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The Internet, Theatre and Time: transmediating the *theatron*

ABSTRACT

This article considers recent instances of theatre on and through the Internet, to examine relations between the two media. It considers 'transmediation' as a process whereby characteristics of one medium are conveyed or refunctioned in another. It addresses the specific mediality of the theatre and the Internet, to assess ways in which space and time are extruded in the latter. In particular, the article considers the matter of temporality, observing that the Internet both complicates and extends performance's characteristic dealings with liveness and presence. It examines performances by companies including New Paradise Laboratories, elastic future, the Hamnet Players, Station House Opera and Forced Entertainment, along with the phenomenon of live-streamed theatre, to argue for the importance of a distributed present as a feature of online performance transactions.

KEYWORDS

The Internet, Internet theatre, temporality, transmediation

Begging for theatre (and transmediation)

To begin with the recent reflections of two experimental theatre directors, each of whom has grappled with the creation of theatre in and through the Internet. Whit MacLaughlin is artistic director of the Philadelphia-based performance company New Paradise Laboratories. When asked why he chose the Internet as a site for the company's 2011 web- and location-based production *Extremely Public Displays of Privacy*, MacLaughlin answered with laconic evangelism, 'It's a great performance space with plenty of interesting features and lots of real estate. It's easy to get to, is easy on the gas expenditure, and is begging for theater.'[1] *Extremely Public Displays* was a multimodal set of pieces, as I discuss further below. It offered the opportunity to undertake a promenade, attend a real-time concert performance, watch a film (by way of a screening that was 'theatrical' in the cinematic sense of requiring you to be there in person), and work your way through different kinds of online performances and artifacts. It raises some familiar questions about theatre and performance in an environment of hybrid digital production. How important, here, are notions of liveness and co-presence? What happens to temporality and duration? What of narrative, character and persona, in this piece that tells a story across media of two fictional friends?

Similar questions arise in relation to *Longitude*, presented by the theatre

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[1] Snyder, Christina, and Nicholas Gilewicz (2011) 'Whit McLaughlin On "Extremely Public Displays of Privacy",' Fringe Arts blog, http://fringearts.com/2011/09/15/whit-mclaughlin-on-extremely-public-displays-of-privacy/, posted 15 September 2011. For details of the company, see http://www.newparadiselaboratories.org/. For the online manifestion of the project, see http://extremelypublicdisplays.com/. See also http://www.phawker.com/2011/09/19/fringe-review-extremely-public-displays-of-privacy/. All links in this article were accessed on 27 September 2016.

company elastic future as a co-commission by LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) 2014 and The Space (a digital curation outfit founded by Arts Council England and the BBC). The piece was webcast live in three weekly episodes of around twenty minutes in length, presenting a narrative concerning climate change and the commodification of water that involved characters in Barcelona, Lagos and London.[2] The locations were brought together in a live mix. Hence the title *Longitude* – it is a little easier to interface remotely when everyone is in more or less the same time zone. In an online post-show discussion, director Erin Gilley was asked why she described the work as 'theatre'. 'It's live,' she responded,

> and to me theatre is about that connection between an actor and an audience that happens live – so that was sort of a question for us, can you do theatre over the Internet, does it still feel like theatre, do we need the audience there for this to happen? … And in terms of how we produce it, the show must go on. … We get one shot at it.[3]

Each production represents an engagement with the Internet as a zone for theatre. It is fair to say that there is no single standard for 'Internet theatre', whether by way of modes of production or assembled technologies of dissemination (*Longitude*, for instance, was captured by Logitech cameras and

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[2] The episodes were webcast on 9, 16 and 23 June 2014. See https://www.liftfestival.com/events/longitude/?spektrix_bounce=true. For details of the company, see http://www.elasticfuture.com/longitude.html. For details of The Space, see https://www.thespace.org.
[3] 'Longitude Q&A' video at http://www.andfestival.org.uk/events/longitude-elastic-future-hellicar-lewis-usuk/.

