correlates such "direct participation" with "[inhabitancy] of the immersive world created".⁵⁰ The following case studies explore the implications of using these responses as data, and using the data to create an imaginative environment, but also challenge the "direct" nature of such a mode of audience participation. Machon's concept of inhabiting such a world is also tested when the audience data remain a part of the imaginative world, after the audience members themselves leave the space. The autopoiesis of Fischer-Lichte's feedback loop – a dynamic in which "participants always act as both subjects *and* objects" – is also challenged by these productions. In these performances, the feedback loop is concretely represented by a technological process that intentionally destabilises the subject-object binary, but this process is also difficult to make visible to the audiences and is fully controlled by the theatre maker. Can such contradictions truly liberate the audience and the performer from the subject-object binary, as Fischer-Lichte suggests?

4.1 De-centring the Self: *Spawn* at the Berliner Festspiele

The Berliner Festspiele, one of Berlin's most prestigious public-funded arts institutions, launched a programme titled *Immersion* in 2016. The series of curated events and experiences included a mixed media 'tour' through memory, 3D film screenings, and exhibitions by virtual reality artists. Led by director Thomas Oberender, the first three years of this curatorial strand encompassed a diversity of media, genre, and forms. The Festspiele used a succinct mission statement to position the *Immersion* programme within its broader programming, and to explain how their audiences should receive it:

Go in instead of look at.

- Allen Kaprow

Die Programmreihe Immersion der Berliner Festspiele stellt Werkformen zwischen Ausstellung und Aufführung vor, in die das Publikum eintritt

⁵⁰ Machon, p. 68.

und die es erlebend koproduziert. (The Berliner Festspiele's programme series Immersion presents artforms that fall between exhibition and performance, art forms into which the audience can step inside and experience as a co-creator.)⁵¹

Beginning with a quotation from Kaprow, an influential American artist credited with developing Happenings, the Festspiele establishes art as an environment to be entered, rather than to be observed from a distance. This repositions the audience member as a component part *within* the artwork, following Lavender's approach to hybridity, and also has connotations of interiority – that the *inside* of the experience between the audience and the artwork is of more value than external aesthetics. Within "Go" is a simple instruction: it implies that these art-audience collaborations are structured around participatory invitations, and that *to go* would to accept such an invitation. The second element of the statement reinforces this, particularly in its framing of these experiences as an art-environment that is constituted, co-created, by the entry of the audience.

This environmental, or spatial, conceptualisation of the artwork as something that a person can be inside of – or external to – echoes Machon's definition of immersion as inhabitation, but also implies that to reject such an invitation of entry would be to undergo an incorrect experience. In the German, the type of experience on offer is expressed more specifically than in English: the present participle *erlebend* stems from *erleben*, a verb that can mean *to experience* or *to undergo*, as well as *to live to see*. It incorporates the verb *leben* (to live) and speaks to 'experience' in contrast to another German verb, *erfahren*, which describes the sort of lived experience that results in knowledge or expertise. Interestingly, Alston addresses this in his 2013 article, and attempts to label elements of his interactions with a Punchdrunk performance in these terms, concluding that "Acting on experience (erfahrung) is rewarded with experience (erlebnis)".⁵² This is a simplified, rather than accurate,

⁵¹ Berliner Festspiele, *Immersion - About*, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/BerlinerFestspiele.Immersion/about/?ref=page_internal> [accessed 10 September 2019].

⁵² Adam Alston, 'Audience Participation', p. 10.

application of the German, but it does emphasise the inadequacy, in English, of using a single word to refer to such a range of possible actions, emotions and sources of knowledge.

In any case, the experiences offered by the *Immersion* programme are too broad for a single case study to explore. Instead, I focus on one example that provides a challenge to the Festspiele's mission statement. Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst's 'Spawn Training Ceremonies' were a combination of "Live-Performances" and installations created as part of the ISM Hexadome hosted at the Gropius Bau, a large space for the exhibition of video work which existed in March and April 2018, in partnership with the Institute for Sound and Music Berlin (ISM). Formed of six large screens and an audio system set in a hexagonal display, the web site described it as a "neues Format" (new format) and "zugleich ein völlig neuartiges Instrument" (at the same time a completely new instrument). Audiences were invited to stand, sit, or lie down in the middle of these screens, a spatial way of setting the audience's experiences centre stage.

The Training Ceremonies were a series of public-facing sessions in which audiences were led through call-and-response vocal exercises by Herndon's musical ensemble, with the explicit purpose of creating data to train a neural network named Spawn. The audiences' vocal contributions were recorded and used to develop Spawn's musical abilities and eleven days later Spawn's learnings were displayed as an installation on the screens of the Hexadome. In an interview for the English-language magazine *Exberliner*, Herndon described this installation as "like a shadow of the performance", but the precise nature of "the performance" is not so easy to determine: is the performance in the vocal contributions of the audience, singing in the Hexadome, or is it found in Spawn's eleven days of data processing?⁵³ The "shadow" installation is a result of both types of performance, but also a means of presenting both performances side-by-side – particularly as the period of data processing was done in private, and no information regarding the nature of this training was provided

⁵³ Michael Hoh, 'AI Trickiness: Holly Herndon and Mathew Dryhurst', *EXBERLINER.com* (2018), <<https://www.exberliner.com/api/content/164f82e8-37ef-11e8-ab49-121bebc5777e/>> [accessed 10 September 2019].

to the public. On the Hexadome's screen, footage of the audiences' vocal exercises blends into Spawn's audio output, based as it is on the audience's input. This collage, presented back to the data sources, is a visualisation of Fischer-Lichte's feed-back loop but also evidence that the exchange is now complete – the audience members no longer have control over their individual contributions.

In the same conversation with *Exberliner*, Dryhurst explained that the Ceremonies were indeed modelled on familiar structures of data collection, but with an optimistic re-interpretation of those structures. He says,

In the Facebook model, the politics of immersion – choosing your own adventure, sharing and getting lost in that universe – is used quite transparently to sell an advertising service to collect data on individuals. We're taking that approach, hopefully, towards more positive ends... This performance is less about surveillance. But everything we're collecting is generalised and abstracted away from an individual.⁵⁴

Dryhurst argues that using data to create an abstracted generalisation of an audience is in opposition to “the politics of immersion” which, like Alston, he characterises as focused on individualism and capital. Still, the connection that Dryhurst makes between data collection and promises of immersion is revealing, in the context of the Festspiele's *Immersion* programme, and acknowledges the potentially murky ethics involved in creating art based on the creative and bodily contributions of paying audiences. However, it is true that although the ‘Spawn Training Ceremonies’ are shaped by the contributions of its audiences, there is not the same emphasis upon individual, subjective experiences that I explored earlier in this chapter, particularly in the claims of immersion made by *Flight* and *Familiar Stranger*.

One year after the Ceremonies, Herndon released the critically acclaimed album *PROTO* (2019), which was created on the basis of these, and many other, training sessions with Spawn. On the tour that promoted the record, members of the touring ensemble once again invited the audience to take part in call-and-response

⁵⁴ Hoh.

vocal exercises, designed to further Spawn’s development. To decline the invitation, in this instance, would simply be to remain silent. In several interviews conducted by Herndon and Dryhurst about the creative process of working with Spawn, they emphasised their interest in using this dynamic to challenge Enlightenment notions of the lone, artistic genius. “The idea of one person being the entirety of something is really limited”, Herndon told me in an interview for *The Guardian*.⁵⁵ They see Spawn, then, as both a metaphor for de-centring the creative process as well as a practical attempt to do so. However, this decentring still comes at the cost – in terms of tickets, time, and voice – of their audiences. There is a significant difference between the use of audience labour to constitute an event, in which that audience has paid to take part, and the subsequent for-profit dissemination of the results of that labour, in a different format, months or even years after the original event. Yet, Dryhurst’s argument that all data is “generalised and abstracted away from an individual” provokes a different consideration: perhaps any audience at any performance can be seen as a kind of training process, assisting, even implicitly, in the refinement of future performances.

In this way, the “Ceremonies” challenge the rituals of audience behaviour more broadly, as well as creating an explicit, performative process that transforms the audience member from subject to object and back again. They also challenge the institutional interpretation of ‘immersion’ by the Festspiele, that states that all audiences will become co-creators, revealing this promise of exchange to be more nuanced and complicated than initially suggested, fraught with ethical grey areas regarding authorship and labour.

4.2 Staging Digital Surveillance: *YOU ARE OUT THERE* at Hebbel am Ufer

In 2017, experimental theatre venue Hebbel am Ufer launched a “campaign” titled KEEP IT REAL, alongside the new directorship of Annemie Vanackere.⁵⁶ This curatorial theme included the creation of films and a series of distinctive posters

⁵⁵ Katie Hawthorne, ‘Holly Herndon: The Musician Who Birthed an AI Baby’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/may/02/holly-herndon-on-her-musical-baby-spawn-i-wanted-to-find-a-new-sound>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

⁵⁶ Hebbel Am Ufer, *KEEP IT REAL*, <<https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/about-us/profile/keep-it-real/>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

featuring uncanny, avatar-like human faces, as well as a programme of theatre works that spoke to questions of ‘reality’ in contemporary society. Once such work was *YOU ARE OUT THERE* by theatre makers doublelucky, a production company created in 2004 by artists Chris Kondek and Christiane Kühn that is interested in making visible the “invisible infrastructures” (die unsichtbaren Infrastrukturen) and “digital architectures” (die digitalen Architekturen) that determine matters of society and privacy.⁵⁷ More specifically, *YOU ARE OUT THERE* was presented as part of a nine-day special programme titled ‘Spy on Me’, a series that examined “the effects of surveillance on our selves and society” (sic) and asks, “What happens when data become the essential raw material and information becomes our most important commodity?”⁵⁸ The marketing blurb for *YOU ARE OUT THERE* makes clear its connection to this theme, by describing the work as a scrutinization of “our omnipresent self-images and digital doppelgängers in social media on either side of the limits of legality”.⁵⁹ However, the use of the plural “our” in this statement is highly contested in this production: it might suggest that the audience members are positioned as mutually involved, alongside the theatre makers, in this omnipresence, but instead the audience is treated as a homogenous body, there to be fooled.

At the box office, whilst having tickets checked for entry, audience members were requested to leave behind an identification card in exchange for a pair of headphones, which were implied to be essential to the performance. Using an identification card – in my case, my driver’s license – as a deposit for technical equipment is not particularly unusual: there was a similar exchange at the beginning of *Remote Mitte*, another Berlin-based performance that uses headphones, which I discuss in Part 3. After receiving the headphones, the audience members are encouraged to take their seats. On the night that I attended *YOU ARE OUT THERE*, on 25 February 2018, I noticed several audience members begin to scrutinise the headphones whilst they were seated, noting that the devices were not wireless and that there did not appear to be anywhere to plug them in, on or near to their seats.

⁵⁷ doublelucky productions, *About*, <<https://doubleluckyproductions.org/about/>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

⁵⁸ Hebbel am Ufer, *Spy on Me*, <<https://www.hebbel-am-ufer.de/en/spy-on-me/>> [accessed 25 February 2022].

⁵⁹ ‘KEEP IT REAL’.

Shortly after the performance began, one of the show's performers made it clear that the headphones were purely a diversion: what doublelucky really wanted was access to our private information. The performers brought on stage the index box in which our cards were stored, and began pulling them out at random, reading aloud certain facts – dates of birth, middle names, nationalities, and streets of residence. Audience members were even encouraged to raise a hand when they recognised data that could belong to them. This is a serious breach of trust; when tickets to the show were purchased, no small print implied that personal data could be taken and used in this way. To state such a thing might have lessened the impact of the reveal, but also such language is commonplace when making purchases and rarely raises concern: this is the argument made on stage, in justification of the theft.

The play tells the story of a fictional protagonist named Alma Beckmann, who is caught in surreal limbo between their physical and online existence and is trying to prove their 'reality' through accumulated data. The rhetorical question at the heart of the narrative asks: which Alma is more 'real' – her online, or offline self? As I noted in the discussion of *User Not Found*, this narrative has been well-used in both Scottish and German theatres over the course of this research. However, in the case of *YOU ARE OUT THERE*, the audience's data are used to make this point more personal. On a table, to the side of the stage, one performer sits and 'processes' the identification cards. Similar to the private nature of Herndon's data processing, it is not clear what this particular act of processing involves – but the performer appears to be extremely busy. Later in the show, the result of this busyness is revealed in a composite image, comprising the photographs taken from the identification cards, displayed on a large screen at the back of the stage.

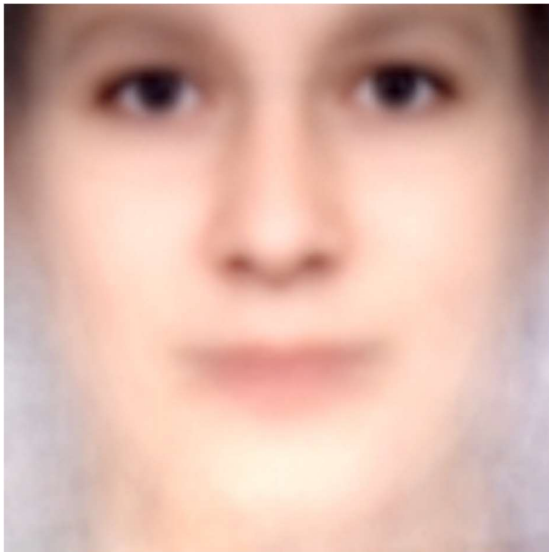


Figure 1: *Friends of Alma Beckmann / Berlin, 25.1.2018*

This composite face is uncanny, with a blurred, ghostly quality, and it is used to visualise the idea that each member of the audience has some form of digital double. As doublelucky explain on their web site, the concept is that these digital doubles, or *doppelgänger*, fulfil purposes of identification and governance beyond what we ask of them. The face is intended to be a personification of the ways in which digital infrastructure can dictate how people form their identities, but this “Geistergeschichte” (ghost story) falls into its own trap: doublelucky have created a production which deals in involuntarily collected data as a commodity and exchanges it, symbolically, for artistic prestige and financial support from major German arts institutions, including the Münchner Kammerspiele and Schauspiel Leipzig, as well as the Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media. Like *Spawn*, this face invites the audience to attempt to see themselves in the data but ensures that this is almost impossible. But whilst the training period for *Spawn* was behind closed doors due to the sheer amount of time required to complete the processing, the audience of *YOU ARE OUT THERE* is led to believe that this face has been created during the theatrical moment. This belief is enhanced by the existence of a website to which we are directed, after the show, which displays the collective faces of each audience that the show has encountered.⁶⁰ Titled “Friends of Alma Beckmann”, these mementos feel more of a

⁶⁰ ‘Friends of Alma Beckmann – Alma Beckmann’ <<http://almabeckmann.net/friends-of-alma-beckmann/>> [accessed 30 March 2022].

proof of concept for the theatre company than a memory aide for any audience members.

Although doublelucky's *YOU ARE OUT THERE* is comparable to Herndon and Dryhurst's use of artificial intelligence and personal data – particularly in its desire to create a tangible product out of the collective audience body – it is strikingly different in how it invites its audiences to participate. It uses what White would describe as a “covert invitation,” because it “relies on deception: that the action anticipated will not become a part of the theatrical performance”.⁶¹ By acting without consent, doublelucky contradict the narrative at the heart of the play, which implies that society is too casual with personal data – had the audience signed over their identification cards with the implicit understanding that they could form part of the show, this could have even enhanced the show's rhetoric. Moreover, the act of deception removes any degree of agency or authorship from the audience and divides them from their data in a manner akin to the disembodied experience at the heart of *Familiar Stranger*. Rather than creating a subject-object feedback loop in which the audience can recognise their own contributions to the performance and then, perhaps, encounter a sensation akin to Machon's sense of *praesence*, the audience data is presented quite straightforwardly as an object of value – and this is far from a radical provocation.

5. Conclusions

Each of the productions in this chapter is concerned with the a-liveness of their audiences, and use digitally mediated participatory practices to place that a-liveness at the heart of the performance. As I have argued, this is not necessarily a purely artistic desire: there are logistical and financial benefits to a production that can reproduce every element bar the audience's imaginative contribution, and to a production which seeks to drive a specific narrative irrespective of its audience's right to data privacy. However, these practices can also result in moving and deeply felt theatrical experiences: Machon's notion of *praesence* is defined by such self-recognition and

⁶¹ White, p. 41.

reflection, and many of these case studies made space for such awareness, by developing the role of the audience as a creative contributor.

Over the period of my research, digitally mediated participation has predominantly been used to drive a discussion regarding society's relationship to digital technologies. However, my case studies also reveal a shared interest in exploring the dynamic between individual and collective audience bodies. *Familiar Stranger* and *Flight* emphasised the individual protagonist, but required a supporting cast of other audience members in order for the protagonist role to be meaningful. In *User Not Found* and *Believers are but Brothers*, smartphones contributed to a more nuanced version of this dynamic, and permitted the productions to shape, and then re-shape, different iterations of a collective audience body. By integrating smartphones as theatrical devices, *User Not Found* established a sense of voyeurism and self-consciousness that contrasted with the play's otherwise earnest and warm tone, and also indicated that the play was not only speaking to the audience in that moment, but "people like us". In contrast, the use of personal devices in *Believers* ensured that remnants of these social groups and re-groupings would linger with the audience beyond the theatre, and this created more pointedly personal implications for the audience as a collective of individuals. Finally, *Spawn* invited the audience to surrender the desire for individualism, and to permit their voices to become part of a greater, unidentifiable whole, whilst *YOU ARE OUT THERE* attempted to emphasise the potentially dangerous, disembodied nature of personal data points, but through the creation of a collective "face" that had little consequence for the audience in the room.

These last two cases also highlight the difficulties in staging technological processes that are beyond the every-day knowledge of the average theatregoer: the creation of the "face" might have been more powerful had the process behind it been explained, whilst the live training of *Spawn* was in fact carried out off stage, due to the time required to complete it. As theatres continue to integrate increasingly ambitious technologies within performance, this question will become more pronounced: how much of a technological process does an audience need to understand, to recognise it as a form of liveness? These case studies have proven the

value of an articulate and *informed* participatory invitation, and demonstrated that this is just as valuable as in analogue modes of participatory theatre, if not more so in digitally mediated circumstances.

Lastly, these case studies have been defined by shifting subject-object relationships, indicating that digitally mediated forms of participation have the potential to reform long established patterns of audience behaviour. Fischer-Lichte argued that, for a feedback loop to be successful, “all participants always act both as subjects *and* objects”.⁶² However, she also states that this “fundamental [...] opposition” is less a fixed binary, and more a notion that “philosophy and the history of ideas so ardently insist upon”.⁶³ The case studies in this chapter reveal this to be true: whilst the roles of subject and object are present in each production, they are contested and explored through the use of mediating technologies in ways that suggest this binary is losing its meaning when describing the role of the audience in digitally mediated performances. Through the collection of creative data, or by using a messaging platform to hand the writing of the script over to the audience, lines of authorship and agency, subjecthood and objecthood, are being re-drawn.

⁶² Fischer-Lichte, p. 172.

⁶³ Fischer-Lichte, p. 172.

