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“I Am Alive in Here”: Liveness, Mediation and the Staged Real of David Blaine’s Body

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how mediation has impacted the meanings of David Blaine’s endurance feats *Above the Below* (2003) and *Dive of Death* (2008), using both traces of the live events found through academic and journalistic commentary, and the films made that document these performances. Using this evidence, both performances suffered from an ambivalent reception that suggested they failed to entertain on the level of high or popular culture. Mediatization plays a recuperative role in understanding Blaine’s body as a container of his power and as invulnerable, retroactively interpreting the live events so that he emerges from his ordeals triumphantly as a coherent, heroic subject. *Above the Below* engaged a discourse of individual transcendence that valorized the extraordinary power of Blaine’s body, while the recording of *Dive of Death* attempted a recovery of a stunt that was largely considered to have failed. Both these works therefore engage the potential of mediation to retrospectively interpret performance, offering a ‘version’ of the performance that can be consumed and circulated on its own terms.

KEYWORDS

Liveness, mediatization, body, David Blaine, magic

This article explores two of David Blaine's performances in order to understand the potential impact of mediatization on his performance practices. The term 'mediatization' is here defined according to Nick Couldry's notion of a 'transformative logic or mechanism that is understood to do something distinctive to (that is, to "mediate") particular processes, objects and fields', so that 'many cultural and social processes are now constrained to take on a form suitable for media re-presentation' (2008, p. 4). Once a process, object, or field has undergone mediatization, it becomes mediated; it has passed from one ontological state of being to another, and in doing so its dimensions (spatial, temporal, and affective, amongst others) are altered to the extent that the media representation becomes an object that is independent of the original referent. Discussing the relationship between magic, mediating technology and the body, Simon During argues that Harry Houdini's films were unsuccessful partially because of their mediated form:

Houdini's movies failed because they attempted to exploit what he was famous for, namely those daredevil or "live risk" stunts which are what film (as mechanical reproduction) cannot capture. His escapes occurred in moments laden with a danger and suspense shared by those present. His aura depended on people witnessing him triumph over risk, danger, even death, in that very moment, and not just seeing it represented. (2002, p. 174)

That Houdini's films flopped is indisputable, but During's formulation seems to contain an assumption that people attending the cinema to view Houdini's movies were expecting the texts to reproduce the experience of attending his live events. Joe Kember suggests that, in fact, early cinema audiences were keenly aware of mediation and able to creatively interpret 'the representation of reality', thanks in part to their familiarity with technological and optical magic performances (2010, p. 34). In the context of more contemporary mass entertainment, it is far from clear that the same groups of audiences would be interested in watching Blaine's street magic specials, his live events, and the recordings of those events, nor that they would expect each of these forms to offer the same viewing experiences. Since the days of Houdini, magic has 'found ways to inhabit and energise both film and TV' so that the contemporary scene 'now rivals that of the golden age in terms of popularity and overshadows it both in invention and in its astonishing scope' (Taylor and Nolan, 2015, p. 128). Blaine exemplifies this, as he found global recognition in the 1990s not through performing live, but solely on the basis of his televised work. This article is concerned with two endurance feats that foreground the staging of Blaine's body as heroically surviving despite intense physical privation, *Above the Below* (2003) and *Dive of Death* (2008).

Matthew Reason argues that in considering liveness and mediation in performance, 'we need to think about the exact relationship between seeing a documentation and seeing a performance, about what kind of knowledge of performance we can access through its representations [and] about the interpretations present within each act of representation' (2006, p. 2). Following this, both the live performances and their mediated forms as documentary films are studied, considering how the latter act of representation 'defines its subject' (Reason, *ibid*, p. 4). For Reason, these considerations are linked to the issue that Amelia Jones describes as the 'problematic' of 'doing work on performances you have not seen [in person]' (1997, p. 11). The 'problematic' Jones refers to is that of analysing live performance using the traces found in its documentation, which themselves rely on memory and retrospective interpretation. This 'problematic' is of immediate concern, as this article works from the evidence available from reviews and reports covering the live events, such that the live performances discussed here are already mediated. Given the complexity of the issues outlined by Reason and Jones, the first section of this article is an attempt at situating the following analysis within a discussion on liveness and mediation in both performance and television studies. It seems that the documentaries do not attempt to function as a compensatory mechanism for those who might have wished to attend the live events, or to allow those who did attend to recover or re-live the experience. Considering the duration of the performances - 44 days for *Above the Below* and 60 hours for *Dive of Death*- an attempt to objectively represent the performance 'as it happened' would stretch the tolerance of an audience. Rather, the films seek to foreground the act of mediation, representing the subject in a specific way. The following analysis takes Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's conceptualization of the 'classical body' as its starting point. Elaborating upon Fintan Walsh's use of this term to understand Blaine's work, this framework is used to interpret the staging of Blaine's body as the elevated, statuesque embodiment of high cultural values that always appears in opposition to the grotesque. Applying this framework, it becomes clear that both documentaries retrospectively interpret the live performances, drastically altering their meanings. While the discourse of value that surrounded *Above the Below* suggests that the performance was received with ambivalence ("Disillusionment Over the Thames", 2003, no pagination), the narrative emerging from the documentary primarily foregrounded the extraordinary achievement of bodily transcendence. In *Dive of Death*, Blaine emerges from the live event as a subject within a culture that is overly concerned with maintaining safety and security. Again, the documentary works against this, eliding the failures of the performance to reinscribe Blaine as an extraordinary outsider, pushing his capacity for self-determination to its limits.