webcast on Google Hangouts on Air, but of course other devices and streaming

platforms are available). For small companies in particular, use of the Internet

still has its challenges. Marc Blinder, elastic future's producer, comments that

'global access to Internet bandwidth is the hardest part with this. Like,

everywhere it is a problem' – including superhighway cities such as London and

New York.[4] Gilley concurs, observing that 'Things go wrong all the time, and it's

rarely the same thing that goes wrong.'[5] The new frontier, then, is not an easy

territory. I am not primarily concerned with the Internet in its function as a

depository for pervasive cultural performance, whether by way of the perma-

presence on news feeds and specialist sites of political, celebrity or sporting

activities; or people teaching others how to play the guitar through tuition

videos; or the ever-accumulating archive of performances from film and

television. Instead I'd like to take MacLaughlin's notion that the Internet is

'begging for theater' at face value, and look for the extension of the older

medium, theatre – durational, three-dimensional and involving co-presence – in

and through this newer medium of communication. Is the Internet really that

well disposed towards theatre, or at least to theatre as we think we know it?

For the purposes of this article I am using 'theatre' in its broad sense to

denote a range of medial qualities that we can consider in relation to the specific

mediality of the Internet. I have sympathy with Jørgen Bruhn's preference for the

term 'mediality' over 'medium', on the grounds that mediality is 'more closely

related to the process of mediation in communicative situations'.[6] Bruhn works

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jørgen Bruhn, *Intermediality and Narrative Literature: Medialities Matter* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. **.

in the same institution (Linnaeus University, Sweden) – and indeed the same

research group (the Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies) – as Lars

Elleström, who has developed a systematic account of media and their

interrelations. In a recent work (2014), Elleström discusses the transposition of

medial characteristics from one medium to another. This, he suggests, is a

dynamic process: it is 'axiomatic … that a transfer of media characteristics among

different types of media always involves transformation to some degree:

something is kept, something is added, and something is removed.'[7] This token of

difference is particularly intriguing, now that we have at least a generation of

Internet performance to reflect upon. Elleström's scheme envisages a 'source

medium' and a 'target medium' in instances of transmediation.[8] In my discussion

in these pages it may appear that the source medium is the theatre, the target

medium the Internet – although the nature of the technological development of

the Internet, bringing its own medial characteristics from diverse preceding

media (video, film, television, photography), means that the relationship is not as

mono-directional as Elleström's scheme might suggest. Indeed, his model has

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[7] Lars Elleström, *Media Transformation: The Transfer of Media Characteristics Among Media* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 4. See also Lars Elleström, 'The Modalities of Media: A Model for Understanding Intermedial Relations,' in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. by Lars Elleström (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 11–48. In this analysis both theatre and the Internet would be what Elleström describes as 'qualified media', subject to social, aesthetic and technological determination. Space precludes further discussion here, but it suffices to consider theatre and the Internet as recognisably distinct media. See Andy Lavender, 'Modal Transpositions toward Theatres of Encounter, or, in Praise of "Media Intermultimodality"', *Theatre Journal* 66:4 (2014), pp. 499-518, for a discussion of Elleström's account of 'intermultimodality'.
[8] Ibid, pp. 16-18. See Lars Elleström, 'Adaptations within the Field of Media Transformations,' in *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions*, ed. by Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik, and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 113–32, for additional consideration of the notion of transmediation.

something of the flavour of Bolter and Grusin's celebrated account of remediation, where the newer medium both supplants and refreshes the older.[9] In the instances that I discuss below, theatre artifacts are not simply transposed to the Internet, but rather the newer medium accommodates theatrical presentation *similarly to* but *differently from* the medium of theatre. It retheatres multimedially. Time, space and event within theatre are coterminous (the space and event are accessed in time-experienced-in-the-present), whilst in the Internet they are multi-synchronous (different spaces and events are accessed coterminously in time-experienced-in-the-present, but may also be experienced in alternative relations – for example, by way of access after the event to material that was broadcast live).

One final starting point. In his essay 'Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum', Giorgio Agamben describes the 'modern concept of time [as] a secularization of rectilinear, irreversible Christian time'.[10] Over and against this he poses 'an immediate and available experience on which a new concept of time could be founded. … it is pleasure' – where, in Agamben's analysis, happiness and history come together in a form of 'freedom in the moment'.[11] He starts the essay as follows:

[9] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Massachussetts: MIT Press, 2002 [1999]).
[10] Giorgio Agamben, 'Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum', in *Infancy & History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993; first published in Italian as *Infanzia e storia*, Giulio Einandi Editore, 1973), 89-105 (p. 96).
[11] Ibid., p. 104.

Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain

experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and thereby has to

be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular

experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in

this experience.[12]

We might add that no new medium is possible without a relationship to

time, and that's particularly true of the Internet. I came to Agamben's essay by

way of Maurya Wickstrom's short piece flagging her concern with temporality,

and 'with opening out the very meaning and practices of temporality itself'.[13]

Wickstrom's project is to examine temporality as part of a neoliberal cultural

formation and as evidenced in cultural production, particularly theatre. The

Internet, too, is of its time.

The mediality of the Internet

Let's start with the mediality of the Internet and work backwards to the theatre.

As Toni Sant observes, even after two decades 'this new medium is still in its

formative years'.[14] What are the affordances of the Internet as a medium for

performance, and particularly, as Sant has it, one that offers 'something more

than a simple remediation of dramatic literature through new technologies'?[15]

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[12] Ibid., p. 91.
[13] Maurya Wickstrom, 'Thinking about Temporality and Theatre', *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre,* 28:1 (Winter 2016), p. ** .
[14] Toni Sant, 'Theatrical performance on the Internet: How far have we come since Hamnet?', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 9:2 (2013), 247-259 (p. 257).
[15] Ibid, p. 257.

An answer to this question, I think, lies in good part in its specific mediality.

Whilst the Internet has a long pre-history, it coalesces as a technological development in 1993 and the very early days of hypertext transfer protocol (http, formulated by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991).[16] Uptake was laboriously slow at first (even colleagues in his own institution CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, didn't all see the point of Berners-Lee's discovery), and then extraordinarily rapid. Schmidt and Cohen remark that 'In the first decade of the twenty-first century the number of people connected to the Internet worldwide increased from 350 million to more than 2 billion.'[17] Such exponential growth was secured by way of reciprocal advances in computing, electronic engineering and telecommunications – the multi-stranded backbone of digital culture. User engagement and interaction have become key features since the quiet revolution

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[16] See Johnny Ryan (2010) *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future*, London: Reaktion Books, for a clear and granular account of the development of the Internet. For a readable account centring on the contributions of the individuals involved (that accordingly personalises the history), see Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators: How a group of hackers, geniuses, and geeks created the digital revolution* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), and in particular the chapters on the Internet (pp. 217-265) and the Web (pp. 405-465). The Internet Society website includes information about the history of the Internet, including an account by some of those involved in its foundation: see http://www.internetsociety.org/internet/what-internet. For a set of informed and suggestive predictions, see Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business* (London: John Murray, 2013). For an historical account of performance on the Internet, see Sant, 'Theatrical performance on the Internet'. For an extensive account of performance in and through the digital, see Steve Dixon, with Barry Smith, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2007); and particularly (for present purposes) chapters on liveness, telematics, webcams, online performance, theatre in cyberspace, and time. For an account of plays that take the Internet and online cultures or practices as their subject matter, see Matt Trueman, 'What can theatre say about the internet?', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jan/21/theatre-say-about-internet.

[17] Schmidt and Cohen, The New Digital Age, p. 4.

provided by Web 2.0, the generic term for a subsequent phase of software and communications developments, including video- and sound-file sharing, faster broadband (as opposed to 'dial-up') connections, and the greater availability of online access and affordable devices, including (from around 2007) smart phones.[18]

As a medium the Internet is also multimedial, involving its users as readers, writers and spectators of text, images, movies and sound files. Consider the Internet's performance of conjunction through separateness; its layering of spaces; its emphasis on the networked connectedness of people as a feature of temporal presence (or, being in the 'now'); its invitation to absorption and a form of immersion; its disposition to information and personal presentation. All these lend it to the warp and weft of theatrical presentation, albeit through a medially distinct set of operations.

In *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future* Johnny Ryan discusses the notion of 'extruded content' as a key characteristic of post-Web 2.0 culture, whereby individuals 'pull' content as they desire it, rather than being subject to a producer or corporation 'pushing' it to them.[19] This notion of extrusion – being pulled out or reshaped – is also useful in thinking about time and space, and this brings us to the specific dramaturgical challenges and possibilities offered by Internet theatre. Firstly, what is it in the theatre that is being extruded?