PART 3: DIGITAL LOCATION

“We are where we aren’t” – Ali Smith, *In the Beginning of the And* (2020)

1. Introduction

What does it mean for a performance to take place in digital space? In the third and final part of this thesis, I explore sites of digitally located performance and consider the contexts in which they are formed in Edinburgh and Berlin. I use “digitally located” to refer to performances that *take place* in pre-existing digital spaces, as well as performances that use digital tools to *create* performance spaces: in both instances, I am interested in the relationships between performances and the digital places and spaces in which they occur, as well as the physical places and spaces which contextualise these performances and digital spaces. As I have argued throughout this thesis, digitally distributed (Part 1) and digitally mediated (Part 2) performance practices do not necessarily have the same relationship to space, time and bodies as longer established modes of performance. So, here, I examine notions of place and space in digitally located performances, in city-specific contexts. I ask: in what kind of spaces or places do we encounter digitally located performances? What kind of space- or place-making relationships can digitally located performances have with physical performance spaces? In what ways can a digital performance place or space be considered ‘live’? Throughout Part 3, I also address the roles of Edinburgh and Berlin within my research and re-examine my own methodology in this thesis, considering whether geographical specificity is the best way to interrogate the modes and contexts of digital performances, or whether in fact it constitutes a restriction.

First, in the theoretical work of Chapter 5, I consider how theatrical notions of space and place are informed by the nature of performance venues, digital technologies, and questions of public versus private space. I draw on the theatre historiography of Marvin Carlson and David Wiles and contrast the work of Marxist geographer Doreen Massey with contemporary theatre scholars who write specifically about theatre and cities. I then examine the formation of public space from a digital studies perspective, and use the augmented reality gaming phenomenon Pokémon Go,

and virtual reality theatre *Limina*, to supply context for the case studies that follow. Lastly, I use the scholarship of theatre maker Chris Goode and philosopher Henri Lefebvre to consider the ways in which a social space can be ‘live’ in order to establish criteria for the analysis of live space in my case studies.

The case studies in Chapter 6 are split into three sections. In the first, ‘Architecture of Hospitality’, I analyse the digital infrastructures within Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley’s *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* and *Verirrten sich im Wald* by CyberRäuber and the Deutsches Theater. I examine how the former takes the pre-existing “digital architecture” of social media platform Instagram to create a performance space, whilst the latter uses mixed reality technologies to create bespoke stages within the institutional framing of the Deutsches Theater.¹ In the second section, I examine the proliferation of digitally aided map-based performances in Edinburgh and Berlin between 2017 and 2019, and the ways in which these performances combine virtual, augmented, and physical space to position their audiences in relation to a specific perspective on the city. I also consider notions of site-specificity and permanence: several of the productions in this section were created to be performed in different cities, sometimes simultaneously, whilst others are explicitly framed as exclusive monuments to a single city. In the final section, I discuss the role of national and federal theatres in an increasingly globalised world and examine instances where such theatres have used digital tools – or the suggestion of them – to expand their geographical reach. More broadly, I consider the potential for digital tools to connect, re-locate and dislocate theatre makers and audiences across countries, borders, and time zones, particularly in times of crisis.

¹ Michael Bossetta, ‘The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 95.2 (2018), 471–96 (p. 1). Bossetta uses the term to describe the technical protocols that enable, constrain and shape user behaviour in a virtual space.

Chapter 5: Digital Place and Space-Making

1. Defining Places and Spaces

I have previously discussed Peter Brook's famous quote, that "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged".¹ This chapter takes that "empty space" and argues that, far from being a blank slate, digital performance spaces interact and intersect with physical places and spaces in complex, context-dependent ways. Theatre historian David Wiles, in *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (2003), describes Brook's "empty space" as "philosophically untenable", and argues that "to *take* an empty space and *call* it a bare stage, he (the unseen director) needs to frame that space [...]. The shape and contour of the frame confer an identity on that which is framed" (original emphasis).² Wiles draws on the discourse of power dynamics in mapping practices to establish that there is no such thing as a space devoid of context, and that in Brook's *taking* of that space, there is an act of shaping and naming which further 'fills' that space with context – even before any performance has taken place.

Wiles' monograph explores the hierarchies of power and capital that influence the histories, social roles and architectures of performance sites from the Ancient Greek theatron through to the twentieth century's 'black box', which he describes as a period "characterized by the rise and fall of the 'empty space'".³ He argues that space is "always produced, in the sense that it is always a set of relationships, never a given, never inert or transparent, never in a state of nature untouched by culture" and instead reiterates social geographer Henri Lefebvre's influential axiom that "(social) space is a (social) product".⁴ I return to Lefebvre later in this chapter, but for now it is enough to note that a variation of this argument is also found in Marvin Carlson's *Places of*

¹ Brook, p. 7.

² David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 243.

³ Wiles, p. 7.

⁴ Wiles, p. 10.

Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture (1989), in which Carlson describes the “entire theatre” – by which he means the theatre building, the literal space of theatre, rather than the act of theatre – and “its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city” as “all important elements of the process by which an audience makes meaning of its experiences”.⁵ This is a useful reminder that a theatre building and the theatre space created by or for a performance are not necessarily the same thing; an obvious point, perhaps, but one that should be remembered throughout this chapter, and particularly in the discussion of virtual performance spaces.

For Carlson, “almost any identifiable space within the city may become a performance space”, and any space that does become a performance space will “bring to the theatrical experience its own spatial and cultural connotations”.⁶ He also argues, though, that “without a player’s space [...] there would be no theatre”.⁷ This condition for theatre – as in, a theatre space – is tempered by his acknowledgement of the “frequent abandonment of the long-established stage/audience spatial confrontation,” yet he insists that the “actor remains an uncanny, disturbing ‘other’ [...] which the audience, however physically close, can never truly penetrate”.⁸ This caveat reinforces the power hierarchies within the “confrontation” that he suggests can be “abandoned” by specific spatial arrangements, which in turn implies that for Carlson there is no spatial arrangement that truly “abandons” the stage/audience divide. His emphasis on a “player’s space” is similar to Brook’s requirement of a space that separates the actor from the observer, in that a subject/object dynamic is a requirement in both of their definitions of a performance space. Later in this chapter I return to Carlson’s notion of a “player” and explore the blurred roles of subject/object within certain digital locations: this is particularly pertinent in the second section of my case studies, in which audience members take on the role of performer/player/protagonist in individual experiences within public places. Wiles criticises Carlson’s suggestion that the “stage/audience” divide can be bridged, arguing that “no-one can stand outside these

⁵ Marvin A. Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 2.

⁶ Carlson, pp. 26–27.

⁷ Carlson, p. 129.

⁸ Carlson, p. 13.

transactions”⁹ and, ultimately, Wiles returns to Brook’s original statement, concluding that “[Brook] has demonstrated the need to turn space into place if communication with a flesh-and-blood audience is to be achieved”.¹⁰ By this, he means that communication is context-driven, and that communication is impossible in a truly culturally empty space, even if such a space could even exist.

However, Carlson’s description of how “almost any identifiable space” can become a space for performance suggests that his conception of *space* is somewhat emptier than a *place*, and that a *place* would enable communication a more specific manner than a *space*. This emphasis on turning a space into a place in order for an audience to make sense of it is not shared by social geographers. In the edited collection *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (1993), editors Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires ask, and answer, the question thus:

How then does space become place? By being named: as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investments of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed.¹¹

The argument that a place has meaning but a space does not is also, to some extent, a definition of ‘meaning’ itself: for the editors, ‘meaning’ is found in social relations, structures of power and in symbolism shared by a population. Rather than a director turning a space into a place for an audience to find meaning in it, then, Carter, Donald and Squires describe the acquisition of meaning, the turning of space into place, as an organic process that is accumulative and symbolic and, most challengingly, at the hands of the populace instead of a top-down process. The editors’ connection between naming and meaning is reminiscent of Foucault’s work in *Power/Knowledge*, where he writes “[t]here is an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge, relations of power which pass via knowledge and which, if one tries to transcribe them, lead one to consider forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and

⁹ Wiles, p. 3.

¹⁰ Wiles, p. 262.

¹¹ Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds, *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), p. xiii.

territory”.¹² This reminder that the naming of places is an act of power that can be wielded over a place and the people within it, and has long been a symbol of imperialist, colonialist violence, is intended to challenge any utopian reading of the editors’ definition.

Geographer Doreen Massey presents a three-fold definition of place in her 1991 essay in *Marxism Today*.¹³ She describes place as a point of “intersection”, a “process”, and a “meeting place”, arguing that “instead [...] of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated movements in networks of social relations and understandings”.¹⁴ This outward-looking, networked understanding of place sounds similar to Carter, Donald and Squires’ definition, but there is a crucial difference rooted in her understanding of the “time-space-compression” phenomenon, which Massey likens to “what Marx once called ‘the annihilation of space by time’”.¹⁵ This phenomenon, she writes, explains the “speed-up” of globalization, and of “movement and communication across space, [...] the geographical stretching-out of social relations”.¹⁶ Massey argues that this results in “an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by ‘places’ and how we relate to them”.¹⁷ Rather than emphasising a concrete difference or a strict delineation between space and place, Massey describes an experiential, fluid approach to place and/or space that is defined by communication, confluence and time. This chapter builds on this definition, which shares similarities with the way scholars such as Kazys Varnelis and danah boyd conceptualise digitally networked public spaces and the populations that occupy them. This next section explores ways of understanding digital points of intersection, processes, and meeting places.

2. Defining Digital Public Spaces

¹² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 69.

¹³ Doreen Massey, “A Global Sense of Place”, *Marxism Today* (June: 1991), p. 28.

¹⁴ Massey, p. 28.

¹⁵ Massey, p. 24.

¹⁶ Massey, p. 24.

¹⁷ Massey, p. 24.

When it comes to defining a digital space or, more specifically, a digital public space, the same axes of movement, process and meeting often apply. In the edited collection *Networked Publics*, Adrienne Russell, Mizuko Ito, Todd Richmond and Marc Tuters contend that “networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies; they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people”.¹⁸ This is comparable to the definition of place proposed by the *Space and Place* editors, but instead of a “concrete form of architecture” that embodies “the flows of power and negotiations of social relations”, the authors find a similar process of embodiment and reinforcement of power and relations in the technologies that network a space and a collection of people into a ‘public’. Later in the article, Russell et al make this relationship explicit: “Architecture shapes and is shaped by practice in mediated environments just as in physical spaces.”¹⁹ Throughout my case studies, I will use ‘architecture’ as a way of discussing the ways in which digital spaces and places are shaped: it helps to illuminate the concrete forms of digital sites that encourage and shape public gatherings, and also offers a crucial difference between the architecture and *infrastructure* of digital spaces and places. I use the latter term to distinguish between what is provided *by* a digital site in terms of facilities (safeguarding, for instance, or anonymity), and the former to describe the more literal structure, navigation and floor plan of a site.

Russell et al describe “three dynamics” that are specific to digitally networked publics. The first they identify as “invisible audiences”, given that “not all audiences are visible when a person is contributing online, nor are they necessarily co-present”.²⁰ The second is “collapsed contexts”, as the “lack of spatial, social and temporal boundaries make it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts”.²¹ The third dynamic is the “blurring of public and private”, as “without control over context” this distinction dissolves into “meaningless binaries”.²² The first two dynamics, however, could just as easily be used to describe physical space: not all publics are co-present or visible

¹⁸ Adrienne Russell, Mizuko Ito, Todd Richmond and Marc Tuters, ‘Culture: Media Convergence and Networked Participation’, in *Networked Publics*, ed. by Kazys Varnelis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 43-76 (p. 51).

¹⁹ Russell et al, p. 35.

²⁰ Russell et al, p. 49.

²¹ Russell et al, p. 49.

²² Russell et al, p. 49.

and, as Massey suggests, spatial, social and temporal boundaries are not, at least not exclusively, responsible for defining place. Still, the authors note that, rather than existing in a vacuum, “the affordances of networked publics [...] increasingly shape publics more broadly”.²³ This implies that, rather than total “context collapse”, alternative spatial, social and temporal qualities create alternative architectures that are structured by digital publics and, in turn, shape those digital publics: rather than these qualities functioning as precise, controlling “boundaries”, in other words, they are more porous.

As I have established above, different digital spaces are structured by very different kinds of publics and architectures. Martin Hand reminds his reader that there is “no definitive model of ‘digital culture’”,²⁴ just as Michael Bossetta notes that “affordances lack an agreed upon definition” and argues that researchers must examine “the underlying mechanisms of a technology and [investigate] how they shape user behaviour”, ultimately concluding that “the architecture of a technology underpins its affordances”.²⁵ I take this approach throughout my case studies, and explore in greater detail the techniques used by theatre makers to negotiate social rules and structures for their audiences by using specific digital architecture, but first I explore two very different contexts for digital performance in order to articulate the relationship between digital public spaces and physical public places: Randonauts, and Pokémon Go.

Since the launch of satellite navigation in the 1990s and the launch of Google Maps in 2005, we have become increasingly accustomed to digital mapping tools that assist us in navigating the spaces around us. Although digital spaces as purpose-built theatre spaces remain an emerging area of study, there are many popular examples of games that use location technologies to allow their user to gamify the landscape around them. Dale Leorke, in *Location-Based Gaming: Play in Public Space* (2019) pinpoints the emergence of location-based games in the early 2000s, describing them as a result of “location-aware technologies, digital storytelling and interactive media art”. He

²³ Russell et al, pp. 54–55.

²⁴ Martin Hand, *Making Digital Cultures: Access, Interactivity, and Authenticity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

²⁵ Bossetta, p. 473.

notes that location-based games differ to other forms of digital gaming in that they usually take place in “the everyday, physical environment – usually an outdoor, public space”.²⁶ This convergence of digital and physical public space can result in some unlikely interactions.

The Outline journalist Tamlin Magee wrote about the quirky digital community that calls itself ‘Randonauts’, describing how a bot and a quantum random number generator are used to plot nearby geolocation points. Randonauts then visit these locations in the hope of leaving their own “reality tunnels” and “[venturing] into parallel iterations of their own realities”.²⁷ The Randonaut community is convinced that this form of exploration is scientifically sound, and when Magee interviews Jürgen Schmidhuber, the “unofficial Father of Modern AI”, he, although unconvinced by randonauting itself, says that “[w]e have no physical evidence our universe is not really run by a short [computer] program”.²⁸ This uncertainty spurs Randonauts to share photographs of the locations that they visit via social media platforms, in order to find inexplicable coincidences between their experiences. This way of using technology to navigate unfamiliar but nearby surroundings sounds extremely unusual, but it is in fact an intensified, streamlined version of far more mainstream location-based gaming experiences. When augmented reality phenomenon Pokémon Go launched in July 2016, “it gathered 45 million players worldwide in its first 12 days”, notes Geoffrey Alan Rhodes.²⁹ He describes the game as augmented reality’s first and only real success, as the medium “seems to be forever emerging and never fully emerged” and gives examples of the game’s impact on “real world ramifications”.³⁰ In those first twelve days of operation, Pokémon Go was blamed for

²⁶ Dale Leorke, *Location-Based Gaming: Play in Public Space* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), p. 3.

²⁷ Tamlin Magee, ‘I Tried to Glitch the Simulation and All I Got Was a Bottle of Pee’, *The Outline*, 27 August 2019. <<https://theoutline.com/post/7881/i-became-a-randonaut-to-try-to-glitch-the-simulation-and-all-i-got-was-a-bottle-of-pee>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

²⁸ Magee.

²⁹ Geoffrey Alan Rhodes, ‘Waiting for the Augmented Reality “Killer App”: Pokémon GO 2016’ in *Augmented Reality Games I*, ed. by Vladimir Geroimenko (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), pp. 3-14 (p. 4).

³⁰ Rhodes, p. 5.

110,000 distracted driving incidents, and then a laundry list of embarrassing incidents [...]: a criminal, busy playing, accidentally wanders into a police station where he is arrested; a gaming couple wander into the tiger enclosure at the zoo; multiple incidents of players stumbling across dead bodies in obscure locations.³¹

The language that Rhodes uses – wandering, stumbling – suggests the same degree of randomness, or chance, that the Randonauts seek to achieve, but this is in fact misleading. The game uses Google Maps for in-play navigation: a player’s ‘real’ location is often visible through their phone’s camera, with the augmented reality creatures appearing to mingle with their physical environment. Nintendo specifically encourages players to “please be aware of your surroundings” on the homepage for the game,³² and is more explicit in the Safety FAQs, warning that “[t]he safety of any given area depends on the user, the time of day, and many other factors” and encouraging “users to use their own judgment about which parts of the city or countryside they feel safe going to at various times of day or night”.³³ Several other mapping tools were created to help players find the game’s creatures, and there are plenty of geographically specific tips available online, crowdsourced by other players. This is intentional searching with a specific goal which intersects with physical space but is not *about* physical space. Leorke notes that some scholars have raised the “ethical implications” of bringing games like these into “every day, social spaces”, and “warn of the potential disjunctures and inequalities that might emerge between players and non-players and the physical and virtual realms they occupy”.³⁴ Moreover, he says, scholars are concerned that games like this “risk effacing or overwriting the context and lived conditions of the everyday physical environment in which they are played”.³⁵

Leorke attempts to remain neutral on the issue. He judges location-based games to be “inherently political” and proposes an either/or statement to provoke debate:

³¹ Rhodes, p. 4.

³² Pokémon GO, *Pokémon GO*, <<https://pokemongolive.com/>> [accessed 3 November 2021].

³³ Pokémon GO.

³⁴ Leorke, p. 4.

³⁵ Leorke, p. 4.

[L]ocation-based games transform everyday locales and sites into spaces for play. In the process, they either encourage players to explore new places and see the built environment in a new light or separate players from the lived conditions and history of those spaces through the barrier of the game interface.³⁶

The framing of this statement is deliberately provocative: both of these scenarios are, to some degree, accurate. Leorke invokes the two sides of a debate that remains at the heart of discussions about location-based gaming and reveals that a strict binary between “the physical and virtual realms” is untenable. If critics of location-based gaming are worried that the virtual realms of digital games could “overwrite” the context and conditions of the “everyday physical environment”, then these two realms are not, in fact, separate: just as the physical environment shapes the narrative structure and explorative quest of the game, the game can change the behaviours of people within physical places and those users, in turn, can create new meanings and histories for those places. To speak, then, of “players and non-players”, and to claim that the material reality of an environment is being “effaced or overwritten” by another reality is to argue against the very formation of places, physical or otherwise. Rather than “context collapse”, or context effacement, I maintain it is more productive to think in terms of a plurality of contexts and publics, co-existing. This idea, as Massey and Russell et al establish, is not new to the study of either social geography or digital media. I re-visit this discourse in more detail in the second group of my case studies, in my analysis of map-app-based performances, but for now will briefly illustrate my argument using the “real world” impact of Pokémon Go in Edinburgh and Berlin.