CREATING THE RHETORIC OF LIVENESS

Blaine characterises his work as 'street magic', a genre of performance described by magician and author Jamy Ian Swiss as a departure from the centuries-old practice of 'busking' (2007, no pagination). Swiss identifies 'busking' as 'making your living on the street by attracting a crowd in a public setting and then "passing the hat" to earn money', while street magic as it appears in Blaine's work is 'a label for a piece of the marketplace', a 'fantasy' that is not to be conflated with 'real conjuring' (ibid, no pagination). The co-presence of performer and spectator signalled by the term 'busking' is removed from the encounter in Blaine's street magic, which is staged to be recorded and broadcast to a wider audience. There is much to unpack in Swiss' damning analysis of the term, with generational conflicts between magicians and the impact of the amateur community on professionalization being two of the issues he raises. However, his primary concern around street magic appears to be its embeddedness in mediatization, as he identifies the platform for both the marketing and overall dissemination of street magic as occurring through online video. The phrase 'hundreds upon hundreds of homemade videos by adolescent street-magic hobbyists' reveals, in Swiss' opinion, the extent of the damage caused by seductive rhetoric promising consumers they will master complex effects quickly: resulting in would-be magicians recording themselves performing alone for the camera by way of rehearsing, 'inadvertently [exposing] the methods', and bypassing the crucial stage of practicing for a live audience (ibid, no pagination). Although performances disseminated through digital media potentially invite a wider audience (although for unknown amateur magicians, the number of views on YouTube may not necessarily eclipse the handful of spectators that would be reached in live performance), they also allow for much tighter editorial control, and as many takes as necessary to achieve the most effective result. In Swiss' analysis, not only are the terms of accomplished and entertaining performance shifting due to mediatization, so is the meaning of magic itself as a practice that requires a live audience.

More broadly in the discourse of performance studies, an antagonistic relationship has been proposed between live and mediated performances, with liveness often imagined as a superior mode of performance to the mediated, possessing 'a special attraction that cannot be duplicated by other media', the 'buzz of anticipation' and 'sense of occasion' with 'no parallel in the cinema' (King, 2016, p. 12). This echoes Swiss' concerns over the impoverishment of experience that mediated forms of magic offer. In the first edition of his work *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander argues that the concept of 'liveness' itself is only necessary due to the advent of mediatizing technology (1999, p. 51). In his analysis, the concepts of 'liveness' and 'mediatization' themselves are inherently relational, one term lacking in meaning without the other. Liveness is always already conceptually embedded in mediation. Auslander poses the possibility that

mediatization has eroded the aura of performance, its 'special attraction', to the extent that there is no longer a meaningful difference between live and non-live performance:

Following Benjamin, I might argue that live performance has indeed been pried from its shell and that all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal: none is perceived as auratic or authentic, the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text. (ibid, p. 50)

Martin Barker suggests that this use of Benjamin may be 'defensive talk', an attempt to claim liveness as 'the undefinable - therefore almost unstatable - "magic" of culture', the meaning of which 'can only be grasped by pointing to where it is supposedly missing' (2003, p. 38). Barker associates magic with a representational void, suggesting that Auslander is unnecessarily pessimistic about the fragmentation of the cultural hierarchy that prioritises theatre. Live performance, and theatre specifically, emerges from Auslander's account as an endangered form that requires such 'defensive talk' in order to sustain it, as mediated forms dominate culture to such an extent that they have replaced the live: Auslander offers examples of studio audiences as *the* model for spectator behaviour, and live events such as rock shows and sporting matches being shaped around the demands of mediation (ibid, p. 26; ibid, p. 158). In later work, Auslander revises his understanding of liveness to incorporate an analysis of the role that digital media plays in culture, arguing that in interacting with a technological artefact:

Liveness is neither a characteristic of the object nor an effect caused by some aspect of the object such as its medium, ability to respond in real time, or anthropomorphism. Rather, liveness is an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim. (2012, p. 9)

This revised interpretation foregrounds 'interaction', 'engagement', and 'willingness' as key to producing liveness, readjusting the concept to reflect the intimate ways in which media affects our lives in the twenty-first century. Yet the issue of liveness as an ontological state of being cannot be easily dismissed, summoning as it does naturalized conceptions of the value of live and mediated performance. Liveness, or rather the lack of liveness and attendant suspicions regarding authenticity, haunts street magic, creating the imperative to stage liveness rhetorically.