The mediality of theatre (with the Internet in view)

The term 'theatre' is derived from the Greek *theatron*, meaning a seeing place – a

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[18] See Ryan, *A History of the Internet*, pp. 137-150.
[19] Ibid, pp. 154-58.

space for a group of people (a public) to witness presentation. It has connotations of communal gathering, but also evokes entertainment. This suggests both functionality and interrelationality, whilst the seeing place is also a *space*. The *theatron* is literally the place of the audience. I like it as a term in relation to the engagement-machine that is the Internet, for it reminds us that 'theatre' encompasses its audience as much as its stage. As David Wiles suggests, 'Theatre is pre-eminently a spatial medium, for it can dispense with language on occasion but never with space.'[20] Wiles has written extensively about space in relation to theatre (classical Greek and otherwise), whilst in *theatre & time* he points to the phenomenological, historical, and rhythmic structuring of time in the theatre. 'In practice it is impossible to conceptualise time except through spatial metaphors', he suggests (so, time bends, time flashes past).[21] We will return to this.

In his reflection upon 'the theatrical situation', Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests that a '*situation of reception* … arises when the theatre brings people together – normally, in a space that is to some degree public.'[22] If this describes the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens, it can apply no less to the Internet as a site of public dissemination and engagement. Lehmann goes on to observe that whilst theatre may self-evidently appear to be a shared enterprise, 'the individual provides the only site of experience that we can grasp, both intimately and

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[20] David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance space and theatrical meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 3.
[21] David Wiles, *theatre & time* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 2.
[22] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. by Erik Butler (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 122 (original emphasis).

ultimately.'[23] *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* expands on matters of experience in accordance with a wider current of thinking that addresses phenomenal encounter. It also suggests (in parallel, since this isn't Lehmann's focus) a paradigm for Internet spectatorship. If we can think of the Internet as an extended theatre – given its *theatron*-like qualities – we can do so all the more readily when we consider its predisposition to individual engagement and experience (the single viewer/participant at her device or desktop).

Lehmann reminds us of the specific medial attributes of theatre. As well as offering a site of communal reception, the theatre provides a space of memory and remembrance, critically involving co-presence, embodied engagement and communal experience.[24] 'As a performative process,' Lehmann observes, 'theatre exhibits a specific temporality'[25] – which we can describe as a present-ness derived not only from the presence of the performers but the affective engagement of the spectators (or indeed participants). Lehmann opens out into a conception of theatre in which absence may be no less significant: 'theatrical experience essentially involves bodies: living, breathing bodies that shape experience even when they are explicitly presented to the observer as absent – say, through the use of media and avatars.'[26] The point here is that the medial spaces and process of theatre are notably adjacent to those of the Internet. Adjacent, but not precisely overlaid. It the Internet itself 'exhibits a specific temporality', for instance, this necessarily extends or complicates how we think of liveness and presence in performance.

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[23] Ibid, p. 122.
[24] Ibid, pp. 125-129.
[25] Ibid, p. 126.
[26] Ibid, p. 129.

'Putting place into the order of time'[27]

Steve Dixon and Barry Smith's *Digital Performance*, published in 2007 and
containing a compendious set of examples, remains an obvious source for
discussions of Internet theatre. Nearly a decade later, we can see some
continuities in how this new medium appears to be evolving both as a site for
theatre, and as a medium that repurposes some of the key qualities of the
theatrical. Before we go forward, however, let's step back nearly a further
decade. Dixon briefly addresses Alice Rayner's 'Everywhere and Nowhere:
Theatre in Cyberspace', published in 1999, and it is worth revisiting her essay. It
contains insights that continue to resonate, and that help to round out a
theoretical premiss before we consider some specific instances of performance.
Rayner's aim is 'to explore the emerging conditions of telepresence as a
transformation of theatre space, a transformation that supplies an epistemology
that does not have its foundation in the languages of space.'[28] On the face of it,
this appears to require new conceptions of space and spatiality, given that the
prefix *tele* insists upon 'distance, remoteness, and lack of presence', although it
also bears most intriguingly upon temporality.[29]

    As Rayner suggests,

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[27] Alice Rayner, 'Everywhere and Nowhere: Theatre in Cyberspace', in *Of Borders
and Thresholds: Theatre, History, Practice, and Theory*, ed. by Michael Kobialka
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 278-302 (p. 285).
[28] Ibid, p. 279. The term 'telepresence' was coined by Marvin Minsky in 1980, in
order to emphasise 'the importance of high‑quality sensory feedback' in relation
to automated robotics. See Marvin Minsky, 'Telepresence', OMNI, June 1980,
http://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/papers/Telepresence.html.
[29] Rayner, 'Everywhere and Nowhere', p. 281.