Pokémon Go is an augmented reality mobile game that is part of Nintendo’s Pokémon franchise. Shortly after it launched, in July 2016, the *Berliner Zeitung* ran an article titled “Pokemon-Verbot am Holocaust Mahnmal” (Pokemon-Ban at Holocaust Memorial), which criticised the mapping of Holocaust memorials in Berlin and Auschwitz within the game, and the presence of ‘catchable’ Pokémon at these locations, as deeply inappropriate. Journalist Katja Colmenares notes that a ban on the

³⁶ Leorke, p. 5.

game in such historically sensitive locations is forthcoming.³⁷ In contrast, one Trip Advisor review for Museum Island, a space of culturally important museums, memorials and galleries in the centre of Berlin, describes the area as a “[v]ery good place for Pokemon Go players [sic]”.³⁸ In Edinburgh, the Zoo launched a specific initiative to encourage players to visit the park, even creating a “special Pokémon Go map to enhance your visit”.³⁹ The marketing blurb recommends that visitors should “explore our amazing collection of endangered animals and maybe even find some rare Pokémon”, with a picture of a Pokémon amongst some penguins. Similarly, an Edinburgh taxi firm took advantage of the app, with Central Taxis claiming to be able to take players on a special route through the city, designed to help them with the game.⁴⁰

These small insights into the ‘real world’ impact of the augmented reality app reveal that the uses and outcomes of location-based gaming are highly varied. Pokémon responded to the ‘misuse’ of the app by removing “Pokéstops” that correlated or overlapped with memorial sites (including Ground Zero and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum) from their gaming map, but this could have been prevented by a more ethically responsible map-making process in the first place. Moreover, there is an obvious layer of geopolitics involved in Nintendo deciding which of the world’s sacred sites deserve to be ‘protected’ from their game. A *Vox* article on the matter also reminds the reader that exploration of real world public sites is always political, even if those sites are not of cultural or historical importance: this report highlights the statistics of racial profiling in the United States, and interviews a Black Pokémon Go gamer about his experiences with the game. He reports “being distracted from the game by thoughts of the countless Black Men who have had the police called on them because they looked ‘suspicious’ or wondering what a second amendment exercising individual might do if I walked past their window a 3rd or 4th

³⁷ Katja Colmenares, ‘Pokémon-Verbot am Holocaust-Mahnmal’, *BZ*, <<https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/mitte/pokemon-verbot-am-holocaust-mahnmal>> [accessed 26 March 2022].

³⁸ ‘Very Good Place for Pokemon Go Players – Museum Island, Berlin Traveller Reviews’, *Tripadvisor*, <http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/ShowUserReviews-g187323-d190520-r409670093-Museum_Island-Berlin.html> [accessed 13 February 2020].

³⁹ Edinburgh Zoo, *PokemonGo at Edinburgh Zoo*, <<http://www.edinburghzoo.org.uk/plan-your-visit/day-planner/pokemongo-at-edinburgh-zoo/>> [accessed 13 February 2020].

⁴⁰ ‘Edinburgh Taxi Firm Offers Tours to Pokemon Go Players Looking to Gain an Edge’, *Herald*, 23 July 2016. <<https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14638615.edinburgh-taxi-firm-offers-tours-to-pokemon-go-players-looking-to-gain-an-edge/>> [accessed 13 February 2020].

time in search of a Jigglypuff’.⁴¹ On the other hand, the strategic capitalisation of Pokémon Go by Edinburgh Zoo and Central Taxis indicates the possibilities for a form of reverse gamification: that businesses can use their proximity to, or presence within, the game to diversify their income stream. The “real world” versus “virtual world” argument is thus very limiting, with these brief examples and anecdotes providing evidence of the overlap in social, cultural, and spatial meanings between the augmented Pokémon world and the physical environments mapped by the game. It confirms, too, that even seemingly playful and ostensibly apolitical maps are inherently political, and that this is particularly noticeable when a digital space is superimposed on a physical space. In the first set of case studies in Chapter 6, I expand this argument by exploring two forms of digitally located performance spaces that are not mapped to any specific physical location, and that instead utilise their physical locations to encourage their audiences to explore digital spaces.

3. Defining ‘Live’ Digital Performance Spaces

The idea that digital spaces can also be performance spaces is well established: from the notion of the performance of the self on social media platforms to the increasingly popular digital distribution methods of the National Theatre Live, and the mass adoption of sites like YouTube as performance spaces for musicians, comedians, and actors. In this chapter I am interested in the co-opting of pre-existing digital places as spaces for theatre, and the function of digital spaces that have been purposely created for hosting theatre. As the previous sections of this chapter have indicated, digital performances do not exist in a purely digital vacuum – so although I am predominantly examining the architecture of digital performance spaces, I do not – and could not – ignore the physical architecture that contextualises these spaces, too. In this specific section, however, I explore the ways in which a digital performance space can be considered ‘live’.

⁴¹ Emily Crockett, ‘Pokemon Go Is Augmented Reality. Too Bad Reality Is Still Racist.’, *Vox*, 11 July 2016. <<https://www.vox.com/2016/7/11/12149664/pokemon-go-augmented-reality-racist>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

I begin this line of inquiry by returning to Henri Lefebvre. He writes that “[n]ot so many years ago, the word ‘space’ had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty space. [...] With the advent of Cartesian logic, however, space had entered the realm of the absolute. As Object opposed to Subject”.⁴² This re-mapping of space as an object is political, he argues: “[Space] represents the political (in the case of the West, the ‘neo-capitalist’) use of knowledge”.⁴³ Yet, he continues, “[t]o speak of ‘producing space’ sounds bizarre, so great is the sway still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it”.⁴⁴ Lefebvre proposes that the only time a space can be ‘empty’ is when it is abstracted, and argues this by describing the relationship between energy, time and space – three ingredients akin to Brook’s own ingredients for an act of, or site for, theatre. Lefebvre writes,

[w]hen we evoke “energy”, we must immediately note that energy has to be deployed within a space. When we evoke “space”, we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so: the deployment of energy in relation to “points” and within a time frame. When we evoke “time”, we must immediately say what it is that moves or changes therein. Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction; likewise energy and time.⁴⁵

Here, he argues that energy needs a spatial perimeter to produce an effect, but that *space*, too, only works within the perimeter of that effect and within the duration of that effect. Again, this creation of space in conjunction with energy and time bears some resemblance to Brook’s definition of a theatrical space, if not for a vital difference: for Lefebvre, these three elements describe material, social and cultural contexts that make any space inherently meaningful, rather than empty of meaning, which opposes Brook’s suggestion of a space that is empty until it is filled by intentional action.

⁴² Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 1.

⁴³ Lefebvre, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Lefebvre, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Lefebvre, p. 15.

I argue that these opposing definitions of space can be mapped onto opposing definitions of liveness. For Brook, the space is not ‘live’ with meaning until the act/ion begins: whilst someone is acting and someone is watching, the act of theatre is “engaged”; prior to, and presumably after this act, the space is ‘empty’. Lefebvre’s definition of space, however, does not rely on a performer announcing, verbally or otherwise, that an act is ‘beginning’ for a space to exist. His concept of space is broader, material and contextual: it relies not on individual acts, but that the concept of space as a Lefebvorean Object – something mappable and measurable – means that there can be no such thing as an ‘empty’ space. Rather, space is always meaningful, but that meaning is tied to the role of energy and time. Building on this, I argue that liveness considered in isolation is an empty abstraction. What would it mean, then, for ‘liveness’ not to be wholly absent until an act is “engaged”, but in fact fluid, mappable and measurable, and tied to notions of energy and time?

To answer these questions, it is useful to look at how Chris Goode, in *The Forest and the Field*, uses space as a metaphor for, and definition of, theatre. Goode’s understanding of the relationship between theatre and space is akin to Carlon’s as Goode maintains that “an actor is always on-stage”, thus, wherever the ‘action’ is, is where the performance is.⁴⁶ However, he strongly disagrees with Brook’s “empty space”, writing that his intention as a theatre maker is to “create places, as *opposed to* spaces; to make work that people could really live inside: not visit, in a state of holiday, or peer into from the temporary exile of some theoretical ‘beyond’ space, but inhabit fully and creatively” (original emphasis).⁴⁷ The idea of theatre as an act of place-creation, generating places in which people could “really live”, is an explicit riff by Goode on the kind of liveness found in a-liveness, the lived-in quality of a comfortable home, and the idea of ‘liveness’ that is so central to the notion of performance. It is reminiscent, too, of Machon’s definition of immersion as an environment in which a person can be fully *praesent*. The precise qualities of this lived-in-ness which Goode advocates are unclear, but his arguments regarding the qualities of a “live”

⁴⁶ Chris Goode, *The Forest and the Field: Changing Theatre in a Changing World* (London: Oberon Books, 2015), p. 69.

⁴⁷ Goode, p. 52.

performance space revolve around three key elements: togetherness, specificity, and simulation.

For Goode, the importance of “togetherness” in a “live” performance space is based on collaboration. He writes, “no matter how variant or atomised that togetherness may be or seem [it] is part of the complex of theatre, and the collaboration it represents is part of the livedness, the liveability, of the place that theatre takes”.⁴⁸ This broad definition of togetherness is less, it appears, about a prescribed form of creative relationship, but about possibility: that there is space, specifically, to nurture different experiences of sharing space with others. This relates to his argument about specificity: Goode argues that the ways theatre is “conceived, made, presented, represented and documented [...] tend towards a minimizing of the work’s capacity of specificity – that is, the precision and sensitivity of its active consequential liveness”.⁴⁹ This is pertinent, because it reveals that Goode’s definition of a “live” space is rooted in that space’s ability to respond to a performance, or vice versa – much as Machon placed this emphasis on the audience member’s own agency within a performance.

Goode explains that much of making a performance performable – and, implicitly, repeatable – involves taking away from it the potential for “active consequential” change, a state that he considers to be “liveness”. There is tension in his use of specificity, as we might imagine that specificity in itself is rigid and prescriptive. Goode, however, uses it in the sense that a performance may find a new specificity in each iteration; a specificity of place – rather than performance – that makes it sensitive and open to mutation. The third quality that is integral to Goode’s understanding of a “live” place of performance, or the “live” place that a performance can make – these are two different things – is simulation. He writes that “audiences are often extraordinarily sensitive to the differences between the actually live and the merely imitative, and to them, on these terms, the signs of liveness that they love will almost always show up in moments of (what is taken to be) failure or unforeseen excess”.⁵⁰ This statement is contradictory: in the first clause he claims that audiences can distinguish between what is live and what is imitative – although these two states

⁴⁸ Goode, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Goode, p. 78.

⁵⁰ Goode, p. 73.

need not be mutually exclusive – and then, in the second, he undermines the audience’s ability to distinguish liveness from a simulation of liveness by suggesting that an audience is unable to recognise true failure. He could be arguing, on the other hand, that there is no such thing as “failure”, but this bracketed phrase, “what is taken to be”, implies that it is redundant to assume that all audience members have the same barometer for a binary value judgement that sets a clearly demarcated category of “liveness” against its equally clearly demarcated opposite, “imitation”.

Ultimately, though, Goode is not describing the place that theatre *is*, but rather describing the place that theatre *makes*. I will look at both kinds of theatrical places in this chapter, and will take Goode’s qualities of a *live, lived* place made by theatre and apply them to the digital places where theatre is. In order to consider the material realities of the location of a digital performance, be that location digital or physical, I need to distinguish between the space created by the performance and the space in which the performance is held. I do not conceive of these spaces as ideologically separate, however, and they necessarily influence and shape each other, but for the purpose of my argument this differentiation is important. So, in the case studies which follow, I take Lefebvre’s concept of space as Object, meaningfully tied to energy and time, and Goode’s suggestion of a site-specificity in theatre that is concerned with a heightened capacity for active adaptation, based on the specifics of the site, to explore a broad variety of digital performance places and spaces and the performances that take place within them. Moreover, although this chapter is predominantly focused on the architecture *within* the places and spaces used for digital performance in Edinburgh and Berlin, I do not – and could not – analyse these performances without also considering the physical architectures and infrastructures, spaces and places, that make these performances possible.

Chapter 6: Case Studies in Virtual Architecture

1. Hospitality and Navigation in Digitally Located Performances

In this first set of case studies, I examine two plays that at first glance appear very different: *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran*, by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley, which uses Instagram to discuss extreme socio-economic divides in Iran and the legacy of the Revolution, and *Verirrten sich im Wald*, a mixed-reality retelling of Hansel and Gretel by the youth branch of the Deutsches Theater. I bring these two plays together to discuss the ways in which they create and utilise digital spaces alongside traditional, physical performance spaces and the importance of hospitality and navigation in guiding their audiences between these spaces.

Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran, created by Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley, premiered at the Traverse during the 2019 Festival Fringe, and was performed via YouTube in lieu of a tour during the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2020.¹ As the YouTube iteration of the play was different to the original version in structure and content, as well as its digital location, I focus my analysis on the version of the play that was performed in Edinburgh. A sequel of sorts to *The Believers are but Brothers*, which I discussed in Chapter 4, the play similarly encourages its audiences to participate in the performance using their smartphones. However, whilst *Believers* used WhatsApp as a private chatroom for invited members, purportedly an intended function of the app, *Rich Kids* uses Instagram as a stage, distorting and restructuring the affordances of the image-based social media platform to suit the play's narrative. The play itself discusses portraiture and the aesthetics of power, the legacy of the Iranian Revolution and, as the title suggests, the architecture and history of shopping malls in the capital. But *Rich Kids* is a play about *time*: it experiments with linear and non-linear narrative structures, inviting the audience to conceptualise deep time and consider the archaeological ramifications of the Anthropocene. In this case study, I analyse the unusual ways in which Alipoor and Housley re-purpose

¹ I attended *Rich Kids* on 7 August 2019 and watched the YouTube livestream on 29 June 2020.

Instagram’s digital architecture to create a digital space that is specific to the play and a play that is site-specific to the app.

The first encounter between the play and its audiences begins in the foyer of the (physical) venue in which it is staged. Front-of-House staff speak to those waiting to be seated, handing out pieces of paper printed with a set of instructions for accessing the venue’s WiFi, for downloading the Instagram app if necessary and detailing how to find and follow the Instagram account (@richkids...) created for the performance. The instructions explain that, although engaging with the performance in this way is not compulsory, it is highly recommended. These instructions are repeated by the venue’s staff once the audience is fully seated and reiterated by Alipoor at the beginning of the performance. He also provides a crash-course in navigating Instagram for anyone unfamiliar. The audience was provided with far more detailed guidance on navigating between the physical and digital spaces of the play than in the brief technological explanation at the beginning of *Believers* – presumably because even if a person has not used WhatsApp before, the flow of the conversation and the typing functionalities are sufficiently similar to the text messaging affordances of other popular applications.

Instagram, on the other hand, is more complicated. Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield and Crystal Abidin, the editors of *Instagram (2020)*, write that “Instagram is more than one thing: it is an app; it is a series of programs and algorithms; it is a gigantic database of images, videos, captions, comments, geolocative tags, location tags, likes, emoji and more and more items over time”.² They argue that it is more productive to conceive of Instagram as an “ecology”, given how many “emergent practices [employ] the technical and communicative possibilities of the platform outside of what is prescribed within their initial design”, notably including a surge of e-commerce on the site, from the ubiquitous Influencer culture to ‘follower’-buying, bots and promotional filters.³ Leaver, Highfield and Abidin’s point that there is no ‘one’ way to navigate or use the app is supported by the sheer scale of the platform: Instagram has more than a billion users at the time of writing. So, although it is

² Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Newark: Polity Press, 2020), p. 17.

³ Leaver et al., p. 58.

commonly understood within media and technology studies that social media platforms are used in a diversity of ways and rarely simply as the developers intended, Instagram's global reach and myriad potential uses are particularly notable. Alipoor's quick tour through the elements of Instagram used in *Rich Kids* is essential to the success of the production: despite the app's ubiquity, it would be easy for a first-time user to lose their way within its structure.

The play is performed by Alipoor and Peyvand Sadeghian, who take turns to walk their audiences through the online spaces of the show. They begin with the grid – “the square frames synonymous with Instagram” – which chronicles a user's uploaded photographs in chronological order, with the most recent uploads at the top.⁴ In *Rich Kids*, however, they note: “A normal account would start now and go back and back [...]. Ours starts now and goes back, into the rest of the show.” This “going back” to go forwards in *literal* time, to reach the end of the play, is just one way in which *Rich Kids* distorts Instagram's in-built sense of chronology. The grid of the account created specifically for the play is the main digital stage for *Rich Kids*, starting “now” – the moment of the play's commencement – and travelling through their narrative, as the audience scrolls further down the grid. However, the narrative told on the play's grid is far from linear: the narrative revolves around a car crash, but jumps forwards and backwards in time – sometimes one thousand years in the past, sometimes just a week before the crash – in order to contextualise the crash within Iranian history. The crash itself is a real event: Mohammad Hossein Rabbani-Shirazi, the son of a prominent Iranian Ayatollah and grandson of a well-known revolutionary, and his girlfriend Parivash Akbarzadeh were both killed when their Porsche hit a kerb at 120 miles per hour in 2015. The accident sparked a conversation, in Iran and across the world, about the country's extreme, post-revolution divide between the rich and the poor. *The Guardian* spoke to a homeless man named Yaqoub in its coverage, who asked: “Wasn't the revolution supposed to help us, the destitute?”⁵ The same article also references Instagram and the site's popular hashtag #richkidsoftehran – after which the play is titled – as an example of extreme displays of wealth in the capital.

⁴ Leaver et al., p. 13.

⁵ Tehran Bureau, ‘How a Fatal Car Crash in Iran Exposed Growing Anger towards Super-Rich’, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/may/15/irans-unequal-revolution-income-disparity>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

The author notes, too, that after Akbarzadeh's death her Instagram page became a "clearing house" for conversations of this nature.⁶ This contextualises Alipoor and Housley's choice to use Instagram within *Rich Kids*: the discussions raised by the play are already playing out on the app, and the show makes use of this.

After introducing the function of the Grid, Alipoor and Sadeghian turn their attention to hashtags. The play uses two: #richkidsofiran and #mallwave, and they are positioned prominently on the show's Instagram profile. On Instagram, hashtags are clickable and function like a search engine: clicking on #mallwave, for instance, brings up all the posts across the platform that have been tagged accordingly. In Bossetta's *Digital Architecture*, he describes hashtags as part of the "functionality" of the site, placing them in the same category as hyperlinks and gifs. I argue, however, that hashtags should be considered a key element of Instagram's searchability, which Bossetta organises under "network structure" in his analysis of the site.⁷ The searchability, and thus visibility, of hashtags has led to the creation of communities that unite under certain tags, and two of these communities are explored within the play. The first hashtag, #richkidsofiran, is used early on in the performance as a visual aid and a literal introduction to Iran's hyper-wealthy youth, who use the app to display their glamorous lifestyles and luxury goods, as *The Guardian* notes in the article cited above.

The second hashtag, #mallwave, reveals a very different kind of community: it is used to collect images and film footage of shopping malls in the 1980s and 1990s and designed to create nostalgia in the viewer or, as Alipoor explains in the play, to provide younger Instagram users with an insight into capitalism and consumerism before online shopping took hold. The audience is invited to explore this hashtag – by clicking on it and scrolling down, through all the user-contributed content – at a later point in the performance, when Alipoor and Sadeghian are discussing the shopping mall as a conceptual descendant of the ancient marketplace. They argue that these social, public places of trade and exchange have long been examined as markers of human progress, just as portraiture has long been a symbol of wealth and power. The

⁶ Tehran Bureau.

⁷ Bossetta, p.8.

inference, then, is that Instagram is both the shopping mall and means of portraiture in our current moment: a place to gather, witness, buy and sell, craft an image, create a community, wield power. It is the epitome of a digital public space, by the metrics proposed by theorists from Carlson to Lefebvre and Massey. *Rich Kids* is, then, following in a long tradition of re-purposing public space as a performance space, while drawing attention to the elements within the space that already constitute performance. In this sense, the hashtags within the play are used as secondary stages, with the audience led on a site-specific promenade-style experience through the app. The editors of *Instagram* describe hashtags as functioning like locations, writing that these “locations can be cities and neighbourhoods, but also landmarks and businesses [...]. Even if not represented cartographically [...] the experience of space has been remediated through the cultures, practices, and visual aesthetics of Instagram”.⁸ The fact that these hashtags and the communities that exist within them are ‘real’, rather than bespoke creations for the play’s narrative, creates a sensation of tourism. Unless the audience members regularly interact with these hashtags, they are genuinely ‘visiting’ these marked locations within Instagram’s vast digital space as voyeurs, in a manner similar to the map-app performances I analyse in the second set of these case studies.