Max Sexton argues that 'because each trick lacks the vital control exercised within the studio', street magic 'depends for much of its appeal on the need to enter into the present, what is happening now to engage in the pleasure of uncertainty due to chance' (2015, p. 26). Further,

the rhetoric of the marvellous suggests a type of audience experience that can be used to open a discussion about the belief or credulity of the spectator as s/he engages with the 'live' event. The viewer is invited to be a witness of a 'marvel', an unmediated event, the unrehearsed spectacle in a public space, in which the complicated machinery of the theatre illusion will be absent. (ibid, p. 27)

Sexton articulates a key tension here, the need for televised performances to convey a sense of unpredictability and possibility that is potentially precluded by mediation, and there are several factors at work to achieve this. First, 'the street' as choice of performance venue, which appears to disavow the theatricality, rehearsal and machinery that the term 'illusion' acknowledges, in favour of the 'canonical' (face-to-face) encounter with participants (Marriott, 2007, p. 6). Second, the fact that viewers did not have to enter directly into an economic transaction in order to view Blaine's street magic programmes, since the specials were originally broadcast on NBC, a channel offered by cable television systems as part of their basic programming package. This form could be accessed with no extra cost and at the convenience of the viewer, so strengthening the association with the immediacy and chance encounter of 'busking'. Street magic potentially occupies a similar place within the mediascape as 'busking' magic within the cityscape, as a form of entertainment that can be chanced upon rather than committed to in advance. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, it is also achieved by the foregrounding of spectatorship, specifically by positioning spectators as witnesses. Where televised magic had often previously conformed to the theatrical convention of the audience facing a proscenium arch, as with *The Paul Daniels Magic Show* (1979-1994) or *The Secret Cabaret* (1990-1992), street magic acknowledged its mediated nature by making spectatorship an important feature of the show. Notwithstanding the venerable practice of busking that Swiss identifies, it is clear that Blaine saw himself as returning to an aspect of magic's heritage that had been neglected, as he stated, 'I'd like to bring magic back to the place it used to be 100 years ago... I like the way Houdini brought magic to the people on the streets, genuinely' (Ryan, 1997, no pagination). This declaration casts Blaine as taking part in the heroic endeavour of reorienting magic 'genuinely' 'back' to 'the people', as well as inserting himself into a long and distinguished performance tradition. The major innovation of the early street magic programmes was the extensive use of reaction footage, so that spectators recruited apparently from the urban environment of the performance became sources of visual pleasure for the viewers watching on television. Blaine's street magic could therefore be considered to participate in the 'demotic turn' in culture identified by Graeme Turner, in which the increasingly visible 'ordinary person' turns themselves into media content (2010, p. 2). Television, with its emphasis on the audio-visual elements of witness, encourages viewers to subscribe to the notion that

'seeing is believing'. As John Ellis writes of televisual witnessing, the 'superabundance' of detail in audio-visual images

[brings] us into contact with individuals, crowds, actions and events, and this contact feels to a significant degree to be unmediated by other humans, however much they may have manipulated the footage... There is always more detail than is needed by the narrative; always more present in the image than is picked out by the commentary; always more to be heard than the foregrounded sounds. (2002, p. 12)

This feeling of un-mediation, of the camera indiscriminately picking up everything in its path whether relevant or not, offers the viewer a sense of 'being there' which is carefully managed throughout Blaine's television performances. The evidence of one's own eyes coupled with an apparently innocent performance space, that of the urban or suburban street, closes down the possibilities for deception.

In practice, of course, it is completely possible that various locations could be loaded in advance with the machinery that they seem to reject. Belief in the innocence of the space allows Blaine to exploit the medium of television to create astonishing illusions. The 'canonical', face-to-face encounter is managed by the magician through the complex physical and psychological processes of misdirection, controlling the audience's attention in such a way that they do not perceive methods behind effects. By contrast, the mediated encounter can be managed firstly at the site of shooting itself with selective filming practices and the use of confederates, and secondly during the postproduction process. The control of the performer in the mediated encounter is thus absolute: though the contact may 'feel' unmediated, since the gaze of the audience is directed by the camera, the audience has no choice but to follow the event as the magician wishes us to see it. Although research on reality television has shown that audiences remain deeply aware of the act of mediation and the possibilities of manipulative editing (Hill, 2011; Skeggs and Wood, 2012), street magic audiences are excluded from any knowledge of the production conditions, meaning that attempts at reconstructing methods for themselves remain wholly speculative. Mediated street magic is a tightly controlled encounter, but one that attempts to evoke spontaneity and possibility through engaging the rhetoric of liveness.

THE CLASSICAL BODY AND STAGING THE EXTRAORDINARY

Mediation captures and amplifies the contrast between Blaine and 'normal' people through repeatedly staging this difference. In his 1997 television special *Street Magic*,

Blaine describes the difference between his work and other magicians' as eschewing the theatricality of the stage:

I wanted to present a different kind of magic than people are used to seeing on TV. I don't work with fancy props, there's no beautiful showgirls, no fancy sets. I work with people and it makes the magic spontaneous. (1997)