In telepresence, the apparatus alters the placement of bodies and puts them in terms of time, not place. Geometic space is de-materialized through the digital transmissions and rematerialized in the video apparatus, putting place into the order of time. "Here,", "there," and the boundary between them do not signify when they are simultaneous.[30]

I'm not at all sure of the final sentence quoted above, but the profoundly suggestive argument is that telepresence puts 'place into the order of time'. In this case, the degrees of remoteness of distributed virtual spaces are arguably less significant than their arrangement *in and through time*. We might define 'theatrical "presence"' in Rayner's construction as both a mode of *being there* – that is, inhabiting a particular place – and a mode of *being now* – that is, transacting in the present moment. Where initially it seemed that the Internet displaced *space*, we can see that it also variously *effaces*, *emphasises* and *extends* time. This brings us again to oft-discussed notions of liveness and presence in theatre and performance. The medial nuance provided by the Internet lies in the diffusion of liveness and presentness in online (and indeed offline) situations, involving an *extruded* time and in particular a disjunct present that permeates virtual and actual spaces. Where Wiles observed, with justification, that 'it is impossible to conceptualise time except through spatial metaphors', in relation to theatre and performance online we might conceptualise space insofar as it belongs to time, and in particular to a *now moment* or a *back then* or *both simultaneously*.

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[30] Ibid, pp. 284-285.

This extruded temporality refigures our fascination with the live and the current. It is not (just) that the Internet apes the theatre in a kind of nostalgia for fleshy communion – rather (equally), the theatre is the modal form whereby digital technologies express our appearance to each other in the present moment. I address below instances of live (in some aspect) performance, in order to focus on the *transmediation* of theatre to and through the new medium provided by Internet technology.

A Shakespearean trajectory

The originary example of Internet theatre is commonly agreed to be *Hamnet: Shakespeare's Play Adapted for IRC* [Internet Relay Chat, a platform for online communication](1993), by the Hamnet Players; followed in 1994 by *PCbeth: an IBM clone of Macbeth*.[31] Both pieces are notably text-based, by way of an adaptation of the source material (respectively Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*) that makes jocular and irreverent interventions whilst conveying the gist of the story. The text for PCBeth, for example, includes the following:

    * SCENE 3: Night in the castle. A hallway. [32]

    * Enter Pcbeth. [33]

    <Pcbeth> Is this a dagger that I see before me? Crikes this castle's spooky at

    night![32]

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[31] See Sant, 'Theatrical performance on the Internet', pp. 251-52.
[32] The *PCBeth* script and images are at
http://www.marmot.org.uk/hamnet/pscript.htm.

The text was generated by way of a live interchange between remote participants who had prepared their contributions, so that the Internet enabled both a form of contiguity of the 'actors', presenting work that had been rehearsed up to a point, and the co-viewing of the spectators. The piece was *accumulative* in that it gathered its material over time, so that the audience was able to look back at the entirety of the piece whilst it was being produced – still a feature of contemporary blogs and text chat. The time of presentation is thereby extruded, since the performance becomes available by way of a trace that is also a presence. The present becomes not so much a series of fleeting and disappearing moments, but rather carries its past in full visibility.

For all that, a principal of liveness remained core to the project. Video streaming protocols had yet to be developed and the performance was realized as an adapted playtext or score. The mode of theatre here is one of live writing. Drama is downplayed in the service of real-time production – so *immediacy of exchange* overrides content in the Hamnet Players' experiments. This primary instance of Internet theatre indicates a trade with liveness and eventness that continues to apply in more recent (Web 2.0) scenarios featuring real-time accumulative text exchange, particularly through micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter. *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a co-production by the Royal Shakespeare Company and the interaction design company Mudlark, provides an instance of a project developed for this context. Six actors performed a version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by way of a series of Twitter exchanges over a five-week period (April 10-May 12 2010), improvising within the structure provided by a story grid prepared by the writers Bethan Marlow and Tim Wright

with director Roxanna Silbert.[33] The creative process here entailed the usual

logistics of dramaturgical structuring and preparation that apply to more

orthodox theatre projects that adapt classic material. It also required a

differently schematic organization of the serial form of daily engagement and the

use of diverse media platforms (including Facebook, YouTube and Xboxlive) by

the characters. The outcome is a form of theatre that is distributed in two senses:

firstly (spatially) through the segmented text chat that reached audiences in

diverse locations; secondly (temporally) through its elongation over time by way

of an extended serial that played across various platforms.