Instagram’s ‘Live’ function was introduced in January 2017, with the ability to save the live video to the user’s profile being added two months later.⁹ It provides the opportunity for the user to ‘go live’, to broadcast live video shot from their phone to their Instagram followers. These ‘lives’ are given preferential treatment within the app: when an account goes ‘live’, it is promoted at the top of the feeds of those that follow the account. However, a ‘live’ only remains in an account’s ‘story’ for 24 hours, before it is archived within that account’s profile. For the editors of *Instagram*, this indicates “a recognition of the value of impermanent content, of user practices that do not privilege an exhaustive archive of everything posted”.¹⁰ They also note that it creates several different temporalities within the same site, arguing that “even the idea of Stories [where the ‘lives’ are situated, within the app] as ephemeral is complicated by

⁸ Leaver et al., p. 70.

⁹ Leaver et al., p. 169.

¹⁰ Leaver et al., pp. 67–68.

the platform, its archival options and the ability to share others' Stories".¹¹ This acknowledgement of the 'live' function's impermanent status confirms that 'live', here, is being used in Phelan's sense: it means limitation and exclusivity. However, it also confirms that there is no one single 'live' moment: these 'lives' overlap and exist as archives, even during the moment of broadcast.

During the performances of *Rich Kids* in Edinburgh, the 'lives' took place on a different part of the Traverse's stage as well as within the function's designated location on Instagram. While broadcasting her face, Sadeghian moves behind on-stage screens, obscuring herself physically from the audience. She speaks into the camera whilst Alipoor types in the chat-box function, and this overlapping, disjointed presentation style is disconcerting and difficult to concentrate on. The audience members are asked to turn up the volume on their respective mobile phones, too, so each phone's individual broadcast clashes with its neighbour's. This cacophony of 'now-ness', with each broadcast a fraction of a second different from the next, proves that there is no such thing as 'now' in a conceptual sense: by the time 'now' has happened on one phone, it is already in the past on another. Within the play, Alipoor describes the 'live' function as such: "It's not necessarily about communicating from a different place, but from a different time." In narrative terms, the 'lives' discuss the less linear elements of *Rich Kids*'s story, departing from the historical analysis of Mohammad and Parivash's crash and, for instance, speculating on the archaeological records that the Anthropocene era will likely leave in the earth. It is particularly appropriate, and no coincidence, that these narratives of decay and deep time are discussed through the specific impermanence of the 'live' tool, an illustration of the complexity of Instagram's relationship with time. The editors argue that "the *Insta* of the platform [...] is becoming a misnomer", noting that

posts in a user's feed are temporally positioned in relation to the current moment: they were posted "4 minutes ago", "7 hours ago", "2 days ago", "1 week ago", and so on. [...] The decay in temporal resolution over time means that the clearest information about a post's appearance accompanies

¹¹ Leaver et al., p. 57.

one that is only seconds or minutes old; as the hours and days pass, when it was posted becomes less discernible.¹²

These “multiple temporalities exist alongside one another [...] with varying levels of visibility and permanence” within the same public place but are also subject to the global time zone of the user. This complicates several of the theoretical approaches to the time-and-place of performance that I discussed earlier in this chapter.¹³ Russell et al argued that in a networked culture “the lack of spatial, social and temporal boundaries make it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts”, but here it is the hyper-specificity, the almost individualised approach to documenting space and time that assists Instagram users in forming sub-communities within the platform. Moreover, *Rich Kids* uses the site’s fragmented sense of time to both unify and individualise their audiences: the audience is physically united, within the physical setting of the theatre, but device-specific delays make visible each audience member’s unique perspective. Moreover, the play reveals the ways in which Instagram creates spaces *through* time. Just as Lefebvre argued that energy, time and space must co-exist if these elements are not to be abstracted, on Instagram time is relative to energy (i.e., the user generated content uploaded to the site) and this relationship creates unique spaces (within Instagram as a named, mappable *place*) for users to communicate.

Rich Kids is site-specific to Instagram in a way that resonates with Goode’s definition of live theatre, as it is built specifically for the spaces within the platform *and* co-opts and reacts to those spaces within the moment of performance. The relationship between its digital and its physical venues, however, is another form of site-specificity, as there must be a cohesive relationship between the two. At the Traverse, during *Rich Kids*’ month-long run, the venue’s basement theatre made it difficult to maintain a reliable source of WiFi. Without this infrastructural support, the performance’s fluid dynamic between its physical and digital stages was challenged in ways that were also site-specific, and in a manner that was detrimental to the narrative. This is to say that although Goode places heavy emphasis on the importance of

¹² Leaver et al., pp. 70–71.

¹³ Leaver et al., p. 73.

specificity to his definition of liveness, this site-specific issue is a genuine challenge to important, live, elements of the play.

In June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Rich Kids* was performed wholly online in lieu of a country-wide tour. The physical part of the play was transferred to YouTube, where Alipoor and Sadeghian performed straight to camera, on a split screen. This element of the performance was pre-recorded, but the prompts to the audience to interact on Instagram remained the same – and the ‘lives’ functioned just as they did at the Traverse the year before, with the actors broadcasting from their phones. This hybrid model of performance not only blurs the line between performance and performance documentation, but it poses a challenge to any ontological definitions of liveness that do not include performances in digital spaces. As such, I argue that Instagram not only provides a stage for *Rich Kids* but a stage in a busy, vibrant public place that, due to its enormous global community, never sleeps. Instagram is never *not* live, in the sense that its processes are always in motion, but the play takes specific advantage of the way in which certain functions of Instagram are labelled *as* live. At the end of the show, Alipoor tells the audience, “We’ve deleted the feed you’ve been following. Some things we dig up and some things we bury.” At this point, the images are wiped from the grid and, one by one, the audience members are blocked from accessing the profile. This makes explicit that they are using the Instagram profile as a set that can be taken down, post-show, rather than as a fixed profile for a person or organisation, and its closure mirrors the audience members’ departure from the physical space.

1.2 CyberRäuber: Lost in the Virtual Woods

Verirrten sich im Wald (Lost in the Forest) is a re-telling of Hansel and Gretel by the Deutsches Theater’s youth company (Junges DT) and was first performed in March 2019; it then remained in the theatre’s repertoire with a single performance each month. The play combined virtual and augmented reality technologies with a physically present cast and a stage set up in the Deutsches Theater’s Box, a small black box theatre with a capacity of eighty people. The show was directed by Robert Lehniger, a regular director at the Deutsches Theater, but created in close collaboration with CyberRäuber, a duo that specialises in theatre and virtual reality.

Comprising programmer Marcel Karnapke and data analysis entrepreneur Björn Lengers, CyberRäuber was created in 2016 when they received funding from the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung to debut a virtual reality adaptation of Schiller's *Die Räuber* (from which they drew their name) at Berlin's annual "Theater und Netz" (Theatre and Web) conference that same year. Since then, their work has included a laser-scanned, virtual recreation of the elaborate set built for Theater Dortmund's *Die Borderline Prozession*: the virtual experience permitted audience members to explore the set at various stages of its construction, with 360-degree films of certain scenes available to watch within specific rooms of the set. This experience was named *Memories of Borderline*, positioning it as a related-but-different work to *Die Borderline Prozession*, and both shows were present at the 2017 Theatertreffen, following Theater Dortmund's invitation to perform that year. Since then, CyberRäuber have become some of Germany's foremost creatives working with theatre and mixed-reality technologies. They have been employed by opera houses, presented their work at prestigious conferences and collaborated with the Akademie für Theater und Digitalität (Academy for Theatre and Digitality) in Dortmund. Although *Verirrt sich im Wald* is not their first major work, it provides an insight into the relation between space and place in their theatre-making process.

The play was first workshopped in January 2019, with a range of participants aged between 7 and 70 invited to take part.¹⁴ These participants were encouraged to explore the elements of the fairy-tale through a variety of activities, including baking gingerbread biscuits shaped to look like VR headsets, constructing a three-dimensional witch's cottage out of string, and using Tiltbrush, a virtual reality software, to imagine what the woods in the tale could look like. I sat in on one such session and witnessed the participants using Tiltbrush to build a 3D forest that contained flora and fauna created by the group. Tiltbrush functions like a three-dimensional sketchbook: a user begins with a blank page, in this case another sort of empty space, and they wear a headset and use a handset to control the range of creative options available to them, much like an artist's palette or a builder's toolbox. Using different brush strokes, textures and shapes, the user can create three dimensional drawings by moving through

¹⁴ I sat in on this workshop, but was unable to attend the finished production.

and interacting with the space: for instance, to draw a tree a user may need to use their whole body, standing on their tiptoes to create the highest branches and crouching low to the floor to detail the roots.

However, this empty space, as I have discussed throughout this chapter, is not empty of context or meaning. In order to set up the Tiltbrush software, much like setting up any VR experience in which a user is likely to walk around, the boundaries of the virtual area must be configured at the start, in specific relation to the physical space that the user is in. By laying this “guardian boundary”, or interrelation, between the physical and the virtual, a user can avoid walking into a wall or otherwise harming themselves physically. It also creates an inverse kind of map, a mapping of negative (in lieu of ‘empty’) space that is then ready to be built upon, like clearing space on a table for a puzzle to be put together. This mapping of the virtual onto the physical highlights how interrelated the two media are, but also illustrates how contextual and subjective any practice of mapping can be. Once this virtual blank space was established, marked out by tape on the floor in order to protect the VR-users from the rest of the busy rehearsal space, a screen was used to project each user’s view from within the virtual space so that the rest of the group could comment upon, praise and critique their creations.

In an interview I conducted in February 2019 with CyberRäuber for *Exberliner*, Karnapke reflected on the importance of demonstrating the social, outward-looking potential of virtual reality, a medium often publicly perceived as introspective and anti-social. “Instead of just consuming virtual reality they could build something,” he says of the workshops, “and that makes virtual reality an extremely social reality.”¹⁵ The collaborative approach to building virtual reality set design, driven by play and experimentation, creates a community – but also makes an imaginative *space* within an institutional yet public *place* like the Deutsches Theater. The suggestion made by Russel et al, that “networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies [...] they are simultaneously a space and a collection of people”, rings particularly true in relation to *Verirrten sich im Wald*.¹⁶ So too does their description

¹⁵ Katie Hawthorne, ‘Lost in a Virtual Forest’, *Exberliner*, 2019, p. 31.

¹⁶ Russell et al., p. 41.

of the functionality of architecture in digital or virtual spaces, in which “architecture shapes and is shaped by practice in mediated environments just as in physical spaces”.¹⁷ The particularly pertinent point of difference, however, is the temporary status of this virtual reality forest as a collaborative experiment. The forest, as created by the workshop participants, was not used in the version of the play that was made available to the public. This is not to say that the participants were not also members of a ‘public’ – these participants were not hand-picked, consisted of people who had responded to the theatre’s advertisement about the workshops. However, although these workshops were free to attend, they were time-consuming, and no doubt this prevented some would-be participants from attending. It is fair to say that the workshop participants were likely regular attendees of the theatre and that once the self-selected group came together to work on the play, this group became separated from the theatre’s larger public. The Deutsches Theater, despite its name, is not a ‘national’ theatre; it is one of four state theatres that receives funding from the Federal State of Berlin. As such, the virtual forest created during the workshops can be considered the result of a public collaboration, but it is not a truly *public* space due to its impermanence and restricted access to a specific group of people, despite its publicly funded status. In this sense, the forest is an example of Lefebvre’s concept of space as Object, explicitly tied to (in this case, limited) time and energy.

That said, the workshop was not explicitly concerned with the creation of public spaces. Rather it offered the time and space to experiment with virtual tools and to imagine how the Deutsches Theater’s wider public might experience the Hansel and Gretel story in a mixed-reality environment. Whilst the crowd-sourced forest was not used in the final iteration of the play, the concept behind it remained: the ethos of sharing and sociability, as well as witnessing and being witnessed, was embedded in the performed version of *Verirrten sich im Wald*. So, too, was this flexible, playful way of working with and creating space. Virtual and augmented realities were used in the performance, with the transitions between realities facilitated by the passing around and sharing of headsets and tablets between audience members. This method of distributing the access to VR and AR was intended to encourage a relaxed approach to

¹⁷ Russell et al., p. 55.

technology within the theatre space and to make the use of the tools optional in case an audience member would rather opt out. Lengens describes the dramaturgical use of the technologies within the performance as, first and foremost, experiential and emotional: “So these children are lost in the woods. But how would that feel? Even experiencing [via a VR headset] just 20 seconds of being in a dark forest with only a flashlight is enough. A glimpse is all you need. Your imagination will take care of the rest.”¹⁸

This hope that brief virtual experiences might expand the spatial awareness of their audience members during the production was noted by the critical response to the play. Theatre critic Konrad Kögler, for *Das Kulturblog*, wrote that the play “lädt das Publikum ein, einen neuen Blick auf das Märchen und die andere Seite zu werfen. Denn was es im Innern des Hexenhäuschens zu entdecken gibt, ist eine Frage der Perspektive” (invites the audience in, to take a new look at the fairy tale and show another side to it. For what’s inside the witch’s house is a question of perspective).¹⁹ This spatial language that revolves around the uncovering of new perspectives is mirrored in his description of the mixed reality tools as the key to the proceedings: “die quer durch die Publikumsreihen gegeben werden und die eindrucksvollsten Szenen bieten” (which are given out across the audience’s rows and offer the most impactful scenes).²⁰ Strikingly, the reviewer employs language that suggests hospitality: *to invite* and *to offer*. This captures the social, sociable intent behind the play as it was demonstrated in the workshops and is reminiscent, too, of Goode’s argument for a theatre that creates a space to be *lived in*: the review suggests a sense of welcome, agency and adaptability for the audience members within both physical and virtual spaces.

Karnapke describes CyberRäuber’s method of creating theatre as starting from a conceptualisation of the space as a kind of “hyperstage”, in the same way that hyperlinks are portals for travel on the internet: they consider the distribution of mixed-reality technologies to be a way of offering alternative spaces and sensations within a

¹⁸ Hawthorne, ‘Lost in a Virtual Forest’, p. 31.

¹⁹ Konrad Kögler, ‘Verirrten sich im Wald’, *Das Kulturblog*, 30 March 2019.

<<https://daskulturblog.com/2019/03/30/verirrten-sich-im-wald-deutsches-theater-kritik/>> [accessed 7 November 2019].

²⁰ Kögler.

theatrical experience. The scenes or “glimpses” offered by the virtual reality headsets, for instance, are not considered extraneous or secondary to the performance on stage in the Deutsches Theater’s Box, but a tool to embellish and complicate the narrative as it moves between a variety of realities. The hyperstage concept itself creates the idea of a non-hierarchical network of stages that contains points of intersection, process and meeting, to paraphrase Massey’s fluid notion of socially constituted space. Karnapke’s concept of a hyperstage could also apply to Alipoor and Housley’s use of Instagram in *Rich Kids*: both plays navigate multiple, simultaneous performance spaces that are a combination of digital and physical. Importantly, both plays also treat the invitation to participate across these spaces as a vital, integral element of the show, from *Rich Kids*’ navigational introduction to Instagram at the start of the performance to the opt-in, sharing approach to passing the headsets around the space in *Verirrten sich im Wald*.

Blended realities in the theatre are not new, in the sense that theatre has long been used as a forum for imagining ‘What if...’, but both *Rich Kids* and *Verirrten* make explicit and tangible the multiple realities (physical, digital and imaginative) that can co-exist and overlap within a single performance. More than that, they make these realities into imbricating *spaces* within the single *place* of performance. These digital tools (Instagram, virtual reality and augmented reality) vary in their relation to space and place: Instagram is arguably a *place* in itself, whilst VR and AR tools are more simply conceived of as mapping, or space-making, tools. Yet they function similarly within these plays by enabling the social creation and constitution of new spaces for performance purposes, as well as the literal spatial expansion of the room in which the physical staging of the performance takes place. Both plays also illustrate the interrelation, rather than separation, of physical and virtual space: what happens in one space feeds into the other, and vice versa. At no point is this more clearly illustrated than when, in *Rich Kids*, the audiences’ phones broadcast the Instagram ‘Lives’ and each individual phone, held in the hands of each individual audience member, is a fraction of a second out of time with its neighbour. This demonstrates a digital and physical unity, as well as a proliferation of subjective perspectives, that is, dramaturgically and narratively, at the heart of both plays: the explicit use of a multiplicity of digital spaces to view an event from multiple perspectives.

2. Pedestrians and Performers: Digitally Mapping the City

The mapping app-based performances in this case study could have fitted into Part 2 of this thesis, as their app-based delivery status certainly qualifies them as digitally mediated performances: they rely on the bodily contributions of their audience members in order to *take place* – that loaded phrase, in this case, transforming into a stage the participant’s body (as Giannachi describes and I discuss in Part 2), as well the cities that they inhabit. In this section I focus on the relationship between these performances and the architecture – both physical and digital – that they rely upon. There has been a proliferation of digitally aided walking-tour-adjacent performances in both Edinburgh and Berlin since I began my research in 2016. In this case study I compare the Fruitmarket Gallery’s *Night Walk for Edinburgh*, ToasterLab’s *Transmission*, Binge Culture’s *Ancient Shrines* and Rimini Protokoll’s *Do’s and Don’ts* and *Remote Mitte*, taking as the basis of my comparison three main elements: audience labour, the digital mapping of and interaction with a city, and the relationships between these performances, their sources of funding, and the arts infrastructure within the cities where they take place.

Between them, these performances use augmented reality, audio instructions, filmed footage, screened images, digital mapping, geocaching and even a modified van. They share an emphasis on navigation, exploration, histories and the use of maps overlaid by personal narratives to uncover an ‘unseen’ element within urban landscapes. I examine the maps and mapping processes in each performance, as well as the casting of the audience-member as ‘explorer’, in the context of the power dynamics present in notions of citizenship, tourism, community and voyeurism. From new cartographer Foucault’s conceptualisation of power in relation to surveillance and visibility to Harley’s vital *Deconstructing the Map*, it is understood that maps create power hierarchies by leveraging knowledge, visibility and control. Anahit Behrooz writes that “[t]he map’s very methods of representation and the ways in which the elements of the landscape are included, excluded, categorised and simplified, produce

a knowledge of the land which in turn creates power”.²¹ She argues that, for Harley, it is “imperative that cartographic theory take a deconstructionist approach to the study of the map in order to break the assumed link between reality and representation that the map presents, which will in turn reveal the ‘invisible or implied’ systems of power at work in the map”.²² For the purposes of this thesis – in which I do not have the space for a full exploration of the socio-political ramifications of cartography – I analyse the maps in this case study with Behrooz’s statement in mind, and examine them for the ways in which their “methods of representation” include, exclude, categorise and simplify the landscape, understanding that the knowledge that maps produce “creates power” in itself.

2.1 Individual Instructions: Maps for Isolation

Night Walk for Edinburgh (2019) and *Transmission* (2017) both used the city of Edinburgh as a set for digitally aided promenade-style performances, experienced by a single audience member at a time. Both of these solo experiences seek to separate the audience member from the broader public for narrative purposes, and this is reflected by the kinds of map they make of Edinburgh as well as the navigational tools provided to the audience member. Jen Harvie, in *Theatre & The City*, writes that walking performances of this nature “cast the audience member as the central performer” and this casting decision draws clear parallels between this chapter and the individualising strategies on sale within the experience economy, as I explained in Part 2.²³ For Harvie, the casting of the audience member as a performer means that the theatre maker

can be absent; the maker or company provides a script, most commonly as an audio recording, that the audience member enacts alone, among passing pedestrians. The audience member becomes a solo performer and is deliberately isolated in the city, inviting reflection on the ways that the city

²¹ Anahit Behrooz, ‘Mapping Middle-Earth: Tracing Environmental and Political Narratives in the Literary Geographies and Cartographies of J.R.R Tolkien’s Legendarium’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2020), p. 29.

