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Performance Criticism and Digital Recordings

A few years ago I attended a talk by an esteemed senior colleague at a major international conference. Speaking to the assembled audience, the professor presented a compelling talk on Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's *Inferno*, which had played at the Festival d'Avignon in 2008. I had attended the company's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in Avignon but had missed *Inferno* and was looking forward to the talk. Despite not having seen *Inferno*, I knew quite a bit about it from friends who had been there. As I listened to the talk, I was struck by discrepancies in their descriptions and those of the presenting scholar. Of course, such is the joy of live performance, where different people have diverse experiences even at the very same show and sitting side by side. This may be particularly true when a performance occurs on the scale of Castellucci's opening spectacle in the Dante-inspired trilogy, which included a nearly naked man climbing the interior walls of the Palais des Papes, a Warhol-photographed car crash, children in a transparent illuminated box, and live dogs attacking Castellucci himself. But the revelation came at the end of the talk, when I approached my colleague to get more details from the performance I had missed. As I pressed for further information, he confessed that he had not actually seen the production in person.

I was shocked, I tell you, shocked. Who is this person to think that a critic can talk about a performance viewed only in documentation? He had not even seen the show. Or had he?

Amid the various arguments on liveness, the uniqueness of copresence, documentation, and performance, my colleague raised an important (though perhaps inadvertent) question about what it means to "see" work in the context of telematic performance and digital media. Telematics in this context has a somewhat fluid definition, referring broadly to information distributed through digital media, usually in the context of simultaneous or so-called real-time transmissions over digital networks and frequently including some kind of feedback or interactive technology. The term was first coined by Simon Nora and Alain Minc in their report for the French govern-

Romeo Castellucci's *Inferno*, Avignon Festival, Avignon, 2008. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage

ment, "L'informatisation de la société: rapport à M. le Président de la République," in 1978. There they wrote, "Nowadays, a multitude of small, powerful, and inexpensive machines are on the market. They are no longer isolated from one another, but rather linked together in 'networks.' This increasing interconnection between computers and telecommunications—which we will term *telematics*—opens radically new horizons."[1] The term *telematics* now encompasses a broad range of work in theater and performance, including broader negotiations of media representations: film and video, as well as digital interactions facilitated by the Internet.[2] In light of emerging performance documentation practices, it seems necessary to revisit some of the assumptions of documentation in light of telematics performance practices and modes of performance criticism that emerge from these. I am thinking specifically about the role of video and other forms of digital documentation that often threaten to displace the original embodied performance as a privileged site.

In 1997 Amelia Jones argued persuasively for the value of documentation as evidence of performance in her article "'Presence' in Absentia." There she claimed that "there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art." More recently Christopher Bedford has argued that performance exists predominantly within a discourse of documentation and recordings.[3] Although these discussions have been more robust in relation to performance art than to theater performance per se, the emergence of increasingly complex performances created and distributed via digital technologies, including screendance, virtual reality, performative games, and genres of performance designed for digital interaction, distribution, and spectatorship, has sustained these debates, both in academic circles and in performance practice. Particularly compelling is the question of how digital media can affect performance criticism. Can we write about contemporary theater and dance that we haven't seen in person? Scholars such as Erika Fischer-Lichte, among others, have argued for the necessity of copresence, a condition that she argues can only be simulated but not created by media.[4] Meanwhile, Chiel Kattenbelt, Martin Harries, and Christopher Balme, among others, have argued for a longer, historical view of the relations between media and live performance encounters.[5] These historical perspectives, though distinct from one another, share a common challenge to the rhetorical opposition of media against live performance (elsewhere summarized as the "liveness debate"),[6] arguing instead for a more nuanced articulation of theater among other media. At the same time, media scholars working in interactive art and digital technologies have similarly challenged prior definitions of participation, engagement, and spectatorship. As Katja Kwastek argues in *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art*, "If presence can be applied both to objects (including technical systems) and to people, then although the quality of presence can only be ascribed to an entity activated in the here and now, this entity need not be human."[7] Kwastek's formulation is particularly true for performance projects that engage telematic viewing as essential to the experience of the work itself.