This brings us to a form of temporal multiplicity. The production invited its

viewer/participants to access it during its moments of production, whilst also

allowing them to dwell and delve outside these moments. Time, here, is managed

such that engagements in time can be both *present* and *postponed*. The project –

and this is true of other pieces that leave a residue of text or images – offers

access over a long duration, whilst the thing that is accessed still appears to us in

its medial mode as *something-originally-live* – that is (here), as a form of theatre.

If we access space *virtually*, we participate in time *vicariously*, both in the

theatrical moment of construction, and through ongoing and potentially

reiterated consumption of the 'theatre' that has been constructed.

Telematic theatre

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[33] See http://wearemudlark.com/projects/such-tweet-sorrow/;
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suchtweetsorrow; the archive of tweets is at
http://www.bleysmaynard.net/suchtweet/.

Let's consider a different kind of Internet theatre – not dissimilar from *Longitude*,

above – that entails the presentation of performance as a one-time event across

different geographical sites. Station House Opera's *What's Wrong With the World*

(2008) linked locations in London and Rio de Janeiro for a performance in real-

time, as did the company's previous telematic projects, *Live from Paradise* (2004-5,

Amsterdam and UK), *Play on Earth* (2006, Newcastle, Sao Paolo and Singapore) and

The Other is You (2006, Brighton, Gronigen and Berlin).[34] The task here is to merge

the separate spaces in a way that facilitates a play of continuities by the performers,

not in the mode of open-ended corporeal interaction in other kinds of telematic

performance, but within a more overtly dramatic paradigm that draws together

motifs of representation and formal interaction.[35] In *Dissolved* (2014) the company,

in association with Florian Feigl and Christopher Hewitt in Berlin, took the trope

of interconnection a step further. It explored mergings of the body by way of a

live dissolve played back (in this instance) in screen spaces in Beaconsfield in

London and the Sophiensaele in Berlin.[36] The piece emblematises the tendency

towards fusion and hybridity that is characteristic of intermedial production in

digital culture. As Lindren, Dahlberg-Grundberg and Johansson suggest, we can

> understand hybridity as a process that not only introduces something
>
> radically new but also, or perhaps mainly, as an occurrence that describes a

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[34] The company's website is at http://www.stationhouseopera.com/.

[35] Joseph Hyde's *me and my shadow* (2012), developed with the National Theatre, London, and the interactive arts producers body>data>space, provides an instance of a more open-ended telematics project. See http://www.bodydataspace.net/projects/meandmyshadow/.

[36] See http://www.stationhouseopera.com/project/6194/ – follow the link to the video to see an instance of body-merging.

fundamental change in the constitution of the interlinked principles … One

could perhaps talk about a dynamic hybridity, a hybridity always in the

making, always becoming something else, something new.[37]

This connects with Elleström's argument that transmediation involves the

development of something different. Station House Opera's Internet-theatre

pieces attempt to elide the boundaries in play, presenting actions that are clearly

rehearsed, within hybrid scenographies designed for framing by the camera.

This facilitates co-temporal encounters between performers whose bodies

create the (re)presentation in a composite virtual space. The event is accessed

diversely by spectators in the same room as a specific set of performers; the

same spectators watching the virtual space in which other performers (and

spectators) appear; and those watching solely online.

This ecology of performance entails a sustained flux of presence and

perception, object and subject relations and positions, and a pluralism of media.

The latter, a kind of medial volatility, becomes dynamic through a meld of aesthetic,

technical and referential systems that are *experienced in the moment* to be mutually

in play. If this makes Internet theatre dramaturgically challenging, it nonetheless

means that it is overtly and experientially *dimensional*. It operates through discrete

layerings of time (due to the mapping of time zones, the effects of latency, and in

some instances the interface between live and pre-recorded materials) and space.