²² Behrooz.

²³ Jen Harvie, *Theatre & the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 58.

and communications technologies provide isolation and possible social atomisation or civic encounter and communication.²⁴

The dynamic of isolation and atomisation established here, between the absent theatre maker, the handed-over performance instructions, the audience member-as-isolated-performer and the “passing pedestrians”, is one that I seek to challenge. The split that Harvie describes between a performer and a playwright, for instance, is regularly experienced in the most conventional of theatres and it is often challenged in the performing arts, as it is entirely possible to make a performance *whilst* you perform it. It is unclear who, or what, Harvie holds as the subject or object within this dynamic: whether the subject is the “absent” theatre maker whose instructions structure the audience’s interaction with the city, the audience member who physically carries out those instructions, or if it is the city within which these interactions take place. The evocative image of passing pedestrians in a busy city, separate to the “solo performance” of the audience member, also necessitates discussions of voyeurism and citizenship, as Harvie’s framing implies that the act of spectatorship and performance combined in the audience member – a literal spect-actor – removes them from the role of pedestrian and citizen, if only temporarily.

In *Transmission*, a mixed-reality production created by Canadian company Toasterlab, those “handed-over performance instructions” function as maps to the city but manifest themselves in multiple forms. The play encompasses a bespoke navigational app, an hour-long ‘official’ Fringe performance, a sixteen-part podcast and, reportedly, a street performance, although I was unable to locate it. Described by Toasterlab as a “distributed performance” with the feel of “Arrival meets Pokemon Go”, *Transmission* tells the story of two sisters selected to join an interstellar mission of no return, in order to seek first contact with alien life.²⁵ I focus primarily on the navigational app in this analysis, but it is important to note the sheer breadth of the play’s remit: particularly as the app alone encourages its users to visit over thirty locations around the city of Edinburgh.

²⁴ Harvie, p. 58.

²⁵ Toasterlab, *Transmission* (2017), <<http://toasterlab.com/projects/transmission/>> [accessed 30 July 2020].

The interface functions like Google Maps, in that it provides a bird's-eye view of the city, with the user's location marked in the centre of the screen and a compass arrow at the bottom of the screen. The user is requested to permit the app to access their location data, so when they travel to one of the flagged locations on the map – marked by glowing dots – the user's physical location unlocks augmented reality content specific to that location. The summary of the app on the App Store describes it as

the dossier for transmission, your guide to the world [...]. It delivers the geolocation and access to the related location-based content to audience members as you wander the city. [...] transmission “haunts” Edinburgh with the ghosts of an alternative reality future. Use this app to reveal the back story for the most ambitious project ever undertaken by humans, with the festival as your backdrop.²⁶

However, the map's dual function of “location” and “access” made it complicated and clunky for its users. The fact that “access” to the geocached content was conditional on the user's literal “location” within the city was undoubtedly a factor in the performance's lukewarm critical reception and the low statistics for engagement with some of the more remote geocached locations. The description suggests that the festival will be “your backdrop”, but although many of the locations were clustered within reach of the main Fringe venues, the full geographical reach of the show was that no user could complete it without dedicating at least one whole day to the mission. Within the context of Edinburgh's August Festivals, this is a big request: not only are Edinburgh's roads and streets extremely busy, making navigation much slower than usual, but it asks the audience member for an unusual amount of time and attention. Together, the Edinburgh International Festival and the Festival Fringe comprise the world's largest celebration of the performing arts and there are thousands of other activities available on any given day.

These factors explain the user engagement graphs made available, post-show, by Toasterlab. The first, titled ‘User Engagement by Experience’, indicates the number

²⁶ *Transmission*. The app is no longer available to download or purchase, but documentation of the app as it existed in 2017 can be found in Toasterlab's ‘Technical Overview’ at <http://toasterlab.com>.

of users who accessed each location over the play's duration and the second shows the number of app users per day, from 5-26 August 2017.²⁷

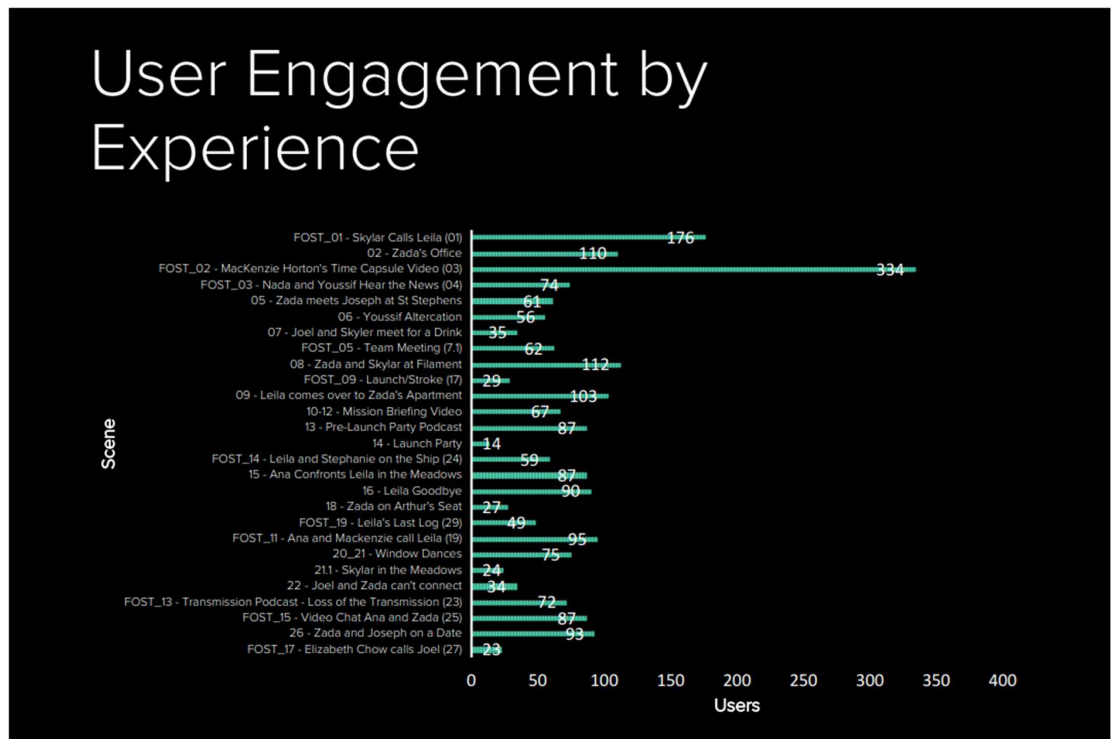


Figure 2: User Engagement by Experience, Toasterlab

²⁷ Toasterlab, *Transmission technical overview-Lower.Pdf*, <http://toasterlab.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/transmission_technical_overview-lower.pdf> [accessed 30 July 2020].

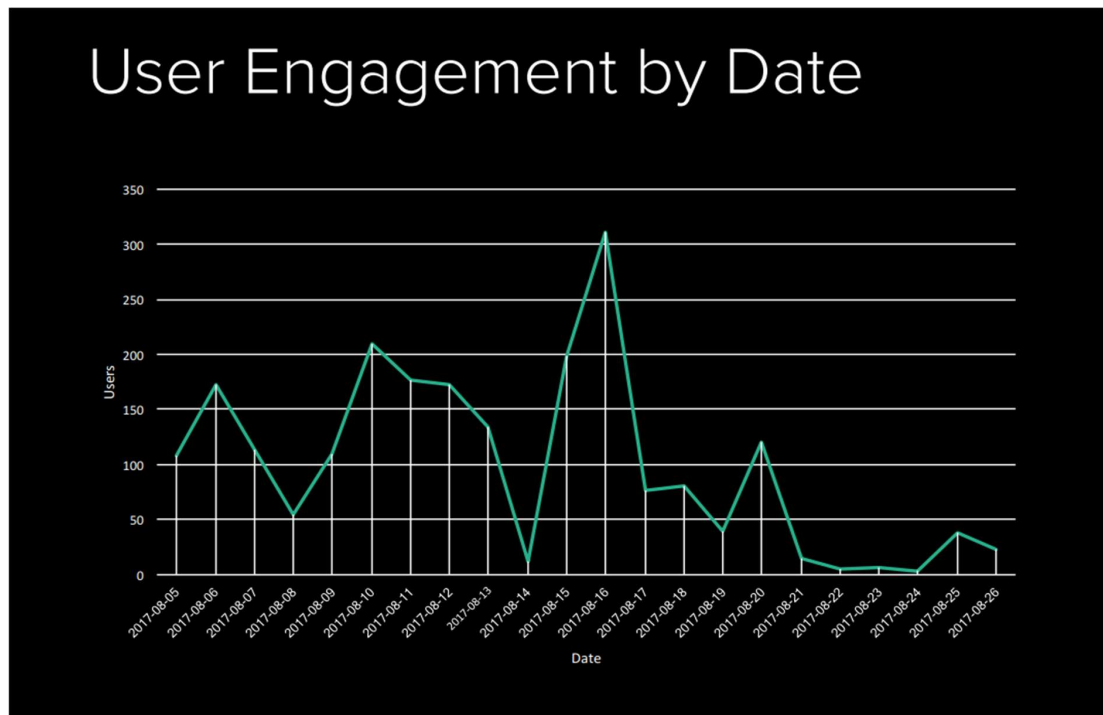


Figure 3: User Engagement by Date, Toasterlab

At the play’s peak, some 300 users accessed the app on a single day, although the data does not make clear what constitutes engagement; it could be simply clicking on the app to open it, rather than engaging with it by visiting the locations or accessing the content. Likewise, the ‘User Engagement by Experience’ graph does not make explicit what constitutes “experience”; if it means that a user has been located in the vicinity of a geotag, that they accessed the content available at that location, or to what extent they ‘engaged’, in a meaningful sense, with that content. It does tell us, however, that one location was considerably more popular than the rest: Location 03, set in the vicinity of the venue in which the ticketed performance of *Transmission* was held. Figure 1 shows that only 27 users visited the geotag on Arthur’s Seat, which could be due to the relative inaccessibility of the rocky inner-city hike for some participants, but also that only 24 users made it to the story’s concluding location point in the Meadows, a flat park in the middle of the city, also located close to the performance venue. Although *Transmission*’s map of Edinburgh seemed superficially inobtrusive – it had a similar aesthetic to Google Maps, with small flashing dots placed upon it – the way in which the digital navigation tool demanded its users structure their

movements within the city, with the threat of missing out on crucial plot points as bait, appeared to be in denial of the physical realities of the city, and particularly the reality of Edinburgh in August.

The app description uses the term “haunt” to describe the way that the digitally located content intersects with the city and this, perhaps inadvertently, speaks to the unnatural behaviour it asks of its audience members. The augmented reality content was filmed to correspond with its geotagged location, so the audience member would watch the cast interacting in the same location from which they were watching it. The precise location of the audience member is required as a ‘ticket’ to access each geotagged performance, and also has the consequence of imbuing the performance with a dual context, across time but in a shared space. The sense that the performers had been there *once*, and that the audience members must be there *later*, in order for the performance to fully take place, both literally and figuratively, is certainly a heightened form of site-specific performance. It is also an additional example of Lefebvre’s concept of space as Object when it is meaningfully tied to energy and time. The energy of the performers, the energy of the audience member and the residual energy of the location itself work together to shape these past and present happenings into an encounter,

However, returning to Goode’s sense of site-specificity, which concerns a heightened capacity for active adaptation based on the specifics, and the reality, of the site, *Transmission* is not a “lived-in” performance. Although the performance *took place* in Edinburgh in several senses, the show was not narratively specific to Edinburgh and nor was it adapted to, or reactive to, the city’s geographic or temporal realities. Although the performance used digital technologies to root itself in the city in more ways than one, the overall effect was as if the city was a set for a show that could take place anywhere: in later years, the play’s narrative and mixed-media approach was applied to Toronto instead, presumably with the scenes re-filmed in specific locations around that city. It is more accurate to describe *Transmission* as *laid over* the city, using a visually accurate map but forcing an unnatural flow throughout the city for its audiences that, ultimately, many users opted out of. The “wandering” of the app’s blurb, similar in sentiment to the description of the discoveries of the Randonauts, is not actually built into the play’s structure, narratively or navigationally

speaking. On the face of it, the ambitious sprawl of location points marked across Edinburgh suggested from the start that *Transmission* treats Edinburgh like an empty performance space, created in the quiet before the beginning of the Fringe, as the pre-recorded content attests, with little regard for the ways in which Edinburgh's spaces, places and publics operate during the time in which the performance was due to take place. In this way, it seems that the performance's disjunction from the city was not for a lack of site-specificity, in Goode's sense, but a lack of time-specificity: *Transmission* treats Edinburgh like an Object rather than a subject, to borrow Lefebvre's phrasing, and in doing so it creates a play that *was there*, once, but before the audiences ever arrived.

Two years later, *Night Walk for Edinburgh* was similarly constructed around pre-recorded, ghostly performances in Edinburgh. Created by artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller in collaboration with the Fruitmarket Gallery and the Edinburgh International Festival, the show took its audience, one at a time, on a circular route through the backstreets of Edinburgh's city centre. Each audience member was given a mobile phone handset and a pair of headphones, through which a binaural soundtrack and a pre-recorded film of the route of the performance were used to direct the participant's movements through the city. The film, recorded in March and July 2019, ahead of the show's August premiere, aimed to create moments of coincidence and juxtaposition between its documentation of the city and each audience member's individual experience in those same locations, and featured performances from several well-known Scottish artists. In a similar way to *Transmission*, these performances were met by the audience in the space in which they took place, but in a different time, with the two temporalities unified through the digital mediation of time and space.

The collaboration between the Fruitmarket and the Edinburgh International Festival came about in part due to the on-going renovations at the gallery, which prevented the Fruitmarket from hosting fine-art exhibitions during the Edinburgh Festivals, but it was also a financially strategic move. *Night Walk* cost over £300,000 to produce and although part of this was sourced from the gallery's usual programming budget, the remaining costs were supplied by the Edinburgh International Festival, which of all the city's annual festivals receives the largest sum from the Creative Scotland regular funding scheme. *Night Walk* is an extremely well-financed project

produced by two of Edinburgh's most influential cultural institutions, but despite this insider-status, Cardiff and Bures Miller sought to present an "outsider's" perspective on the city, and to create an experience that disrupted its audiences' sense of place, rather than reinforcing it. My analysis explores how *Night Walk* aims to situate each participant in a bespoke performance space, rather than in Edinburgh as a *place*, and how the dynamic of disconnection between these two locations is mapped throughout the show, as well as the ways in which it was presented to the public.

The marketing blurb for the show emphasises this dislocation, describing the show as a "merging" of two worlds, with the audience member as the fulcrum:

The image of the street comes up on the iPod screen. It appears that it has been shot in the exact location you are standing in, almost as if it is in real time. A figure walks past on the video as another passes by in the real world, the two realities aligning. The sounds from the headphones are startlingly three-dimensional, further merging the two worlds in front of you.²⁸

It then explains that, by "[f]ollowing Cardiff's voice and walking in her footsteps" you will "[unravel] a disjointed tale [...] layered with history, invention and memories ... which draw[s] you into a world they create alongside your own".²⁹ This clear demarcation between the two "worlds" within the show, the "world" of the artists and the "world" of daily life in Edinburgh, actually appears to suggest a disconnect between the two, rather than a full "merging". Instead, what is foregrounded is the friction between the coincidences that could occur between the filmed content and the unpredictability of a city in motion, noticed (or not) only by a single audience member situated in a precise *place* by *Night Walk*'s directions, but in an imprecise *time*. The marketing blurb, printed on handouts available to audience members, also confirms that disruption is a vital creative impulse. The video performances that 'match' the audience's physical locations are made stranger by their physical absences, and the physical locations made ghostlier by the performances' implied absences. Moreover,

²⁸ The Fruitmarket Gallery, *Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: Night Walk for Edinburgh*, <<https://www.fruitmarket.co.uk/event/night-walk-edinburgh/2019-07-25/>> [accessed 29 November 2019].

²⁹ The Fruitmarket Gallery.

the notion of “real time” is tested, here, by these two competing and overlapping realities; it is essential that the audience ‘keeps up’ with the navigational directions within the show, but it is only the “real time” of factors external to the performance and the audience’s experience that can contribute to the intended sense of disorientation. After all, the “figure walk[ing] past on the video as another passes by in the real world” is only an “alignment” if the street has pedestrians passing by at the precise time that the audience member is there to witness them. That *Night Walk*’s narrative structure is constructed in order to make possible coincidences feel intentional is a mode of creating a performance across “real times”, plural. The performance is documented by the audio-visual content, found in the unintentional ‘performance’ of passers-by, and located in how the solo-performance of each audience member opens up further opportunities for alignments between the two “realities”, all in a manner that Goode might describe as truly “site-specific” due to its intentional lack of specificity.

In a public talk about the show, the Director of the Fruitmarket, Fiona Bradley, described *Night Walk* as “contained in these devices; it runs when we’re here to start it”.³⁰ The idea that the show exists primarily within the headset and handset, and that it is engaged, made live, when the gallery is open to hand out the equipment to an audience member, imbues *Night Walk* with the kind of temporal specificity, a sense of a beginning and an end, that is often associated with liveness in the theatre. However, its temporal relationship to Edinburgh is more complicated. The filmed content was created over several months and despite these gaps in time it presents a coherent, recognisable version of Edinburgh, something which is essential given the film’s navigational function for the audience. However, *Night Walk* premiered in August, during the Festivals, with Bradley explaining that the creators wanted the disruptive effect of the “whole city performing”, an effect achieved by the juxtaposition between the hustle and bustle of Festival hotspots like the Royal Mile and the relative calm of the pre-Festivals video footage.³¹ As the show’s title suggests, *Night Walk* was created to be experienced at dusk: during August, when Edinburgh has long daylight hours, performances ran late into the night. During winter, however, when dusk falls mid-

³⁰ Fiona Bradley, Director’s Talk: *Night Walk* for Edinburgh, 2019.

³¹ Bradley, Director’s Talk.

afternoon in Edinburgh, the Fruitmarket updated the show's running times accordingly. That the show's efficacy is specifically tied to Edinburgh's geographic location is the reason that *Night Walk* does not exist as a download for audiences to experience at their leisure: Bradley explained that the Fruitmarket wanted to ensure that audiences took part only in optimal conditions.

Night Walk is also tied to the city's on-going reality. Bradley's talk likened the show to the refurbishment of the Scotsman Steps, a major project completed by the Fruitmarket in which artist Martin Creed fitted the historical staircase with different marbles from across the world. The Fruitmarket's promotional materials describe the project as in line with the gallery's "mission to make contemporary art freely accessible, bringing it out of the gallery to engage people where they are" and note that the ambitious installation cost over £250,000.³² Bradley described *Night Walk* as a similarly laborious endeavour and "just as permanent", explaining that the artists stipulated its permanency in their contract, and remarking that "it's made for here, and will remain unless the city is drastically altered". That *Night Walk*'s permanency is reliant on Edinburgh remaining visibly and geographically similar to the version of the city documented and mapped within the performance is significant, given that the lifespan of a performance is typically more reliable on factors such as production costs, ticket sales or the availability of the cast. To rely upon a capital city *not* to change or evolve beyond recognition in fact confirms that *Night Walk* is not in fact "site-specific", according to Goode's definition of the term. It is, rather, "specific" to certain qualities of Edinburgh that could evolve beyond the show's capacity.