This statement draws a link between the foregrounding of the body and a return to a stripped-down, unencumbered authenticity, emphasising the body's powers of signification. As Fintan Walsh has demonstrated, Stallybrass and White's conceptualization of classical and grotesque bodies is useful in understanding how Blaine's body is portrayed as a site of power. Stallybrass and White's work *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* uses notions of the body to trace the construction of 'interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low' in culture through the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque, understanding culture as the product of conceptual interdependencies (1986, p. 2). In their account, high culture cannot exist independently of low culture, much as Auslander's category of the live appears meaningless without that of the mediated. Stallybrass and White emphasise the importance of elevation in conceptualizing the classical body and distancing it from the multiplicity of the grotesque body: 'the classical statue is the radiant centre of a transcendent individualism, "put on a pedestal", raised above the viewer and the commonality and anticipating passive admiration from below' (ibid, p. 21). Through this monumentality, the classical body epitomizes and legitimates official culture. It is identified with 'high' values and discourses, the register of the epic and tragic, as is made clear through the form it takes:

The classical statue has no openings or orifices whereas grotesque costume and masks emphasize the gaping mouth, the protuberant belly and buttocks, the feet and the genitals... The grotesque body is emphasized as a mobile, split, multiple self, a subject of pleasure in processes of exchange; and it is never closed off from either its social or ecosystemic context. The classical body on the other hand keeps its distance. (ibid, p. 22)

These 'closed, homogenous, monumental, centred and symmetrical' systems are encoded within Blaine's embodied performance of superiority (ibid, p. 22). Using this framework, Walsh reads the spectacle of Blaine's body as heroic and essentially non-transgressive, '[corroborating] with the status quo by staging the near disappearance of the subject, only to bring him back to life, in a spectacular coup de théâtre', and furthermore '[bolstering] the association between masculinity and the mastery of self and the laws of nature' (2010, p. 148; ibid, p. 153).

The model of classical restraint described above is clearly evoked in Blaine's endurance feats, which were included repeatedly in his repertoire from 1999 until the airing of the 2013 television special *David Blaine: Real or Magic?*. These 'stunts', as they have been termed in reviews, usually occur in a public place in an urban environment with sites open to all visitors. They often feature extreme privation, such as the requirement to fast or forego sleep for the duration, as well as physical isolation and restraint. Such works included *Frozen in Time* (1999), in which Blaine's body was encased in a block of ice for more than 60 hours, *Drowned Alive* (2006) where he was completely submerged in a spherical tank of water for seven days before attempting a climactic handcuff escape, and *Electrified: One Million Volts Always On* (2012), in which he stood in the middle of an artificially-generated lightning storm, with the current controlled remotely by members of the public, for 72 hours. One of the feats that received the most attention in the United Kingdom was *Above the Below*, in which Blaine was incarcerated for 44 days in a Plexiglas box suspended thirty feet above the South Bank of the River Thames, close to Tower Bridge in London. The dimensions of the box allowed him to stand, sit and lie down, and contained some bedding and continence aids. He remained there without food, reportedly relying on four and a half litres of water each day for sustenance. A camera was also installed inside the box 'to allow those present, and those watching on television, the opportunity of getting the best possible close-up view of Blaine' (Walsh, 2010, p. 150). Consistent with Auslander, the live event itself cannot escape mediation, and from Ellis' comments on televisual witnessing, this mode of viewing may offer greater intimacy than watching while physically co-present. The documentary *Above the Below* comprises an edited version of the programme broadcast live on Channel 4 on 20 October 2003. This recording covers the final hour of Blaine's incarceration, with his release forming the climactic moment of the narrative. It is interspersed with clips of street magic performance, press conferences that took place before the event began, and various moments from the duration of the event, including spectators performing to the camera. The distinction between the live and mediated events is immediately reflected in their duration; spectators would have to be seriously committed in order to witness the live event in its entirety, much less so in order to view the whole documentary. Moreover, where the live event seemed ambiguous, at times frustratingly so according to media commentary, the mediatized version provided an opportunity for Blaine to reclaim the meaning of the event on his own terms, so that *Above the Below* contributed to the illusion of the impervious classical body.

It seems that the aim of *Above the Below* was to present Blaine's body as extraordinarily resilient, as he performed a dignified process of starvation that appeared spectacular in its suffering without being excessive and graphic in its violence. As Walsh notes, Blaine's suspended body directly invokes the elevation that Stallybrass and White reference in