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[37] Simon Lindgren, Michael Dahlberg-Grundberg and Anna Johansson, 'Hybrid media culture: An introduction', in *Hybrid Media Culture: Sensing place in a world of flows*, ed. by Simon Lindgren (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-15, (p. 8).

The layerings become increasingly difficult to separate, hence an effect of hybridization.

Live-streamed theatre

No discussion of our present topic would be complete without considering the impact of live broadcast of theatre events, both in cinemas and online. In 2006 the New York Metropolitan Opera began what has become a successful series of live streamings of staged performance, 'New York Met Live in HD'. The National Theatre in London provides another example, live-streaming selected productions since 2009, and a number of theatres have begun offering this mode of encounter to audiences, typically in cinemas, but increasingly online. This is on the one hand a straightforward model of broadcast, but it strikes me as important because it has become part of a cultural milieu that continues to privilege presentness (liveness) over presence (being there), putting 'place into the order of time', as Rayner has it. This also disposes people to watching theatre in a different medium, as Emily Altenau, an actor in *Longitude*, observed, where the Internet simply *mediates* theatre but in so doing reinforces its own facility for the live.[38]

In his consideration of audience survey responses, Martin Barker unpacks what he sees as the key idea of 'closeness' in these performance transactions:

> [It means] access to performers' emotions and interactions; the elimination
> of interference from other audience members; yet the creation in the same

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[38] 'Longitude Q&A' video.

process of a new sense of communality of experience; a sense of privileged

access to performers, designers and directors as well as the production

itself; an intensified sense that performers are doing their best, for you; and

the constitution of the whole event as an *emotional learning experience*.[39]

Whilst this usefully explains some of the dynamics of this growing tendency, it

might be thought familiar to those who watch live sporting events on television,

whether at home or in pubs and sports bars, where the same sense of liveness,

direct access and communality of experience is in play. Mediation by camera is

already part of the commodification of experience in the present.

Nonetheless, 'putting place into the order of time' has a peculiar intensity in

relation to theatrical presentation. By way of example, consider *Complete Works:*

Table Top Shakespeare by Forced Entertainment – a rendition of all 36 of

Shakespeare's plays.[40] Each was distilled into a narrative described by a single

performer (with six actors sharing the oeuvre as a whole) from behind a wooden

trestle-top table. The performer used ordinary objects as characters in the story,

bringing these on and off the table as the narrative demanded. In *Richard III*, for

instance, Richard was represented by an upturned plastic flower pot; Queen

Margaret by a miniature bottle of whisky; Elizabeth by a mug, which housed her

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[39] Martin Barker, '"Live at a Cinema Near You": How Audiences Respond to Digital Streaming of the Arts', in *The Audience Experience: A critical analysis of audiences in the performing arts*, ed. by Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 15-34 (p. 29, original emphasis).

[40] See http://www.forcedentertainment.com/project/complete-works-table-top-shakespeare/. The first performance of the project was at the Berliner Festspiele, Berlin, Germany, 25 June-4 July 2015. *Complete Works* was live-streamed from the Junges Teater as part of the TheaterFestival Basel, 1-9 September 2016 (I watched *Richard III* on 9 September).

children (a nail varnish bottle and two Pritt sticks). The story is told in modern language, not Shakespearean text – simply an account of the plot, with some extrapolation and reflection. The murder of the twins, for example, is described as follows: 'They both have their arms wrapped around each other [the Pritt sticks lie together on the table], and they're snoring slightly, as children do. The murderers make their way towards them, and then they smother them...'

The production was periodically live-streamed, by way of a fixed camera observing the performance. Webcasting here offers access, but also a vicarious form of phenomenal engagement. I found the piece to be absorbing and interesting, not least because I understood that I was co-temporal with the event as live performance, and co-terminous with the festival spectators (whose responses – whose *spectating* – I could hear on occasions) in the venue with the performer. This act of remote viewing became the more concentrated precisely because it existed in a distributed present. I find myself wondering how this is different to watching the football online. It is so, I think, because of the call for attention that theatre makes, and the deliberate conferring of attention in return.