The marketing materials for *Night Walk* emphasised the show's intention to dislocate experiences of space and place within Edinburgh, but I argue that instead it is Edinburgh itself, rather than the show, that is the disruptive factor. As Lefebvre established, public spaces are shaped by publics. In their analysis of a similar work by Cardiff and Bures Miller, *Ghost Machine* (2005), Eirini Nedelkopolou writes that the "mediat(iz)ed traces" of performance that are created by "[t]echnological corporeality in place of a physical performer" are a tool shared by other notable creators, such as

³² 'The Fruitmarket Gallery Presents Martin Creed at Edinburgh's Scotsman Steps', *e-Flux*, 2 July 2011. <<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/35379/the-fruitmarket-gallery-presents-martin-creed-at-edinburgh-s-scotsman-steps/>> [accessed 26 March 2022].

The Wooster Group and Blast Theory.³³ Whilst this description is an accurate description of the performances captured on video within *Night Walk*, it does not fully encapsulate *Night Walk*'s relationship to Edinburgh: I argue instead that this show is more concerned with the technological corporeality of a physical city in the creation of those mediated traces. It is the mapping of Edinburgh, but twice over – first in the audio-visual documentation and second in the retracing of those steps by the audience member – that creates the opportunity for these ‘traces’ of a city to interact with each other, and *Night Walk* to ‘exist’ as a performance. That this dynamic is reliant on Edinburgh remaining navigationally similar to its documentation suggests that *Night Walk* is situated in a performance *space* of its own mapping, rather than in Edinburgh as a public place. As such, *Night Walk* is frozen in time, as is its mapping of Edinburgh: the place of the performance will continue to evolve, but the space of the performance is a time-portal, even though audience members navigate it in the present.

As I have discussed, both *Night Walk for Edinburgh* and *Transmission* established a disconnect between the narrative, digitally mediated *space* of the performance and the physical reality of Edinburgh as a *place*. To some extent this disconnect was essential to both narratives, as both productions relied on the suggestion of a performance held in that *place* that was only accessible by participating in each show's performance *space*: via the handset and headphones in *Night Walk* and via the app in *Transmission*. However, this should not be mistaken for site-specificity: as Goode argues, site-specificity must involve the potential to adapt to that site, rather than, as in the case of *Night Walk*, speaking to a version of that site that is frozen in time. Almost the opposite is true for *Transmission*: after the show's limited success at the 2017 Fringe, the creators relocated the performance to Toronto, using a new map and reducing the number of locations in the process. I take up the re-locational potential of digitally aided performance maps in the next section.

2.2 Relocation, Relocation, Relocation: “Invisible, Fictional” Performance Structures

³³ Eirini Nedelkopoulou, ‘Walking Out on Our Bodies Participation as Ecstasis in Janet Cardiff’s Walks’, *Performance Research*, 16.4 (2011), pp. 117–23 (p. 117).

Here I consider three further performances that engage in digital mapping. These shows contribute to my analysis of digital forms of site-specificity, but also raise broader questions about the identity of a city, or the places within a city, and the relation between these identities and the communities that shape them. Each performance claims to offer an unusual insight into the city: *Remote X* and *Do's and Don'ts* both claim to reveal unspoken social contracts that underpin their chosen cities, whilst *Ancient Shrines* is an absurd pastiche of the kinds of walking tour that claim to provide off-the-beaten-track “local” knowledge of a city. Despite the importance of persuading their audiences of their insider-status, none of these productions are city-specific: each has been designed to be a touring production, easily transferrable to new locations. I analyse the potentials of digital site-unspecificity and the repercussions for the social politics of digitally mediated place within these performances.

Rimini Protokoll's *Remote X* is one of the company's most regularly performed productions. Created by Stefan Kaegi and Jörg Karrenbauer, *Remote X* has taken place in Berlin, Tehran, Los Angeles, Bangalore, St Petersburg and many other major cities since its creation in 2013.³⁴ Kaegi has described the show as “the most flexible project I have ever done”, explaining that all it requires is “a suitcase full of receivers and three transmitters”, as well as a small team to spend up to three weeks in each new location because “the existing city doubles as a stage, so we need to know what we are dealing with”.³⁵ This “doubling” of the city as a stage resembles the dual effect of *Transmission's* and *Night Walk's* digital mapping processes, but unlike in those performances, Kaegi acknowledges it upfront. In the same interview, he clarifies this thought process, saying: “I like to consider my work [as] temporary invisible architectures; social and fictional structures that bring crowds together – and dissolve them before they get on your nerves. In Europe, theatre has invested too much in fixed structures that predetermine the contents.”³⁶ It is particularly significant to consider this framing in respect of *Transmission* and *Night Walk*, both of which seek to use digital modes of mapping and navigation to create fixed, inflexible points of

³⁴ Rimini Protokoll, *Remote X*, <<https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project/remote-x>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

³⁵ Rimini Protokoll, *Interviewing Stefan Kaegi*, <<https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/text/interviewing-stefan-kaegi>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

³⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *Interviewing Stefan Kaegi*.

performance between the production, the city and the participant. In my analysis of *Remote X*, *Do's and Don'ts* and *Ancient Shrines*, I attend to the ways in which their physical and digital structures are temporarily site-specific, and what this means for the social and fictional content of each production.

The Berlin iteration, titled *Remote Mitte*, begins in a graveyard.³⁷ Participants pick up a headset from a steward positioned by the main entrance and wander about the headstones until the show ‘begins’, at which point a disembodied voice issues instructions to the group that move them out of the park and towards the city centre. These instructions occasionally set the participants against each other, divide them into subgroups, or draw attention to each participant’s individual bodily movements. At one point, as the group progresses up a long, steep staircase, the voice asks, “Are you sweating?” The narrative encourages the participants to act extra-ordinarily in spaces that may otherwise be ordinary to them, and the activities en route include dancing, running, standing still in the busy Hauptbahnhof foyer and exploring the quiet corridors of the Charité hospital. Whilst the participants are urged to perform behaviours that are clearly at odds with the ‘normal’ uses of each space, often garnering curious looks from other pedestrians, the narrative voice lays claim to an almost uncanny convergence with the structures and movements of the city: the voice announces ‘stop’ and ‘go’ in synchronicity with the pedestrian traffic lights and asks the audience to pay attention to their ‘colleague’ just as the robotic voice of the U-Bahn announces the train’s next station.

Presented as external to the city’s social mores but directly *in time* with the robotic or automated elements of city life, *Remote X* claims to offer its audience an unusual perspective on what Massey described as the “flows of power and negotiations of social relations” that form the built environment both physically and culturally.³⁸ By creating a show that explicitly asks its audience to “flow” with the orchestrated movement of pedestrians through urban space as well as to move against that flow by navigating unusual public spaces in unusual ways, Rimini Protokoll create a state of temporary, or temporal, site-specificity. As such, the digitally distributed aural

³⁷ I attended *Remote Mitte* in Berlin on 3 May 2017.

³⁸ Massey, p. 14.

instructions constitute a map for the audience member that propels them in and out of site-specific behaviours, but rather than focussing on creating an accurate or even recognisable map of the city – as in the case of both *Transmission* and *Night Walk – Remote X* maps “social and fictional structures”, as Kaegi asserts. Taken in comparison with Massey’s argument that places are better “imagined as articulated movements in networks of social relations”,³⁹ *Remote X*’s mapping practice is an articulation of the movements which make public places, and an acknowledgement of the impermanence of this practice of mapping – to which the ‘X’ in the show’s title, in lieu of a specific location, attests.

This nuanced approach to the creation of temporary site-specificity was not continued in the second Rimini Protokoll production in this case study. *Do’s and Don’ts* has many similarities to *Remote X*: it is built to be temporarily site-specific to many cities and has toured many cities within Germany and Northern Europe, all the while claiming to unpick the often unspoken or invisible social behaviours which shape a city. Rimini Protokoll’s website describes it as trip on which “the ordered system” of the city in question “is carefully examined: laws, rules, norms, rituals, explicit and implicit arrangements, visible and invisible codes”.⁴⁰ However, the digital mapping process of the cities in which it is performed results in a performance with little claim to any kind of site-specificity. *Do’s and Don’ts* premiered in Berlin in May 2018 and toured to Paisley the following year as part of a programme of international works aimed at young people curated and facilitated by the National Theatre of Scotland.⁴¹ Its central premise is based on two local youths leading a tour around areas of the city that are meaningful to them, with the audience transported in Rimini Protokoll’s converted van. Inside the van, the audience is seated parallel to the movement of the vehicle, so that they can look out of a large window built into the van’s side. At the beginning of the show, however, the window is shuttered: it is only on arrival at the show’s first ‘location’, Hermannplatz in Berlin and County Square in Paisley, that the blinds roll upwards and the site is revealed as if framed for the

³⁹ Massey, p. 28.

⁴⁰ Rimini Protokoll, *DO’s & DON’Ts*, <<https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/de/project/do-s-don-ts>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

⁴¹ Rimini Protokoll, *DO’s & DON’Ts*.

audience by the van's window.⁴² This framing device has two dramaturgical functions: firstly, to make the framed location appear unusual by situating the audience in a position that forces an unusual perspective on it; and secondly, to legitimise the narrative of the show by controlling the aspects of the city that are displayed to, or withheld from, the audience.

As the audience is driven around the city, the digital mapping process within *Do's and Don'ts* serves as a narrative aid, rather than a navigational tool. When the blinds cover the window, digital images are projected onto them that are intended to reveal the supposedly tacit cultural rules and behaviours behind the locations visited in the show. For instance, one element is a composite film made up of the faces of a local children's choir, who sing about the potential futures for urban life - but in both Berlin and Paisley, the song was the same, and dealt almost exclusively with the idea of driverless cars. *Do's and Don'ts* is not marketed in any specific way that encourages repeat viewings across different cities, but my attendance at two iterations of the performance revealed the lack of local specificity. It is, to my mind, highly unlikely that both children's' choirs share precisely the same concern for the future. Paisley and Berlin have little in common, but the tour through both urban landscapes, in theory informed by our young guides' lived experiences, explores the same, admittedly generic, themes: gentrification, buildings of governance, motorways, areas of commerce, parkland. It demonstrates that the framework of the show requires a driveable route through the city, within a set time, that hits the required narrative points. This insensitivity to place requires the performance to be re-mapped in every location, bending the urban space to fit the requirements of the performance. As an example, *Do's and Don'ts* requires its city to provide a 'rich' neighbourhood as well as a 'poor' one in close proximity in order to complete its narrative, which results in a glossing-over of the socio-economic nuances of its chosen cities.

It is pertinent to note that I have barely drawn on the specific qualities of Berlin or Paisley to discuss these productions. This recalls the suggestion made by Goode that it is increasingly simpler to consider theatre a "non-place" rather than a "viable 'somewhere'" but also points to a power imbalance inherent in Rimini Protokoll's

⁴² I attended *Do's and Don'ts* in Berlin on 9 May 2018 and in Paisley on 13 October 2018.

desire to re-map an audience member's relationship to the public spaces within a city. Whilst this ethos could be considered simply as an invitation for each participant to re-evaluate their own relationship to a specific place, these performances, and particularly *Do's and Don'ts*, could also feel like a didactic lesson for 'locals' performed by a company that intentionally complicates its own local/outsider perspective. Moreover, this "non-place" form of site-specificity is essential to Rimini Protokoll's income model, as the ability to tour its work generates increased revenue, as does the possibility of shared budgets: in Berlin, *Remote Mitte* was co-produced by the Gorki Theater, and *Do's and Don'ts* was supported by Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin and the National Theatre of Scotland (and thus indirectly by Creative Scotland) in Paisley.

This leads me to the last digital mapping case study: New Zealand theatre company Binge Culture's *Ancient Shrines and Half Truths*, performed as part of Summerhall's 2017 Festival Fringe programme.⁴³ *Ancient Shrines*, like many of the other performances in this chapter, is a non-site-specific walking tour of a city: after its Edinburgh premiere, it was performed in Australia. However, it puts an intentionally self-conscious spin on this idea. The marketing blurb, for instance, is a tongue-in-cheek pastiche of the language used to sell walking tours to tourists and the kind of language used to market the other performances I have analysed here. They write,

[r]eal travellers belong everywhere. Join performance alchemists Binge Culture on an immersive audio experience that mainlines you into the city's heart. Discover hidden gems, stumble into fragile cultural ceremonies and laugh with Authentic Locals™. Armed with the knowledge of your expert guide [...] take the outsider's insider's guide that proves you deserve to belong.⁴⁴

Binge Culture's assertion that "real travelling" deals in belonging, authenticity, chance and the dichotomy between outsiders and insiders sends up the tourism industry's current trend in offering visitors a 'local' experience – for instance in the feel-at-home

⁴³ I attended *Ancient Shrines* on 23 August 2017.

⁴⁴ 'Binge Culture, *Ancient Shrines and Half Truths*, <<https://www.bingeculture.co.nz/ancient-shrines-and-half-truths.html>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

rhetoric of holiday letting giant AirBnB. Coincidentally, it also reads like a riff on the promises made by Rimini Protokoll about *Do's and Don'ts*, which they described as “[a] journey through every trick in the city”.

Ancient Shrines, when I took part in it in August 2017, began in the Summerhall Courtyard. Headphones and smartphones were given to each participant, and then a performer led the audience out of the building, across the road and into the Meadows, a large central park. There, the host introduced the functionalities of the navigational app and audio guide and then counted down to the beginning, to ensure that each audience member hit ‘start’ on the guide at the same time. The audio guide then explains how the icons on the app correlate to locations or objects around the park and encourages the listener to begin exploring their surroundings. On reaching a location, the audience member is instructed to press a button on the app to trigger the matching audio narrative: this is a much less technologically nuanced method than the geocaching techniques used by *Transmission*, but in fact hands the audience considerably more autonomy over their experience. These audio narratives, told in a friendly, authoritative manner, were intentionally false and often completely absurd: something that would be immediately apparent to someone familiar with the city, but would take someone on their first visit to Edinburgh a little while longer to realise. At various points, the audio guide and mapping app instruct the audience to gather en masse, to split into smaller groups and to choose one of three potential pathways. The work culminates in a “sacred ritual” that involves flicking paint at a supposedly ‘legendary’ Edinburgh local, at which point any suggestion of seriousness has been completely abandoned.

Like *Do's and Don'ts* and *Remote Mitte*, *Ancient Shrines* deals in intentional disorientation – but with very different results. The purpose of the show is to impose a varnish of half-truths upon Edinburgh’s buildings and topography, and in doing so to poke holes in the pretence that it is possible to sell, or commercialise, a truly ‘local’ understanding or experience of place – as there is no single, hegemonic, ‘local’ experience. Rather than claiming to ‘reveal’ a new perspective on the city for its audiences, as in the work of Rimini Protokoll, Binge Culture invites its participants to consider the rhetoric and language that often surrounds such tours, and to enjoy the surreal, often silly, humour created in the gap between the audio guide’s confident

descriptions and the clear reality of the object of location she describes. Rather than aiming to map Edinburgh, it functions as an anti-map, while still retaining a key impetus for exploration, allowing the audience's imaginative engagement between clear falsehoods and geographical reality to lead the way. Exploration is articulated differently in *Do's and Don'ts* and *Remote Mitte*: instead of discovery being placed in the hands of the audience members, both Rimini Protokoll productions are presented as the labour of previous exploration, which is now being presented to the participants. In *Do's and Don'ts*, the audience is led to believe that this exploration has been conducted by the two young, local guides, whilst *Remote Mitte*'s disembodied voice floats the notion that it is the city itself that is showcasing its secrets. The key difference between these three performances, then, is how they connect seemingly insider, or secret, forms of knowledge with an audience member's physical experience in a specific place.

In *Ancient Shrines*, knowledge is intentionally overwritten by falsehoods and this, in turn, transforms a recognisable, mappable place (Edinburgh) into a space in flux, following the editors of *Space and Place*. This kind of context-collapse is also reminiscent of Massey's view that an "annihilation of space by time" (in this case, time is the duration of the performance) "creates "increasing uncertainty about what we mean by 'places' and how we relate to them".⁴⁵ In this way, *Ancient Shrines* is an example of digital site-unspecificity, a form of mapping that works to undo knowledge and make space for alternative imaginations. *Do's and Don'ts* and *Remote Mitte* can also be seen as site-unspecific, in how the specificity of place in these performances has more to do with narrative than geographical reality, but they utilise digital tools in a way that directly contrasts with *Ancient Shrines*. Both the Rimini Protokoll productions seek to add context, rather than to take it away – they overwrite spatial realities with additional, supposedly secret, information, regardless of the audience member's own experiences in, and knowledge of, that spatial reality. When Kaegi describes his work as "temporary invisible architectures; social and fictional structures", he emphasises that this is to avoid "fixed [physical] structures that predetermine the contents".⁴⁶ However, this desire for touring-friendly geographical

⁴⁵ Massey, p. 28.

⁴⁶ Rimini Protokoll, *Interviewing Stefan Kaegi*.

temporariness has, on the contrary, resulted in fixed digital and narrative structures that do not encourage their audiences to contribute to the creation of such “social [...] structures”. Where *Ancient Shrines* creates fluidity in experience and narrative, both *Do’s and Don’ts* and *Remote Mitte* choose to avoid engaging in real time with the “flows of power and negotiations of social relations” that Carter et al consider essential to networked publics,⁴⁷ and instead present temporary, yet fixed, perspectives on unfixed environments.

3. ‘Local’ Theatre in a Mediated World

My final two case studies allow me to open up the question of what function a national or federal theatre has in the age of digitally distributed, mediated or located theatre. To explore this, I examine two performances: the National Theatre of Scotland’s *Adam* and the Berliner Ensemble and Schauspiel Dortmund’s co-production *Die Parallelwelt* (Parallel Worlds, or Parallel Existence) as both productions use digital technologies to be simultaneously ‘local’ and ‘elsewhere’ during the time and space of the performance.

3.1 Performing Global Community ‘Live’ on Stage

The National Theatre of Scotland occupies a strange position: it claims to be both hegemonic and not. A ‘theatre without walls’, its *raison d’être* is to create theatre across the entirety of Scotland without favouring any specific venue or city. A national theatre can say a lot about a nation’s sense of self and this is evidenced in the National Theatre of Scotland’s clear separation from the United Kingdom’s London-based National Theatre, as well as in its presentation as a progressive, left-leaning, integrally Scottish and European-facing organisation.⁴⁸ This orientation is exemplified in its recent programming, including works by the German company Rimini Protokoll, as I discussed in the previous section. The full extent of the ambassadorial role of a national theatre is too large a discussion to be had here, but this dual existence of the National Theatre of Scotland as both outward- and inward-looking, coupled with its desire to

⁴⁷ Carter et al., p. xiii.

⁴⁸ National Theatre of Scotland, *What We Do*, <<https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/about/what-we-do>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

position itself as an intentionally placeless national institution, is central to my analysis of the 2017 play *Adam* and its digital, global cast.