their conceptualization of the classical body, his physical distance from the spectators adding to the monumentality of his feat. Read this way, the work aligns with Amelia Jones' analysis of Chris Burden's tendency to 'reiterate normative codes of masculine artistic genius-as-transcendent' in his work, using pain and privation to inscribe his body as ultimately resilient to the point of indestructibility (1998, p. 132). Indeed, the duration suggests an alignment with such interventions as Burden's *Five Day Locker Piece* (1971) and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performance* series (1978-2000), perhaps more easily than with Houdini's highly physical and ostensibly risky, but much shorter escape performances. A 'demonstrative' performance of self through endurance, identified in Burden's early pieces by Patrick Anderson, is perhaps at play in *Above the Below*, as Blaine's selfhood is constituted through his ability to survive (2010, p. 77). Through the elevation and isolation, *Above the Below* also alludes to Christ's ascension into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil and his subsequent 40-day fast, pointing to the spiritual dimension of fasting. Blaine's physicality received much media interest, perhaps in an attempt to 'zoom in' to the micro-level activities of the body to compensate for the lack of action visible to the naked eye. It was reported that physical symptoms experienced during his incarceration included heart palpitations, breathing problems, backache and blurred vision (Burkeman, 2003, no pagination; Craig, 2003, no pagination; Mann, 2015, no pagination). The team of scientists recording the process of refeeding Blaine after his prolonged fast, taking a rare opportunity to study the effects of starvation on a non-obese subject, reported that he had lost 24.5 kilograms of fat and muscular tissue, equating to 25% of his original body weight (Jackson et al., 2006, p. 892). The elements of isolation and removal no doubt helped to sustain the illusion of the classical body, since both spectators and viewers only have access to auditory and visual elements of the performance (being able to smell and hear the sounds of the deteriorating body might have negated some of the dignity). While Blaine denied himself food, the voiding of bodily waste was also managed with extreme discretion, contributing to the illusion of a lack of openings and orifices that is crucial to sustaining the classical body according to Stallybrass and White. The physical needs of Blaine's body are disavowed: 'owing to the fact that he does not openly display any obvious signs of abjection, and medical professionals carefully monitor his physical health, the spectator is primarily invited to "gaze up" at his superhuman achievement' (Walsh, *ibid*, p. 152).

However, the invitation to 'gaze up' in admiration was met with some ambivalence by the academic and popular press. This is to say nothing of the aggressive taunting Blaine received from the public, with one antagonist attempting to sever his water supply. At the time, some attempts were made to contextualize *Above the Below* as belonging to official or high culture, as noted by Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, who argue that the 'artistic imperative' of the piece was 'signalled in a number of ways' (2005, p. 139). These signals include the involvement of avant-garde filmmaker Harmony Korine to direct the

documentary of the performance, Blaine's explicit allusion to Franz Kafka's short story *The Hunger Artist*, the evocation of the classical statue as an iconographical register, and the aforementioned similarity to works by Chris Burden (ibid, p. 139-141). However, Biressi and Nunn also contend that *Above the Below* 'does not seem to properly fit established models of performance and display', inconsistently and often non-explicitly referencing the 'high culture' it lays claim to (ibid, p. 143). Michael Mangan, too, reads *Above the Below* as suffused with meaning, arguing that 'so much of Blaine's act is quotation', and locating the performance in the 'interstices of the canonized and anathemized, of the holy and the pathological' (2007, p. 189). Mangan draws comparisons with the popular entertainment figures of 'fasting girls' and saints who martyred themselves through their refusal to eat, the spectacle of denial invoking both the holy and the secular in a 'non-matrixed' magic performance, 'abandoning narrative and concentrating on the fact of its own being to the extent that the spectator seems to become irrelevant' (ibid, pp. 188-189). Here, the refusal of narrative is taken to be a reflection of its postmodern cultural context. This acknowledged turn away from narrative and towards deliberate ambiguity is not without its vexations. In the same breath as praising the *Street Magic* and *Magic Man* specials as 'the biggest break through done in our lifetime', Penn Jillette of the magician duo Penn and Teller dismisses the endurance performances as 'all the "I'm really not kidding, honestly I'm not going to eat, swear to God I'm not eating, no really I'm not eating, no it's not a trick I'm really not eating." I don't know what that is' (Hoffman, 2010, no pagination). This category anxiety appears to hinge upon the apparent lack of illusion in the narrative- that if Blaine really is doing what he appears to be doing, in what sense can we consider this magic? Where Jillette reads Blaine's work as empty of significance, possessing no discernible narrative or moment of illusion, in Mangan's and Biressi and Nunn's analyses it is almost bursting with meaning. This turn away from narrative also provoked some anxiety among journalists and commentators. Michael Billington, theatre critic for the *Guardian*, attended twenty-two days into the duration of the piece, and struggled to interpret the live event as a spectator in his review. He attempted to place the work in terms of performance, asking, 'What are we really watching? A piece of performance art? A 44-day play? A theatrical illusion?' before adding that the spectacle lacks both the drama of being able to know what Blaine is thinking, and the 'vulgar excitement of trickery', thus failing to entertain on either a high or popular culture basis (2003, no pagination). Others adopted a position of outright cynicism:

Maybe Blaine is trying to make some sort of incredibly ironic, post-modern statement about the worst aspects of our celebrity-obsessed culture, the depths to which reality TV will sink, and the decadence of modern society. Or maybe he'll just do anything for attention and money. (Caplin, 2004, no pagination)

Like the contestants in the Big Brother house, he is unaware of what has been written and said of him. That anguish will come after his box is lowered live on Sky One television at 9pm tonight and he crawls out. Then he will discover that the crowds who came to watch his misery did so more to mock than to marvel: no one was overly impressed. (Craig, 2003, no pagination)

... the stunt is just dull. Man Sits In Box And It's Amazing! - well, definitely on day one, but when the media gets tired of reporting the initial hiatus, and there's nothing much happening, it then starts writing articles about how Man Who Sits In Box Is Really Arrogant and Boring and No One Likes Him. (Borkowski, 2003, no pagination)

The work is dismissed through placing it within the imagined worst excesses of mediatized culture: empty postmodern navel-gazing, reality TV that exploits the delusions of wannabe celebrities, and media hype that generates more heat than light. In this context, the performance's artistic heritage and spiritual associations that might help to interpret Blaine's body as classically heroic seem to be lost or purposefully ignored. Instead, according to these discourses, the spectacle of his body takes on a different meaning, becoming an emblem for everything that is wrong with popular culture.