The currency of the present

This brings us back to the challenges posed by *Extremely Public Displays of Privacy* (2011) by New Paradise Laboratories, whose artistic director, Whit MacLaughlin, I quoted at the top of this article. Here, there is no attempt to present Internet theatre as a live phenomenon – rather, it is a medial resource for a multimodal dramaturgical arrangement that nonetheless circulates around a privileging of liveness. As the company's publicity material indicates, the piece is about

the evolving relationship between Fess Elliot – mother, schoolteacher and undiscovered singer/songwriter, and Beatrix Luff (Bea) performance artist, "cool hunter," and mysterious entrepreneur, as they meet online. First, Bea sweeps Fess off her feet and into a surreal game of escalating public dares; then Fess begins to question who Beatrix really is and just how public she wants her life to be.[41]

This scenario is played out through three acts. Act 1 requires audiences to work through series of website manifestations, via Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr and so on, that develop the characters and scenario through fictional material presented as if actual through social media platforms. One segment, for example, shows the Facebook images for the two characters with the clickthrough textbox '+1 Add Friend'. Another shows a video entitled *Dogs*, made ostensibly by Bea. Another shows an iPhone text exchange in which Fess discusses the videos with Bea, in this way building up story information through diverse modules of online content. Act 2, 'A sound/video walk in Philadelphia', is experienced by way of a podcast downloaded by the spectator that provides the soundtrack to a 45-minute tour through parts of the city. The spectator encounters some of the characters' scenarios of dare and public exposure. Act 3, 'Performance', requires the audience to attend a secret location (which turns out to be the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia) to watch a live concert by Fess the musician and a film featuring Bea the artist.

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[41] http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/189605.

Extremely Public Displays utilises the fragmented and multiple spaces of the Internet, and requires its audience to navigate diverse modes of presentation across different places (online sites, the city of Philadelphia, and a church hall) and media (the Internet, video, site-specific promenade, a concert). This sort of multimodal realisation requires a good degree of dramaturgical planning. It entails the production of a reasonably extensive series of short films; the creation of online social media outlets (Facebook accounts, mobile phone identities and so on) and the ongoing curation of these through the project; event planning in relation to the promenade and performances; and, not least, the rehearsal and staging of a show. That's not to say that the project is necessarily more complex than a mono-medial theatre production, but it is *differently* complicated, requiring a segmented set of activities across a wider array of media and artistic outlets. 'Theatre,' in this instance, becomes an umbrella term for an intermedial, multimodal activity that aims at the narrative coherence characteristic of various forms of drama onstage. To that end, the project reflects the splintering and plural distribution of artifacts and communications afforded by the Internet, whilst operating under the sign of Theatre as a unifying representational schema.

What of liveness and temporality in this assemblage? Part of the theatrical schema is the requirement to attend in person. *Extremely Public Displays* could have been presented simply as its website dissemination, so that you could access it in your own time and from the comfort of your own home. The live and co-present events necessarily reduce the production's scope – available only to those who can get to Philadelphia – but increase its specificity as theatre (albeit of an intermedial kind, since the theatrical part is also/actually a promenade,

film and concert). Liveness here is to do with *eventness*, and is a guarantee not only of the performers' presence, but your own as a co-present spectator.

In elastic futures' *Longitude* the live webcast makes the event more widely available, but still in 'theatrical exhibition' mode, in its evanescent currency. This may not appear to be very different from the productions of NTLive, for example – conveying theatre to a dispersed audience – except for the fact that *Longitude* is also filmic in its use of actual locations (rather than theatre sets), and involves live editing to cut between different places and shots. The effort is to bring this together in the live moment – and then make the video recordings available for onward viewing.

What connects the work discussed above? Perhaps an answer lies in the continuing currency of the present – the pull of attention and requirement for co-temporal engagement, and the extruded present offered by the transmedial encounters of the Internet. It may appear that Internet technologies put people in the same virtual space. What they also do is put them *in the same time*, in appearance and interconnection. It will be for further studies to ascertain how this relates to neoliberal constructions of temporality, experience and consumption; and how that older concern of dramaturgy – to do with content and representation – might be played out in this newer domain. For now, we can observe that being in the *same time* as others, adjacent to performance, guarantees a transmedial togetherness that is oddly familiar. It provides the sort of experiential affirmation that underwrites our engagement with the theatre.