Adam is the “true story” of a young Egyptian transgender man seeking asylum in the United Kingdom and was written by Frances Poet in collaboration with Adam Kashmiry.⁴⁹ The narrative is based upon Kashmiry’s real-life experiences and he performed in the play alongside Scottish actor Neshla Caplan. *Adam* is a two-person play with multiple roles: an Egyptian Adam and a Glasgow Adam, who then perform thirteen other characters, including Adam at multiple ages, a Home Office representative, a translator and a mental health nurse. The first iteration of the play, directed by Cora Bissett, was presented by the National Theatre of Scotland at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, as part of the Made in Scotland showcase at the 2017 Edinburgh Festivals and included recorded performances from six named participants. A preface to the printed version of the play notes that the performance featured “videos sent in from members of the Adam World Choir, a global digital community of transgender and non-binary people from the USA to Russia, Denmark to Slovenia, Australia to the Netherlands”.⁵⁰ The Adam World Choir was an initiative created by the National Theatre of Scotland alongside the play, facilitated by Leonie Rae Gasson, and it used WhatsApp and other encrypted messaging platforms to communicate across countries and time zones in order to protect the identity of the group’s members.

The songs and stories that resulted from the group’s digital discussions were recorded in advance of the play’s opening night, with some members participating in the recording process via video software whilst others used audio-only software. This duality was essential for two reasons: firstly, recording these performances made participation more accessible, as the choir members did not need to have the high-quality internet connection, availability, or the privacy and safety required to call in to perform in the show at potentially unsocial hours of the night, during the initial month-long run of *Adam* at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Secondly, it made it easier for the National Theatre of Scotland to re-stage the play in the future, as the consolidation and documentation of the choir’s contributions streamlined this process. When I

⁴⁹ I attended *Adam* at the Traverse on 13 August 2017.

⁵⁰ Frances Poet, *Adam* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), p.vii.

interviewed Gasson for *The Skinny*, she explained that the central ambition for the choir was to provide a safe space of expression for a “geographically, socially and politically diverse” digital community and that some of the safeguarding measures revolved around these access measures: “[The participants] don’t need fancy tech or a brilliant internet connection [...]. It’s all been recorded on phones or laptops. Anything that anyone had to hand, that was the right kit.”⁵¹

The World Choir performed in the show through their recordings, but on-stage their contributions are presented as an a-live embodiment of the liveness of the internet. In a scene called ‘The Tree of Knowledge’, Adam searches on the internet for answers:

EGYPTIAN ADAM. The woman who lent me this laptop described the internet as a brain. To type a question is just to have a thought, an electric spark in a global brain of ideas.

GLASGOW ADAM. Can I be punished for a thought?

EGYPTIAN ADAM *opens the laptop.*

GLASGOW ADAM *types a question, which appears on the screens.*

CAN THE SOUL OF A MAN BE TRAPPED IN A WOMAN?

The question sits for a moment.

The TV screens begin to flicker, sounds of static and distorted voices surge.

Faces flicker on to the screen. Words become discernible.

Here are the faces of people who dare to share themselves on the internet.

They are experience, they are knowledge, they are the understanding

ADAM has never had.

⁵¹ Katie Hawthorne, ‘NTS Celebrates Transgender Experiences with Adam’, *The Skinny*, 31 July 2017. <<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/festivals/edinburgh-fringe/theatre/the-national-theatre-of-scotland-talk-about-adam>> [accessed 5 October 2021].

Fragments of testimony from trans people across the world morph into something musical. A global choir of experience and knowledge. It is beautiful but there is disharmony too. The many voices are overwhelming.

GLASGOW ADAM *is transfixed.*

I. Am. Real.⁵²

This moving moment, at the heart of the play, stages the internet in several different ways: first, via a literal laptop on stage, placed in Glasgow Adam's lap. The words he types on the keyboard are then represented on the large screen at the back of the stage, as if mirroring his gaze for the audience. The literal writing-out of his question renders visible what was, until this moment within the play, unspoken and unspeakable. Then, the large screen – as well as other, smaller screens set on the stage – come 'alive' with, as the stage directions put it, the faces and voices of a "global choir". The glitchy connection between these faces also suggests geographical distance and unstable digital connections (reminiscent of my discussion of the staging of digital absence in Part 1) and depicting globality in both a literal and metaphorical sense. The verification that Glasgow Adam discovers in this moment, "I. Am. Real", doubles as a verification of the reality of the voices and faces appearing on the screen.

However, in the same interview for *The Skinny*, Kashmiry describes how the theatrical adaptation created some distance between the characters on stage and his real-life experiences. "Adam is a character in a play", he said. "It's odd when you say, 'This is a story about one person' – it feels like you're completely neglecting everybody else. Are you saying that just because this person is trans, that's why this story is important? But when you talk about an entire community, then *that* is a cause. That's powerful." (original emphasis)⁵³

The first internet scene is reflected in the second-to-last scene, in which Adam rings his mother. The audience is encouraged to believe that this is a 'real' mother-son moment of connection via FaceTime, but the script clarifies that Maryam is portrayed by an actor. However, the 'real'-ness of this moment is enhanced by the fact that, until

⁵² Poet, p.27.

⁵³ Hawthorne, 'NTS Celebrates Transgender Experience'.

now, Maryam has been played by Kashmiry and Caplan – like all the other characters in the play. In this moment, another actor appears on the screen at the back of the stage: “On the screen behind we see the ‘real’ MARYAM (an Arabic woman in her fifties)”.⁵⁴ They have a moving conversation, during which Adam explains that he will tell his story on stage, after all. “I won’t wish you luck,” says Maryam, “Because you won’t need it. Just tell the truth.”⁵⁵ The screen goes dark.

EGYPTIAN ADAM is overjoyed. He walks to the front of the stage.

GLASGOW ADAM. I am here. I can see all these faces looking up at me. Sweat is forming on my top lip. I feel my heart beating hard here. Boom. Boom. Boom. I am alive. Eyes are meeting mine and these eyes tell me they don’t hate me, they understand. They remind me of the people who helped me when I first typed my question into the computer. Is it possible for the soul of a man to be trapped in the body of a woman? The answer is yes. When I finish people come up to me, shake my hand, hi-fives and hugs. It’s a fucking buzz.⁵⁶

Here, the play compares the experience of Glasgow Adam discovering an online community to the experience of standing on stage, in front of another community. The physicality of this moment; sweat, racing heartbeats, the touch of congratulations, the “fucking buzz”, focuses the performance back on the here and now, narrowing the play’s international gaze until only the performer on stage and the audience in the room remain in focus.

The dual function of pre-recording the choir’s performances and then contextualising them *as live* underpins the entire existence of the play. The community aspect of *Adam* could not have existed in any other form, which shows that traditional conceptions of live performance can be exclusionary for actors, too, as well as audience members. A ‘live’ performance, in the traditional sense, could have been personally dangerous for many of the World Choir members resident in certain countries. By choosing to stage the live processes of digital technology, rather than by

⁵⁴ Poet, p. 46.

⁵⁵ Poet, p. 48.

⁵⁶ Poet, pp. 48–49.

literally calling Kashmiry's mother, or by demanding that the World Choir perform in digital synchronicity, the National Theatre of Scotland presents a performance that is global in reach but local at the time of performance and depicts instead the subjective sensations of *how it feels* to be globally connected.

3.2 Parallel Worlds: Performing in the In-Between

“A simultaneous performance” between the Berliner Ensemble and Schauspiel Dortmund”, *Die Parallelwelt* (2018) takes the premise of this chapter quite literally: two companies of actors, in Dortmund and Berlin respectively, performed the play together in real time, whilst two audiences looked on. The Dortmund performance was broadcast to the stage in Berlin and vice versa: neither performance would make narrative sense without the other.⁵⁷ From the earliest marketing materials released to promote the production, *Die Parallelwelt* was situated “between” the two theatres – creatively and geographically. The marketing material describes this dynamic:

What would the consequences for our actions be if everything were in reciprocity with everything else across time and space? Two companies of actors in Dortmund and Berlin will play *Die Parallelwelt* in identical stage environments – separated by a distance of 420.26 km as the crow flies, and yet audible and visible to each other, connected by a fibre optic cable that can pulverise the distance at the speed of light.⁵⁸

The “pulverise[d] distance” sounds like a metaphor, but there was in fact a literal cable connection created between Schauspiel Dortmund and the Berliner Ensemble: three wavelengths were privately reserved at great difficulty and expense, exemplifying Massey's predictions for the phenomenon of “time-space-compression” leading to “what Marx once called the annihilation of space by time”.⁵⁹ While this private cable connection was literally designed to overcome distance with speed, it was not without its own pressures of time and expense: in private correspondence, one technical contributor to the project estimated that this connection cost 25,000 euro over the show's two year run-time, and that it took six months to arrange this connection in the

⁵⁷ I attended *Die Parallelwelt* on 28 October 2018 at the Berliner Ensemble.

⁵⁸ Berliner Ensemble, *Die Parallelwelt*, <<https://www.berliner-ensemble.de/en/production/die-parallelwelt>> [accessed 29 March 2022].

⁵⁹ Massey, p. 24.

first place. Still, without this literal connection the joint production would have been impossible – even a split-second delay would render impossible the simultaneous performance between the two theatre houses. This is particularly evident in the on-stage dialogue between the two sets of performers, which mediated by a live video editor working at the Schauspiel Dortmund. This editor surveys, reacts to and re-distributes live input from both theatre houses, mixing the two stages into a cohesive whole for the audience, whilst providing the insights required for the actors to react to each other in real time.

In *Adam*, the digital connection is staged to create a *feeling* of digital connection, rather than to depict the logistical realities of such connection, but in *Die Parallelwelt* the connectivity plays both a literal and metaphorical role. The repeated imagery of a wormhole, as well as explicit philosophical discussions about causality and predeterminism, imbue the material digital connection with a feeling of mysticism, whilst the audiences are used as witnesses to – and living proof of – the show's simultaneous double existence. At the start of the play, as the audiences take their seats, a large screen that fits the height and width of the stage depicts another audience, sitting in a similar-looking theatre. As the audience in Berlin – where I watched the performance – begin to realise that the on-screen audience is an 'other' audience, rather than a mirror of themselves, they start to wave. A performer, on stage, operates a camera on a tripod that tracks from the stalls to the upper levels of seating in the Berlin auditorium and as they do so, the audience members in each section wave to the camera without any other form of encouragement. The 'other' audience waves back. This mutual act of witnessing and accountability, established between the audience members of Berlin and Dortmund before the play has officially 'begun', is the first enactment of the performance as *in-between*. It also indicates that the location of this performance is subjective, personal and dependent on each individual audience member's individual gaze, as well as their literal presence at the play.

This dynamic is different to that of a remote audience watching a digitally distributed play and the digitally distributed audience of that play: this dynamic is that of a mutual gaze. As I discussed in Part 1, an audience in London watching Benedict Cumberbatch play Hamlet does not need an audience in Edinburgh to verify their own experience of being present at a play, for instance, but the audience in Edinburgh could

feel more persuaded of the theatricality of the digitally distributed performance of Cumberbatch, if the London audience are at times visible. In the case of *Die Parallelwelt*, both the Berlin audience and the Dortmund audience depend on each other to verify the reality of the performance; to confirm that the play is ‘truly’ live and located in both places, and to confirm their own attendance at the performance – by waving and being waved to in return. However, at this point in the play, this could be simple stage magic: a pre-recorded video of an audience waving, presented on the screen ‘as if’ in real time, with an actor operating the camera on stage to suggest that the broadcast is a two-way-street, could easily have had the same effect upon each audience. Without insider knowledge, or sending a trusted friend to the other city, it would be impossible for a (cynical) audience member to verify the ‘reality’ of this live moment in both cities.

When the play *begins*, and the lights dim, the screen with the ‘other’ audience on it rolls up to reveal a stage split into four parts: two boxes below, two boxes above. The lower right quarter has actors within it, the lower left quarter is covered by a screen, or a gauze, that makes it difficult to tell if there are actors within it or if the movement, barely visible, is in fact taking place on that screen. The upper two boxes are both screens, showing different feeds. The effect is disorienting and distracting: it is difficult to decide what to focus upon and indeed the performance is a difficult one to describe. Slowly it becomes clear that one of the top screens is a direct live feed from a camera held on (our) stage that is documenting the performers in the bottom right square. The other screen shows a performance taking place in an environment that looks extremely similar but is also definitely *not* occurring on (our) stage in that moment. The inference, then, is that the ‘other’ performance is taking place in Dortmund. Much of the action proceeds in this way: for instance, whilst the Berlin stage shows a birth, the Dortmund stage mirrors it with a death staged in a similar manner. The already non-linear narrative is interspersed by philosophical musings made by certain characters seemingly stuck in a kind of limbo, or by quotations from philosophers such as Empedocles. The resultant mash-up effect, the montage of the four segments of the stage intersected by meta-theatrical discussions raises the question: which of these on-stage realities is ‘real’? At this point in the production, the play exists on all of these stages, in the literal and metaphorical crossing of wires.

Then, roughly in the middle of the play, the two casts, or two realities, meet. This takes place during a simultaneous wedding reception laden with puns about “eine symbolische Einheit” (a symbolic union) and “eine Doppelbindung” (a double bond), when the wedding party in Berlin notice an eerily similar wedding party on the TV screen at their reception. As they peer into the screen, they realise that almost identical doppelgangers are staring back at them. The confrontation between the two sets of characters swiftly becomes a melodrama: “Das ist *meine* Hochzeit!” (It’s *my* wedding!), “*Ich* bin die Braut!” (*I* am the bride!). The audience witness ‘both sides’ of the drama via a screen at the top of the stage which displays what is taking place on the ‘TV’ on stage, as well as the on-stage characters’ reactions to it. This highly mediated scene is successful because, at this point in the play, the audience has become accustomed to looking in several places at once and also because they already *know* about the ‘other’ play: the moment recalls the very beginning of the show, when both sets of audiences realise that they are being inexactly mirrored. The scene is also a pivot: this is the instance when the characters realise that they are not ‘real’, both within the logic of the narrative and within the logic of putting *on* a play.

Both sets of characters leave the quartered frame of the set and step out to the front of their stages to seek validation from their audiences. One performer spreads her arms and points to the full auditorium in front of her: “Ein Theater ist wirklich da”, she says, “wenn es Zuschauer gibt.” (A theatre is really there, if there’s an audience). Her doppelganger agrees: “Dieser Ort ist total real.” (This place is completely real) They both gesture to their respective technical crews and request that the house lights are turned on. The front of each stage is now visible on the screens, as are the front rows of the audiences. The Berlin performers announce that they will go into the “Zuschauerraum” (auditorium, literally the audience space), depicting it as *another* reality within the play’s logic, in order to prove that their audience is somehow more *real*. The Berlin Bridegroom chooses an audience member sitting in the first seat of the fourth row, after some elaborate counting. She has blonde hair and a distinctive t-shirt branded with *Rick and Morty* cartoon characters (a series that is similarly interested in parallel realities). The Dortmund Bridegroom follows his lead, counting to the fourth row only to find an identical woman sat in the first seat, wearing the same t-shirt. Both Bridegrooms demand that their audience member supplies the time (7.20

pm) and then the date (28 October). The audience members give identical answers. Then, finally, the Berlin Bridegroom asks: and how is the weather in Berlin? The Dortmund cast members react in shock: “Eh, aber wir sind in Dortmund.” (Huh? But we’re in Dortmund.) Further chaos ensues.

This slapstick caper pulls in different directions. Establishing the audience as culpable and involved, it positions them as the determining factors of the reality *and* the theatricality of the performance’s dual existence. Like a magician attempting to verify a magic trick, both casts ‘prove’ that there is true synchronicity between the two stages, to counter any argument that either theatre’s contribution *could* have been pre-recorded. However, it is odd that the play’s biggest scene should revolve around this reveal, as the play is heavily marketed as a simultaneous collaboration between the two cities. This could suggest that *Die Parallelwelt* depends on the sheer scale of its endeavour being appreciated as a novelty, rather than in the possibilities of its simultaneous existence. That said, it is in this combination of metaphor and literalism that *Die Parallelwelt* successfully occupies an in-between location, in the cables running the width of Germany, rather than on both stages at once. Narratively and logistically speaking, neither performance could exist without the other.

Like *Adam*, and indeed many of the performances in this thesis, *Die Parallelwelt* relies upon a crucial dynamic of presence and absence. The Berlin audience is digitally present in Dortmund but it is essential to the show’s logic that they are also geographically distant. The Adam World Choir is staged to be digitally present but, for essential reasons, must be absent in the moment of performance. Where *Adam* is presented as an act of reaching out from Scotland to a global community, *Die Parallelwelt* is celebrated as a literal and metaphorical union between two major, state-funded theatres. Both productions use digital technologies to expand the remit of their stages as national and local theatres, but without travelling far from their own sources of artistic infrastructure. Kaegi, from Rimini Protokoll, spoke of his desire to do without such artistic infrastructure in order to create temporary, socially-created spaces, but the two productions discussed here draw on precisely those resources in order to create digital-first performance locations that are visibly and impactfully social, while remaining specific to their civic remit.

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I return to Part 3's original question: what does it mean for performance to take place in a digital space? Over the course of the case studies in Chapter Seven, I have argued that performances that occur in digital space remain tethered to physical conceptions of place. From *Rich Kids*' use of an established digital place like Instagram, to the various navigation tools of performances like *Ancient Shrines* and *Remote Mitte*, the hyperstage of *Verirrtten sich im Wald* and the manner in which the in-between is performed in *Die Parallelwelt*, it is evident that digital performance spaces must be created and navigated with as much care as physical ones, and that one of the most effective ways of doing this is to set the performance in a recognisable, mappable *place*. Correspondingly, a performance that creates a digital facsimile of a physical place without adequate recognition of that physical place – seen in the confused and confusing narratives of *Transmission* and *Do's and Don'ts* – risks becoming a performance without a meaningful relation to place at all.

There is a tendency, across the theoretical material considered in Part 3, to assume that place- and space making digital technologies results in context collapse, with Russell et al even attributing this as one of “three dynamics” specific to digital, networked publics. However, whilst context collapse features in the narrative of certain productions, *Ancient Shrines* and *Remote Mitte* in particular, it is clear that these productions result in a layering of alternative contexts, rather than a flattening of those contexts. In fact, this predicted phenomenon of context collapse, which is also present in Massey's concern that technological compressions of space by time result in “an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by ‘places’”, resonates uncannily with Brook's description of a single stage as an “empty” space. Moreover, following Wiles and Goode's criticism of Brook's theatrical version of context collapse, we know that there is no such thing as truly empty, context-free, space. It follows, then, that it is less tenable to understand performances that take place in digital space as falling victim to context collapse and more instructive to see them as layering so many contexts that they become difficult for an audience member to parse. In my analysis of *Rich Kids*, I argued for the importance of playing host to an audience in digital space, much as the box office and ushers help an audience to navigate a theatre house. It is as

easy to get lost in digital contexts, architecture and infrastructure as it is in the twisting streets of a city like Edinburgh.

Along similar lines, some productions in Chapter 6, like *Adam* and *Die Parallelwelt*, claim to overcome physical and geographic borders through their use of digital technologies. However, my analysis revealed that this overcoming is more typically narrative-driven than anchored in material reality and it often exemplifies the continuing importance of physical places and spaces to such digitally located performances. Without global borders and time differences to overcome, *Adam*'s narrative of global connectivity would not be nearly so powerful and the safeguarding and logistics required of that production cannot be divorced from political and geographical reality. Likewise, *Die Parallelwelt* made much of its ability to transcend space through time – and although this was a genuine feat of digital infrastructure, it also comprised the heart of the play's narrative.