The documentary *Above the Below* provides an interpretation of the event that is dictated by Blaine's personal life experiences, meanings which are far from clear in the live event, retrospectively interpreting Blaine as the embodiment of 'transcendent individualism', to borrow Stallybrass and White's phrase (1986, p. 21). This is partially achieved through inserting several segments staged for the recording that are clearly designed to inform a viewer's interpretation of the stunt as an extraordinary feat performed by an extraordinary person. Blaine's own authoritative voice is employed to comment on his own experience, informing us through voiceover, 'I am alive in here. I am more alive than I have ever been', insisting on a persona that thrives in the face of adversity and privation. This statement also constitutes a rejection of the social, performing a body that is entirely emotionally and physically self-sufficient. Other moments in the documentary include clips of Blaine throwing playing cards at the camera while apparently covered in blood, and telling a joke to a group of naked women arranged around him on a white set of sofas. These scenes of carnivalesque excess seem antithetical to the rejection of theatrical style, the elaborate sets and beautiful showgirls that Blaine dismisses in his early street magic specials. Arguably, these interludes bolster Blaine's performance of self by positioning him in the role of 'killer', who fools and '[defies] others to understand' as identified by the magician Topas (in Jones, 2011, p. 126). Topas' schema also includes the role of 'victim', who bears the brunt of the effect, and 'witness' who '[takes] in the effect along with the audience', adding that 'most [magicians] are killers' (ibid, p. 126; ibid, p.

128). Initially, the framing of 'killer' seems an odd approach to take towards the masochistic and passive *Above the Below*, in which Blaine could perhaps be more easily understood as a 'victim' or, perhaps 'witness' to his own suffering. However, these moments of self-conscious display are placed alongside footage of people in costume dancing or children playing at the site of the live event, accompanied by a melodious soundtrack. Taken together, the viewer receives the impression that the live event is directly responsible for these happy moments of togetherness and individual expression, so that Blaine's isolated presence is influencing the events below. This reaffirms his position as 'killer', an active presence working on the audience. A further narrative element in the documentary is the inclusion of autobiographical details, linking the work back to Blaine's childhood. The work is explained in terms of a memorial to his mother, who passed away from ovarian cancer some years before the event, as a way of honouring her suffering: 'I watched people that I loved and were close to me deteriorate and die in front of my face... My mother, the whole time she was dying, she never complained about anything once'. Far from being ambiguous, it is made clear in the documentary that Blaine's public physical suffering is intended specifically as a highly stylised expression of private emotional trauma.

The mediated nature of the documentary works against ambiguity, suffusing the event with significance using information that is not available to those who experienced the event live. The documentary bolsters the image of Blaine as extraordinary, his body capable of withstanding extreme privation and performing death-defying feats unscathed. The audience is offered meaning in the interpretation of the performance as a way of coming to terms with a traumatic loss, offering a narrative thread that is absent in the durational live event, except for Blaine's release in the very final hour. The following section will similarly consider *Dive of Death* as both live event and documentary, in this case exploring the documentary as attempting to recuperate a failed live performance that revealed the vulnerability of Blaine's body all too clearly.

STAGING RISK: THE MEDIATED BODY IN JEOPARDY

Dive of Death began on 22 September 2008, having been announced jointly by Blaine and his sponsor Donald Trump as an event in which Blaine would be suspended upside down for 60 hours outside Trump Tower, New York. The final hour of the stunt was broadcast live by ABC, promising an epic, death-defying climax, and this footage was subsequently edited into a documentary released on DVD entitled *What is Magic?* By introducing the idea of a climax, *Dive of Death* has a narrative built in from its inception, aligning it more clearly with the type of illusion Penn Jillette imagines in his dismissal of *Above the Below* ('no, it's not a trick, I'm really not...'). The stunt was widely reported as a failure, even by

Blaine himself, and could be considered as such for two reasons. The first was that the event did not meet the conventions that Blaine had established for his work by this time, in fact making his physical vulnerabilities and needs highly visible so that the fiction of his impermeable body could not be upheld. The second reason was the anti-climax of the promised 'dive of death' itself, which failed to provide the thrill of risk that its name suggested, resulting in a poor pay-off for spectators who had been present to support Blaine in his feat and viewers who had followed coverage of the event. The documentary represented an attempt to correct the failings of the live event. Structured to place the emphasis on a bullet catch trick; rather than faithfully capturing what occurred, it was arguably a form of damage control designed to restore Blaine's image.