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Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Tension* (2007) is a key example of work designed to be experienced primarily in and through media while in process and now exists solely as a digital record. Developed as a critique of the politics of remote engagement, Bilal's performance invited his audience to reenact the violent telematics of digital warfare via the Internet. For thirty days, Bilal lived twenty-four hours a day in an enclosed gallery space in Chicago. Visitors were "present" for Bilal's performance installation not by showing up in person to the museum but by remotely controlling a paintball gun that they could fire (or not) at Bilal during the thirty days he spent in the gallery. Though visible through glass walls in the gallery, Bilal's performance was primarily directed to an online audience through a series of personal YouTube videos that he recorded every day as both a performance and a record of the interactive experience. Created in response to the US invasion of Iraq and the death of his own brother at a US checkpoint, Bilal's performance focused on, among other things, the power of distance and virtual

Wafaa Bilal's
Domestic Tension,
Driscoll Babcock
Galleries, New York,
2007. Photo courtesy
of the artist and
Driscoll Babcock
Galleries

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control. The audience's presence in this work was not an immediate one, yet the power available to them and their impact not only on the performance but also on Bilal's physical reality was far greater than the effect of most audiences who may be physically present but limited in their ability to interact with the performance. Projects like Bilal's demand a different kind of critical engagement, then, one that does not reduce affective meaning to physical proximity but allows for a mode of engagement that acknowledges the power in virtual domains. For Bilal, the incessant firing of the paintball gun was a constant presence for his experience of the here and now, but for a viewer the mode of engagement—though remote—itself raised questions about the meaning of digital presence around a digitally networked globe.

If we take seriously this renegotiation of presence and affect in digital contexts, then we need to consider performance criticism via digital artifacts. Privileging of the so-called live event only reinforces the experience of physical proximity and copresence as a total and complete one, while relegating the images, recordings, and data to secondary and supplemental status of necessarily incomplete fragments of the thing itself. Such constructs conform to the binaries of performance studies that often revert to either text-based analyses derived from literary and theater studies and/or the privileging of immediate physical proximity and sensation. As Michael LeVan notes, "We have long been left to choose . . . between sensory curtailment and holy attendance."[8]

In the digital context this distinction often no longer holds, and in terms of specific performances we find that the recordings reveal new aspects of performance unseen by the live, attending audiences. Comparing contemporary performances with their digital records, one finds that the experience of copresence is not itself a complete version. In a short clip released on YouTube, one sees a close-up of Castellucci's face that would be impossible for the attending audience.[9] Even in the short trailer clip, the viewer can see the performance from several perspectives available only to the camera: the close-up of Castellucci, the view of the audience from the upstage wall, and images of the man free-climbing the palace walls from an equivalent height in the space.

A conventional view of performance and presence claims that to understand the full work, it must be experienced in real time and physical space. For Castellucci and Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio, in particular, we should also take note of what might best be described as an affective gap in the emotional and aesthetic distance between the original performance and screen record. Surely, the visceral experience of watching a nearly naked man free-climb the palace walls cannot be duplicated on-screen, to say nothing of the sensory manipulations for which Castellucci has become renowned. Stephen Di Benedetto has written compellingly on Socìetas Raffaello Sanzio's work in this respect, arguing for a phenomenological approach to the work beyond visual analysis and taking specific note of the ways that sounds and physical sensations shape the viewer's perception and experience of the work.[10] Certainly, the sense of danger in *Inferno* is clearly diminished for the telematic critic. Such a viewer can be comforted by the certainty of

an event already completed and the comfort of viewing a potentially dangerous event with aesthetic distance.

But anyone who has ever been startled or frightened while watching a horror film, even in one's own living room, knows that this performance affect is not limited to the live or even lived experience. In perhaps one of the earliest examples of the power of new digital technology in cinema, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) demonstrated that certain camera techniques could be as viscerally powerful as any live performance. A fiction film created in a visual style of amateur-found footage, *The Blair Witch Project* caused some audiences to experience violent nausea.[11] As Steven Shaviro has argued, "Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" and, further, that contemporary media (what Shaviro refers to as postcinematic) function not in the absence of affect but, rather, as "machines for generating affect."[12] Take note of an early scene in which Castellucci is set upon by snarling, and apparently authentically angry, dogs. While the experience of the dogs in performance was startling for most, the unique visual proximity of the camera to his attack renders the event arguably more immediate to the screen viewer by creating greater intimacy to the action than was perceptible to the live audience at Avignon.[13] Rather than dismiss the recorded version as having no affective relationship to the performance, we might further investigate the conditions of the performance via its digital record.