Ultimately, the relationships between digital place and the performances in Part 3 can be summarised as either hyper-generalised or hyper-specific. Some, like *Transmission*'s a-geographical approach to mapping Edinburgh or *Adam*'s depiction of Scotland vs. the world, draw in broad strokes to create a vague notion of digital space, one that is fluid, unlabelled and defined only in opposition to the audience's current physical location. Others, like *Die Parallelwelt* and *Night Walk* are highly specific in how they stage an encounter with digital *place* that is in co-relation to the audience and its physical surroundings. Similarly, *Rich Kids* and *Verirrten sich im Wald* speak directly to the theatrical experience, encouraging their audiences to exercise agency in their personal navigation between physical and virtual stages.

But in what ways can these digital places and spaces be said to be *live*? To explore this, I used three different criteria: the idea of site-specificity and site responsivity, as discussed by Goode; Lefebvre's criticism of treating space as "Object opposed to Subject" and his argument that space must always be considered in relation to energy and time lest it become an "empty abstraction"; and notions of networked publics, as described by Russell et al as "simultaneously a space and a collection of people".⁶⁰ This combination of site-specificity, space in energy and time and the ways

⁶⁰ Russell et al., p. 41.

in which publics contribute to the formation of spatial and social contexts, allowed me to pinpoint when – and if and how – a digital theatrical space or place can be considered live.

For instance, *Rich Kids*' use of Instagram demonstrated how the app's individual, user-based approach to documenting and historicising space and time is an apt visualisation for the subjective nature of the theatre. In this case, the play makes visible what is often intuitive about the 'live' theatre experience and its relation to Benjamin's description of a "unique existence" in time and space,⁶¹ as it demonstrates how this multiplicity of unique existences is unique to each audience member. Elsewhere, *Die Parallelwelt* manifests liveness and limitation in a more tangible sense: after the two-year run of the production concluded, so too the private cable connection was severed. It also presented liveness as being in the eye of the beholder: the audiences were the witness *and* the proof of the event's synchronicity in time and space. In *Night Walk*, it is the city itself that will dictate when the performance is no longer live, for the show will be over when Edinburgh is changed so far as to make the digital map unintelligible. Other productions, designed for touring, similarly demonstrated the potential of being live only when the theatrical city is sufficiently tethered to a specific physical location. On the contrary, *Verirrten sich im Wald* created liveness through an act of un-tethering, by providing digital tools that offered the opportunity to experience alternative perspectives and memories that enriched the narrative presented on stage. These different manifestations and stagings of digital spatial liveness share one thing: the ability to make visible (and sometimes tangible) how theatre leverages sensations of liveness to traverse time and space, expanding on chronologies and mappable places.

The performances I have considered in Part 3 offer us a range of perceptual lenses with which to think about space and place within different forms of digitally located performance: 'place' is *where* the theatre happens – the Traverse, or Berlin, or Instagram – and 'space' is the imaginative, virtual, collective and temporary space that a performance *makes*. When a theatrical moment is staged to be felt as live, it is when the place and space collide, such as the moment in *Die Parallelwelt* when the two

⁶¹ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 169.

audiences and the dramatic fiction of the wormhole are used for mutual validation. This phenomenon is not specific to the use of digital place and space in the theatre, but analysing digital performance locations renders it visible.

Conclusion: What makes theatre live, in the digital age?

This thesis demonstrates how the use of digital technologies is expanding what liveness can mean in the theatre. I have argued that liveness in theatrical productions in Edinburgh and Berlin is deeply connected to the material contexts in which it is produced and I have established that the creation and valuation of liveness can vary markedly in different theatres and in different theatre industries. Moreover, I have analysed the relationship between emerging modes of liveness and traditional definitions of live performance, and found that qualities such as limitation, fallibility, immersion and simultaneity shape the kinds of liveness found in digitally aided performances just as much as they inform traditional conceptions of liveness. I have maintained throughout that liveness does not stand in opposition to the digital, as scholars such as Phelan and Auslander have suggested, instead digital technologies should be seen as offering additional tools that expand and reshape approaches to liveness.

My contextual approach indicates the value of analysing liveness as a contextual phenomenon and demonstrates how this approach can be developed for future scholarship. As I noted in the Introduction, with only a few exceptions such as of Suk-Young Kim's *K-Pop Live*, most Anglophone scholarship concerning liveness is based on Western performance traditions. Given the differences between conceptions of liveness in Edinburgh and Berlin, two wealthy Western European capital cities, there is ample opportunity for future research that examines liveness on a contextual basis. Moreover, Kim describes how there is no direct translation for 'live' in Korean, and as we have seen, many German theatres adopted the English term within otherwise German-language descriptions of performances. Thus, the global dominance of the English word, enhanced by its use as a label on dominant social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, requires further scrutiny.

Throughout this thesis, I have proposed three key terms for the analysis of different forms of digitally aided theatre: digital distribution, digital mediation and

digital location. As I explain in Chapter 1, this is not to imply that I have coined these terms, but to argue that the examination of digitally aided performance from these perspectives can reveal more specifically how digital technologies are shaping theatrical liveness, particularly in relation to time, bodies and space. Focusing on digital distribution permits a closer analysis of notions of co-presence, reproduction, documentation and authenticity, whilst digital mediation speaks to performances that focus on the participatory role of the audience member, and digital location enables a digital-first approach to the places and spaces where theatre occurs. These modes of digitally aided theatre are far from mutually exclusive and several of the case studies in this thesis could have been analysed from multiple perspectives, but by breaking down my analysis in this way, I have been able to examine more specifically how the use of tools and techniques such as livestreaming, virtual reality, augmented reality and messaging platforms are reshaping the way liveness can manifest in the theatre.

In Part 1, I discussed how digital distribution technologies challenge definitions of liveness that are based upon notions of limitation, ephemerality and authenticity, taking as a starting point Phelan's ontological assertion that "[p]erformance honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward".¹ Although Phelan argues that if a performance is saved, recorded, or documented it "betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology", I found that her theory of limitation is highly applicable to the ways in which digitally distributed performances are marketed as live.² The event cinema industry in the UK provided an illustration of how factors of limitation are used to structure a hierarchy of cultural and economic values in livestreamed theatre.

My argument moved beyond ontological discussions to examine how digital distribution is often framed as a solution to a logistical problem, and as a secondary option to a traditionally live performance. In Chapter 2 I argued that the use of different broadcasting and livestreaming technologies at the Berliner Theatertreffen created a hierarchy of performances based on limitation and exclusivity, and described how this

¹ Phelan, p. 149.

² Phelan, p. 148.

led to a divide between the festival's regular attendees and the wider public. I compared this to similar presentations of livestreaming as a solution in two productions performed at the Edinburgh Fringe. In *Nassim*, a livestream was used to create the illusion of overcoming geographical distance, and to imply that the titular protagonist was not in the building. Significantly, this illusion was broken at an important moment in the play, revealing and disrupting the association of geographical distance that I argue is often attached to livestreaming. In *Pathetic Fallacy*, livestreaming was presented as a viable solution to the carbon footprint accrued by international performers attending the Fringe and framed as a way for the playwright Anita Rochon to take part in the performance from afar. The fact that, as I later learned, Rochon was in Edinburgh at the time both confirms the efficacy of using livestreaming to convey a sense of distance and raises questions about whether it will be adopted as an eco-friendly solution to touring live performances any time soon.

Dynamics of presence and absence are key to each of these case studies, and they underpin my argument that co-presence in time and space remains the most economically and socially valued form of liveness in the theatre. This is true of digitally distributed theatre, too. The visibility of the means of distribution has a tangible impact on the staging of liveness, and this is more significant than any ontological definition of liveness which might be used to analyse such forms of distribution. Most strikingly, the case studies in both Edinburgh and Berlin demonstrate how digital distribution is used to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies of cultural and economic power, rather than to disturb the status quo.

In Part 2, I discussed the extent to which liveness can be seen as an experiential, participatory experience by examining productions which use digitally mediating technologies to locate the liveness of the performance in the creative contributions of the (a)live audience member. Focusing on the theoretical approaches of Machon, Fischer-Lichte, Giannachi, and Alston, I analysed the connection between liveness and notions of immersion, participation and authorship, and the moral questions generated by productions that cast their audiences as a “prosthetic component”.³ A comparison of Machon's conceptualisation of *praesence* as a heightened state of self-awareness

³ Giannachi, p. 43.

and Alston's "narcissistic" mode of participation enabled me to draw out a discussion of agency, participatory labour and the co-opting of personal data through the pursuit of immersion.

In Chapter 3, my application of Fischer-Lichte's concept of the "feedback loop", and her definition of it as a process in which "all participants always act both as subjects *and* objects", made visible the dynamics of (a)liveness in the featured case studies.⁴ I argued that each of the productions, through their focus on the (a)liveness of their audiences, revealed a shared interest in exploring the relationships between individual and collective audience bodies. *Flight* and *Familiar Stranger* used digital mediation to cast each audience member as a protagonist, whilst *User Not Found* and *The Believers are but Brothers* utilised smartphones to shape different configurations of the audience as a collective. Lastly, *Spawn* and *YOU ARE OUT THERE* foregrounded the collection of audience data as a means of making visible the role of the audience member as both an individual and as part of a collective. These performances demonstrated that sensations of liveness in digitally mediated performances are predicated upon casting the audience as both subject and object, and that occasionally this can lead to exploitative practices disguised as opportunities for immersion or agency.

Lastly, in Part 3, I explored what it means for a performance to take place in a digital space, and the ways in which a digital performance place or space can be considered 'live'. Following a consideration of Carlson's belief that "without a player's space [...] there would be no theatre", I discussed theoretical conceptions of place and space regarding both the theatre and the digital.⁵ A comparison of the digital mapping in the social gaming activities of Randonauts and Pokémon Go allowed me to illustrate how virtual versions of public space can have physical and socio-political implications, and to conceive of space as a Lefebvrian Object. Lefebvre's argument that "[s]pace considered in isolation is an empty abstraction; likewise energy and time"

⁴ Fischer-Lichte, p. 172.

⁵ Carlson, p. 129.

contributed to my conceptualisation of live digital performance sites, which I pursued in the case studies of Chapter 6.⁶

I analysed how *Rich Kids* and *Verirrten sich im Wald* both use digital spaces to create multiple perspectives within a performance, the former by creating a performance *space* within the digital *place* of Instagram, and the latter by using virtual reality scenes to create “hyperstages” that offer a spatial expansion of the physical stage. I also explored productions that use mapping apps in the creation of temporarily site-specific performances, and the relationship between these productions and the social and architectural geographies with which they claim to be in dialogue. Pertinent to these productions is their ability to tour, which adds economic pressure to be more specific in the creation of digital performance spaces than in the intersection of physical places. Finally, I discussed two productions that sought to use digital technologies to reach beyond each theatre’s national or federal ties, and how this expansion of their geographical remit remained dependent upon funding and other artistic infrastructures. Ultimately, Part 3 demonstrated how the conceptualisation of digitally located performance through the differences between space and place can pinpoint the ways in which a digital performance site can be considered as live, showing that digitally located liveness is often a consequence of the collision of digital place and space.

In concert, the three Parts of my thesis are evidence that liveness is more productively conceived of as a set of dramaturgical tools, rather than as an ontological state. My case studies revealed how a performance can be imbued with a sense of liveness through many different techniques, as well as setting out some of the many functions that liveness can serve in a performance. From intentional typographic errors in *Believers* to the illusion of spontaneity in *Parallelwelt*, the limited availability of streamed performances at the Theatertreffen or the emphasis on participatory agency in productions as different as *Flight* and *Spawn*, it is clear that digital forms of liveness are often the product of established theatrical and dramaturgical techniques, articulated through and re-shaped by digital technologies.

⁶ Lefebvre, p. 15.

My research period, from 2017 – 2019, preceded a moment of historical change for the theatre industries in Edinburgh and Berlin, and indeed the rest of the world. The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 resulted in the extended closures of innumerable theatre venues, due to restrictions placed on many forms of physical gathering. In turn, this led to theatres in Edinburgh and Berlin embracing digital technologies as a means of overcoming such restrictions. For instance, the Schaubühne created a free streaming programme of the theatre’s archival recordings in 2020, whilst the Theatertreffen ran a solely digital programme in 2020 and 2021, with productions directly livestreamed from their original theatres.⁷ In an interview with *the Guardian*, Thomas Ostermeier, the artistic director of the Schaubühne, noted the theatre’s “special status” as both state subsidised and privately owned and reflected that “we managed to reach an agreement on the furlough scheme with the union after just two days. Berlin’s state-owned theatres, by contrast, couldn’t put their employees on furlough for the first 10 months because they only reached an agreement in January”.⁸ This stark difference goes some way to explaining the ability of the Schaubühne to create a digital programme much faster than other theatres in the city, and is further confirmation that liveness can be deeply impacted by the material and economic conditions of any cultural production.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe ran a heavily reduced, online programme in 2020 and a hybrid programme in 2021: *Edinburgh Guide* reported that of the 779 shows that ran as part of the Fringe, 480 took place in physical venues in Edinburgh and 300 were streamed online.⁹ Meanwhile the Traverse launched a digital-first stage in August 2020, which hosted performances commissioned specifically for the space, “alongside stage productions reimaged to be enjoyed as films, podcasts, audio plays

⁷ Sabine Peschel, ‘Germany’s Best Theater Available Online’, *DW*, 6 May 2020. <<https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-best-theater-available-online/a-53352471>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

⁸ Susannah Clapp and others, “‘It Has Been a Sort of Nightmare’”: How Major Theatres Abroad Fared in the Pandemic’, *The Observer*, 14 March 2021. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/mar/14/how-has-global-theatre-fared-during-pandemic-schaubuhne-international-amsterdam-public-theater-new-york-odeon-paris-helsingborg>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

⁹ Edinburgh Guide, *Relief and Pride As Hybrid Edinburgh Fringe 2021 Gets Underway* (2021), <<https://edinburghguide.com/news/20518-relief-and-pride-as-hybrid-edinburgh-fringe-2021-gets-underway>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

or performed recordings”.¹⁰ Notably the digital stage remains “live and active as a permanent part of the Traverse’s cultural offering” and the theatre now uses labels like “in-person” and “on-demand” to describe events in its programme.¹¹ This brief overview indicates that there is much research to be done concerning the digital developments in theatres during the pandemic, including in due course an assessment of which changes are embraced by the industry in the longer term. The Fringe’s digital ‘Fringe Player’ platform is, for instance, no longer supported for the 2022 iteration of Fringe.¹²

My research in this thesis thus provides vital contextualisation of a period that, in retrospect, can be seen as being on the cusp of unprecedented changes for theatrical performance. I have demonstrated that attitudes to the digital were already changing in the years prior to the pandemic, and that questions regarding accessibility, participation and artistic innovation were already driving exploration in this field. My analysis in Part 1 is particularly pertinent to this, in its dissection of the framing of digital distribution as a solution to logistical difficulties, and I argue that casting these technologies as secondary options will only exacerbate inequalities already present in the theatre industry more broadly, as we have also seen in the United Kingdom’s event cinema boom. That said, this thesis encompasses many forms of digitally aided performance that were restricted by the pandemic and we should be wary of any framing of the digital that implies that it is a straightforward solution to on-going or future crises that prevent physical co-presence. However, I also argue that digital tools *can* assist in the creation of new forms of gathering in the theatre, and I hope that the creative digital responses to the pandemic will continue to be developed. As Ostermeier suggests, this will be deeply dependent upon strategies of economic recovery that are specific to the industries in Edinburgh and Berlin.

¹⁰ Traverse, *Traverse Launches New Online Venue and Year-Round Festival Programme*, <<https://www.traverse.co.uk/news/traverse-hits-reset-with-new-online-venue-and-year-round-festival-programme?token=I7NfQpxqnyxhrr9uvkJSLUHDb3CBaDtx>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

¹¹ Traverse, *Traverse Launches New Online Venue and Year-Round Festival Programme*, <<https://www.traverse.co.uk/news/traverse-hits-reset-with-new-online-venue-and-year-round-festival-programme?token=I7NfQpxqnyxhrr9uvkJSLUHDb3CBaDtx>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

¹² EdFringe, *Doing an Online Event*, <<https://www.edfringe.com/take-part/doing-an-online-event>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

These world events also illustrate the importance of context to any analysis of digitally aided performance. Throughout this thesis I have shown liveness to be socio-economically contextual and have explored at length how infrastructural factors such as private and state funding, geographical location, accessibility issues, and embedded performance traditions can shape how people experience various forms of live performance. Comparing Edinburgh and Berlin has enabled me to explore how different theatre industries create, prioritise and value different kinds of liveness. The comparison also confirms that there is no single, definitive form of liveness, but indicates that liveness is a direct product of the context in which it is performed.

This comparison also reveals the different attitudes towards emerging forms of live theatre in both cities. The majority of my Edinburgh case studies were brought to the city for the Fringe, revealing Edinburgh to be a transient marketplace for innovative international productions rather than a place where such productions are created. This also speaks to the broader dynamic created by the event cinema industry in the United Kingdom, during my period of research, in which Edinburgh is a host for livestreams by prestigious companies such as the National Theatre in London, rather than a location from which such streams tend to be broadcast. However, with the recent launch of platforms like the Traverse's digital stage, this is open to change.

In contrast, some theatres in Berlin underwent major transformations during my period of research. In Part 3 I discussed the Berliner Ensemble's highly ambitious, digitally connected co-production with Theater Dortmund in the autumn of 2018, yet the Ensemble had a social media presence comprising solely a fan-run Facebook account in early 2017. In Berlin, digitally aided theatre was not confined to Fringe festival contexts, as in Edinburgh, but it was often a part of specific curatorial themes, as with the Hebbel am Ufer's 'KEEP IT REAL' campaign and the Berliner Festspiele's long-term focus on immersion and immersive technologies. However, as I also explored in Part 3, Cyberräuber's all-ages workshop with the youth branch of the Deutsches Theater reflects how digitally aided theatre is increasingly considered to be a part of the mainstream, rather than a niche specialism. EU-funded initiatives like PlayOn!, a theatre network launched in 2019 that supports its members in understanding "the processes of digital change" and "understand[ing], learn[ing],

test[ing] and apply[ing] immersive technology” will continue to broaden the reach of such modes of performance.¹³

In the afterword to *Experiencing Liveness*, Auslander reflects that

In all cases, liveness is the experience of having an active connection to an event taking place now, but somewhere else, whether that somewhere else is miles away or only inches away but distinguished from the space I’m in by virtue of its belonging to the realm of performer rather than that of the spectator, the inviolable distinction on which all performance depends.¹⁴

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that this is no longer quite the case. The dissolution of the spatial distinction between the performer and the spectator, or the performance and the audience, is in fact central to experiences of liveness in digitally aided performance. Moreover, I have indicated how “now” is far from a reliable metric in the measurement of a live experience. Auslander’s invocation of an “active connection” is indeed reflected in the kinds of liveness performed by the productions in my case studies, but it is that this kind of “active connection” is one of the forms of liveness preferred by theatres in Edinburgh and Berlin between 2017-2019, rather than a defining feature of liveness in the longer term.

The concept of liveness will continue to resist simple definition, because its meaning will continue to expand in concert with the on-going evolution of theatre and performance. Beyond the theatre, liveness also continues to change, particularly as major social platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram continue to develop ‘live’ modes of communication for their users. Thus, only a carefully contextualised approach can take into account the full variety of meanings and roles that liveness has in any theatre. As we create new technologies of communication, theatre will generate new forms of liveness. Far from rendering theatre unrecognisable, this process will enable the theatre to continue to re-make itself.

¹³ PlayOn, *About*, <<https://play-on.eu/about/>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

¹⁴ Philip Auslander, ‘So Close and Yet So Far Away: The Proxemics of Liveness’, in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 295–98 (p. 298).

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