According to the press release reprinted by online magazine *The Futon Critic*, the durational aspect of the work would involve Blaine '[attempting] to hang from a thin wire five stories in the air with no safety net or airbag to break his fall':

For more than 60 spellbinding hours, Blaine will be on the wire without food. He will pull himself up to drink liquids and to restore circulation. He will need to fight off muscle spasms and lack of sleep, as well as maintain maximum concentration in order to be successful. He will have to hang on for his life, even sleeping by dangling upside down. ("David Blaine Stuns the World...", 2008, no pagination)

The phrase 'pull himself up' fails to convey that he would be standing upright, although not released from the harness supporting him, for between five to ten minutes per hour (Soodin, 2008, no pagination). According to a story by Fox News, a spokesperson for Blaine's public relations representatives 'said he never intended to stay upside down for 60 consecutive hours', and added that this measure was necessary for medical checks as well as allowing circulation to temporarily return to normal and for Blaine to 'relieve himself' (Miller, 2008, no pagination). Intended to excuse the failings of the performance, this statement highlights the 'lower bodily stratum' associated with the grotesque rather than classical body in a literal sense, expressing physical needs that the classical body is supposed to disavow (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 23). This runs counter to the narrative of heroism established in the references to the physical danger Blaine faces in undergoing this ordeal in the media coverage of the event, with the *BBC*, the *Telegraph* and *Reuters* all reporting that he risks blindness (Mackenzie, 2008, no pagination; "David Blaine's latest stunt could 'make him blind'", 2008, no pagination; Nichols, 2008, no pagination). However, this threat of harm was not enough to redeem *Dive of Death* in the eyes of a reporter for *Entertainment Weekly* who described the scene of the event in scathing terms:

This was the scene at the rink: Scaffolding [sic] everywhere, people snapping pictures, at least seven camera crews standing by for a press conference, security guys in suits with Secret Service-like earbuds, and red rope separating the public from Blaine. Meanwhile, the stuntman was not hanging. Nope... There was no diving and no death. (Juarez, 2008, no pagination)

Juarez supports her interpretation of the event with quotes from similarly underwhelmed bystanders: 'one guy on his lunch break said to his friend, "Dude gets water breaks?" while another man nearby said, "It doesn't count [if he isn't doing it continuously]. I could do that"' (ibid, no pagination). The feat is apparently perceived by these bystanders as something anybody could do, as they interpret Blaine's body as ordinary and thereby undeserving of its elevation. Meanwhile, the activity and energy around the event is not reflected in the non-happening of the event itself. To return to Ellis' conceptualisation of televisual witnessing, Juarez's account indicates a 'superabundance' of bodies at the scene who are present for two reasons: first, to record the (uneventful) event, and second, to ensure Blaine's safety and security. These two purposes seem rather at odds with one another, given that presumably the reason the event is so uneventful is due to the imperative to maintain Blaine's safety. Where *Above the Below* seemed to be a denial of Blaine's mortality through a performance of heroic bodily transcendence, *Dive of Death* clearly factored this mortality into the performance.

The disappointment surrounding *Dive of Death* can once more be explained in terms of reference to the classical body, specifically the ideal relation of 'gazing up', to borrow Walsh's term, which is the product of distance from the spectacle. In her discussion of the film *Man on Wire*, Ruth Mackay argues that the discourse surrounding Phillippe Petit's 1974 wire-walk between the Twin Towers reroutes the possibility of Petit's death into:

a kind of Burkean sublime — a spectacle which incites terror in its audience due to its overwhelming dangerousness without the beholder necessarily being in physical danger — without the problematic interference of moral questions concerning the pleasure accrued by the scene. (2011, p. 11)

Arguably, the process Mackay identifies requires spectators to invest emotionally in the spectacle to the extent that they feel a certain amount of fear on behalf of the performer, heightening their own pleasure in the spectacle. However, this investment must not extend to any ethical concerns for the performer's safety that could interrupt the contemplative process of 'gazing up'. Crucially, in order to avoid these concerns, the classical body cannot be perceived as actually endangered, vulnerable, or otherwise tainted with the porousness of the grotesque. In *Dive of Death*, the medical necessity of having to take standing breaks highlighted the endangerment of Blaine's body. As the

body emerges as actually threatened, this precludes its alignment with classical elevation, rendering it unable to inspire the 'sublime' in the process that Mackay identifies; instead, we question why, if the event is so patently unsafe and risky, is the body being forced into this vulnerable position in the first place? And, following Juarez, why this vulnerable body, rather than another? This effect is perhaps amplified by the fact that it had not been necessary for Blaine to remove himself from an incarcerated state for health reasons in any of his previous works. Rather, he worked to keep the evidence of the needs and vulnerabilities of his body, such as hydration and passing waste, as discreet as possible. In *Dive of Death*, the bodily jeopardy that the live event offers is not abstractly thrilling, like performing an unsupported wire-walk between two urban landmarks, but appears at the level of the intimately mundane, unable to be successfully incorporated into the heroic spectacle.