Beyond the parallels to cinema, the affective experience facilitated through representation and digital media aligns with what Castellucci articulates elsewhere in the performance. *Inferno* explores the negotiations of reality and representation, the dynamics of spectatorship, and the negotiations of pain and pleasure. The performance opens with Castellucci declaring, "My name is Romeo Castellucci" and then enduring the dog attack as a dark pun on Roland Barthes's death of the author. The figure of Andy Warhol presides over the photographic documentation of a car crash, which is itself a restaging of a crash that killed a member of Castellucci's company. In the second part of the trilogy, *Purgatorio*, the violent rape of a child is rendered entirely through the mediated sounds of the boy's suffering offstage. And, the final installation of the trilogy, *Paradiso*, eschews live presence entirely, inviting viewers to witness a tableau in one of Avignon's church ruins only to interrupt the vision periodically with a haunting black cloth that operates much like the black strips between individual frames in a filmstrip. If there was ever a production that aligned with the representation strategies of its documentation, it is Castellucci's adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Viewing the digital version cannot necessarily replace the experience of the live performance—the sensations of heat in midsummer Avignon, the feeling of being among the crowd, the grandeur of the Palais des Papes—but it would be a mistake to claim that the performance in Avignon (or many other large-scale productions) can be fully apprehended by its live audience. Looking at other examples of contemporary doc-

umentation, such as the streaming version of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, performances in the subscription series Ontheboards.tv, and the digital Routledge Performance Archive, one can find numerous instances of documentation that, like Castellucci's *Inferno*, show aspects of performance that exceed the view of the live audience.

Whether viewing work conceived of as telematic performance or through the interconnected networks of performance documentation and media, contemporary critics need to engage a mode of viewing and critique that can account for media representation not as a supplement or secondary factor but as simultaneously an integral part of the performance and even parallel performance site. Previously, I have argued for the need to view performance events and digital records as part of a mutually dependent and constitutive network that continues to shape the performance event after an embodied staging.[14] Within this network, we can further account for affective experi-

Romeo Castellucci's *Inferno*, 2008. Photo: Christophe Raynaud de Lage

ences, what Miriam Felton-Dansky and Jacob Gallager-Ross call "the structures . . . of digital feeling," after Raymond Williams (see "Digital Feelings," 1).

There are several possible models for how we might approach an affective criticism in performance media, but one may be drawn from reality television. In her analysis of reality television and the pleasures of spectatorship, Misha Kavka details the processes by which viewers become engaged with the performances on screen: "Contrary to Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, which empties signification of real-world links," she claims, "reality TV has affective reality: feeling for the participants guarantees their reality, and the fact that they are 'real' justifies the feeling."[15] Like reality television, recordings of performances often establish themselves as events that *really* happened. Castellucci's *Inferno* clearly establishes the presence of an audience, and Bilal's direct address to the camera echoes the behind-the-scenes confessionals of television programs like CBS's *Big Brother*. Thus, when we consider the emotional impact of performance documentation, we can look with a perspective learned from reality television, where the viewer questions both the accuracy of the media representation and the reality on which the documentation is based, while simultaneously attending to the affective relations developed by the screen versions.

The resulting critical response cannot be to omit the digital record from consideration but instead needs to acknowledge the role of the media record both in shaping the reception of the performance and as an enduring factor in future considerations. Given the emergence of hybrid performances and the ubiquity of digital performance, interactive digital performance art, and hybrid genres, including telematics and virtual and networked performance, performance criticism can neither presume a privileged copresence in viewing nor overlook the critical differences between the live event and the mediated record. Even as we too often valorize the experience of a live event above the mediated record, increasingly many of us rely on digital media to facilitate our critical responses. Rather than elide this engagement with performance, critics have the opportunity to explore new modes of performance as always already mediated through diverse interactions. I have argued elsewhere that theater *is* media. What is needed now is a mode of criticality that can acknowledge both the digital record and the generative event as complements of what is an always incomplete and evolving record. In an age of digital media, nearly all performance is, at some point in its history, telematic. This means that our critical commentary for a theater work like *Inferno* needs to acknowledge, not only the embodied performance of a theater work like *Inferno* in Avignon, but also its digital documentation, as equally *the* performance of Castellucci's production. Performance critics of all genera can engage the vocabularies of film and media analysis, looking at the construction of the media record as a critical feature of performance and marking the differences and discrepancies between the various archival elements. As evidence from the documents reveal, the view of the live event may be as incomplete as that of the digital record.

This approach also demands that recordings be more commonly accessible, not only through paid subscription services, such as Ontheboards.tv, Electronic Arts Intermix, or the Routledge Performance Archive, but also with free access for scholars, students, and the public through robust funding to libraries and archives. Such collections are expensive to create and maintain, and upgrading technology requires the continual investment of resources. However, the advantage of digital records diminishes when only the best-resourced critics can access them.

To return to my opening example, of course my colleague did see *Inferno*, despite not having attended the live performance in Avignon. The mediated record was evidently as rich an experience for him as the live event was for others. Moreover, the fallacy of a single original site is belied by the discrepancies that emerge between various iterations of the piece.[16] However, rather than privileging one view over another, critical analyses are strengthened by attending specifically to the media artifact as a performative and affective document within a constellation of engagements with the primary performance. In the case of *Inferno*, such digital documents not only can support the analyses but also can enhance the philosophical explorations of Castellucci himself. Rather than omit or ignore the digital records, criticism can point to these as vital, ongoing sites of performance, albeit viewed through a different lens. It would be a mistake, however, to pretend that the documentation was *the* performance. After all, this is the theater, and thus not a place for pretending.

NOTES

1. Simon Nora and Alain Minc, *The Computerization of Society: A Report to the President of France* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 3–4.

2. See Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Johannes H. Birringer, *Media and Performance: Along the Border* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Sarah Bay-Cheng et al., eds., *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

3. Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 12; Christopher Bedford, "The Viral Ontology of Performance," in *Perform Repeat Record*, ed. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 77–87.

4. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 100.

5. Chiel Kattenbelt, "Intermediality in Theater and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships," *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación/Culture, Language and Representation* 6 (2008): 19–29; Martin Harries, "Theater and Media before 'New Media,'" *Theater* 42, no. 2 (2012): 7–25; Christopher Balme, "Surrogate Stages: Theater, Performance and the Challenge of New Media," *Performance Research* 13, no. 2 (2008): 80–91.

6. Steve Dixon, with Barry Smith, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 115.

7. Katja Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 109.

8. Michael LeVan, "Digital Proximities," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2013): 246.

9. "Romeo Castellucci */ Inferno*," YouTube video, from a performance at Festival d'Avignon, directed by Don Kent, July 2008, posted by "deSingel Internationale Kunstcampus," June 21, 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOv3QsyJG2I.

10. Stephen Di Benedetto, "Sensing Bodies: A Phenomenological Approach to the Performance Sensorium," *Performance Research* 8, no. 2 (2003): 100–108, and *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

11. Emily Wax, "The Dizzy Spell of 'Blair Witch Project,'" *Washington Post*, July 30, 1999, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/movies/features/witchdizzy.htm.

12. Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 3. Note also Brian Massumi's distinction between affect and emotion in this context in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) and "The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens: A Semblance of a Conversation," *Inflexions Journal*, no. 1 (2008), www.inflexions.org/n1_The-Thinking-Feeling-of-What -Happens-by-Brian-Massumi.pdf.

13. Interestingly, this was not the case for those who saw the trilogy performed at London's Barbican Centre. There, the audience's proximity was much closer to the performance, allowing for perspectives much closer to the documentation version than what was experienced in Avignon.

14. Sarah Bay-Cheng, "Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance," *Theater* 42, no. 2 (2012): 27–41.

15. Misha Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), xi–xii.

16. Having witnessed the extraordinary visceral impact of *Paradiso* on a hot summer's day outside in the ruins of Avignon, it is impossible for me to imagine the equivalent staged in an interior space, even one as expansive as the Barbican.