The failure of the event can be seen not only in terms of the collapse of the fiction of Blaine's impossible body, but also in terms of a failure of televisuality. The promised 'dive of death' itself was widely perceived as an anti-climax. The planned '44ft plunge to the ground' followed by a 'ride into the night holding onto a big rig of balloons', turned into a bungee jump, after which he 'dangled awkwardly for a moment' and subsequently mysteriously disappeared (Thompson, 2008, no pagination). Blaine reportedly blamed the disappointing stunt on the delay of the broadcast caused by the transmission of a presidential address by George W. Bush. The fact that the live broadcast of *Dive of Death* had to be delayed meant that high winds picked up, and he was advised not to proceed with the intended ending (Thompson, 2008, no pagination; Cruz and Standora, 2008, no pagination). Blaine himself acknowledged a disparity between the planned stunt and that which was actually broadcast, stating, "It wasn't meant to be what it was on TV" (Cruz and Standora, 2008, no pagination). Blaine's justifications seem to lean on the overexposure of the televisual event, its dependence on weather conditions and running orders made visible. Perhaps the unpredictability of actual live programming could not match up to the rhetoric of liveness as seen in the street magic specials. Amelia Jones refers to the 'contingency' of the performing body, its inability to contain a full 'repository of selfhood' on its own, adding that 'documents of the body-in- performance are just as clearly contingent, however, in that the meaning that accrues to this action, and the body-in-performance, is fully dependent on the ways in which the image is contextualized and interpreted' (1997, p. 14). This contingency is apparent in *Dive of Death*, in which the ontological liveness of the event forced the broadcast to acknowledge the conditions of production and account for the fallibility and limitations not only of the star, but the medium of television itself.

The disappointing liveness of *Dive of Death* is attested to by the editing of the documentary *What is Magic?* The documentary shifts the narrative climax from the 'dive'

to a bullet catch illusion, in which Blaine appears to catch a bullet fired from a rifle into a steel cup placed in his mouth. This event seems to conform more easily to the register of the classical body as articulated by Stallybrass and White and the evocation of the sublime as formulated by Mackay. For one thing, the lack of ontological liveness is stressed through the extensive footage of the preparation for the event, meaning that viewers can reasonably assume the effect will have an entertaining rather than deadly outcome. This removes concern for Blaine's body, and the need to engage in ethical questions about witnessing the event. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the number of magicians that have been killed in the past by attempting similar feats, so that both the risks to Blaine's person and the corresponding extraordinariness of his body are both made clear to the viewer. As an established magic trick that has been performed for centuries, the bullet catch also better conforms to the definition of magic offered by Penn Jillette. The documentary seeks to recuperate Blaine's body as capable of impossible feats by downplaying the event *Dive of Death*. Where the live broadcast was subject to contingency, the documentary suggests an attempt to take back control of the image and narrative, providing a climactic moment on which the action hinges and re-establishing Blaine as a showman capable of performing illusions. Indeed, the recuperation of *Dive of Death* is a project that involves multiple strata of mediation, requiring the footage captured of the live broadcast itself, and the editing and distribution systems of the DVD. These forms of media provide the means of unmaking and remaking Blaine, the site of his downfall and his recuperation, opening up possibilities for his self-performance that would not be possible to achieve through live events alone.

CONCLUSION

The cultural dominance of mediation as established by Auslander poses an issue for magic, which after all developed as a form in which spectator and performer were co-present. This primordial co-presence has led to magic's association with the ineffable and inexplicable, and countless technological and performance innovations have been realised in order to overcome the challenges it offers. The resilience of magic is demonstrated by its great commercial success in adapting to mediation, with mediated forms offering new modes of artistic experimentation and expression, as well as new constraints. Though mediation allows the staging of astonishing and extreme effects, mobilising televisual intimacy and capacity for witness to their utmost, the spatial and temporal distance of mediation necessarily creates a barrier to belief in mediatized culture. As this article has argued, Blaine's street magic is testament to the tension between the opportunities and constraints that mediation allows, as it has sought to create a rhetoric of liveness that exploits the possibilities of television to offer a sense of spontaneity and immediacy to the audience while retaining total editorial control. This

control is clearly visible in the documentaries of Blaine's endurance stunts when compared to the live events. The documentaries of both arguably represent a chance to reinterpret the performances in a manner that heroically foregrounds Blaine's body, understood in this article as evoking the 'classical body': in effect, performing an editorial sleight-of-hand. Through its extended duration and lack of obvious action or narrative, the media traces of the live event *Above the Below* suggest that the performance was perceived to be ambiguous at best or confused or empty of meaning at worst, the quotations of the performance disregarded in favour of an interpretation that suited a narrative of the emptiness of popular culture. In *Dive of Death*, the limitations of Blaine's body and of live televisual broadcasting itself became publically visible. From this perspective, it is conceivable that the performances themselves served to provide material for a documentary, a mass of chaotic and freely-floating images to be organised into a coherent narrative that could later be circulated and consumed on its own terms. This would support Auslander's argument that ontological priority cannot automatically be granted to the live, that the mediated is always already embedded within performance. Co-presence, the live bodies of performer and spectator in the same space, may be perceived as the ideal way in which to experience magic, but mediatized culture and mediation technology enable the performing body to be consumed across time and space, its gestures reframed and remixed, offering new techniques and technologies of astonishment for magicians to deploy.

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