

# Post-performance: Pandemic Breach Experiments, Big Theatre Data, and the Ends of Theory

ULF OTTO

---

*All became data during the pandemic. Lockdowns made manifest what had developed for some time: that theatre has become inextricably entangled with digital cultures, the performing arts being increasingly encountered as a growing stock of multimodal fragments, textual discourses and networked communications. And, it is argued, it is precisely this appearance of theatre as (big) data that might prove to be the game-changer post-pandemic, and that this game-changer might be solely an epistemological one: what is known about theatre, how that knowledge is organized, and who is involved in organizing this knowledge, are rapidly changing. Based on an exemplary analysis of the discourses of legitimation that compensated for the loss of presence in German theatres, and the associated imperative to innovate production, this article estimates the epistemological consequences of theatre returns as data to advocate for a reconceptualization of theatre beyond performance.*

Reflecting on media change in early twentieth-century capitalist societies, Walter Benjamin stresses the historicity of art as a concept: looking back, he argues, his time recognizes as art what might have appeared as magic in the past:

Indeed, just as in primitive times the work of art, by virtue of the absolute weight which rested on its cult value, became primarily an instrument of magic, which, as it were, was recognized as a work of art only later, so today the work of art, by virtue of the absolute weight which rests on its exhibition value, becomes an entity with entirely new functions, from which the one of which we are conscious, the artistic one, stands out as the one which may be recognized later as an incidental one.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, he speculates, future generations may in turn recognize the art-ness of art – what he identifies as the ‘exhibition value’ – as only incidental to foreground again a different function of the thing. In the background of these considerations are the roles that technologies of mechanical reproduction have played in the rise of popular cultures and the accompanying changes in patterns of perception.

Financial Support: Open Access publication funding courtesy of a Volkswagen Foundation grant “Viral Theatre: Post-COVID 19 Art Works, Precarity and Medical Humanities” (Az. 99949).

In the following, I want to propose a similar line of argument with regard to the topic of this special issue: namely that now is this future that recognizes as incidental in theatre what once was central to it, its art-ness (the ‘exhibition value’) – the performance, and that it is again the technologies of reproduction, or rather reprocessing, that lie at the core of this realization.

To put it into a lean formula, *post-pandemic equates to post-performance*, which is to say that the model at the core of twentieth-century theatres, performance as some enclosed social event with some *As* in front of some *Bs* (Bentley) in some more or less empty space (Brook), appears increasingly to be beside the point.<sup>2</sup> And that is not to rant, once more, against the metaphysics of presence inherent in this essentialist doctrine or make a plea for the mediatedness of performance.<sup>3</sup> But instead to account for a tentative observation: that the whole debate on performance, which was so central for twentieth-century transatlantic theatre cultures, because it defined theatre as a specific form of art within the modernist framework, is quickly receding, losing engagement and explanatory power.<sup>4</sup> Whether theatre’s ‘only life is in the present’ or not no longer seems to be a pressing issue;<sup>5</sup> consequently, looking back, it looks like it might never have been the point. During the pandemic, the debate itself has at last become historical, it seems, and the question might now be less whether theatre necessitates liveness, but rather why people were so concerned with it in the first place.<sup>6</sup> At least, that is the hypothesis that this article pursues (i.e. that the change the pandemic brought with it lies mainly in the final rupture with a way of theatre thinking that has been challenged for quite some time now) and that is encapsulated in the concept of post-performance.

In contrast to other contributions, I am less interested in aesthetic innovation, or institutional challenges brought about by the pandemic,<sup>7</sup> than in its *epistemic* repercussions and their politics. In line with Walter Benjamin, I turn my attention to technology and its impact on perception, but, diverging from his line of argument, I propose to consider perception not as an individual faculty but as a collective endeavour that is inseparable from a socio-material production of knowledge within a framework oriented at actor-network theory.<sup>8</sup> How society processes theatre is undergoing a profound change, and it is undergoing this change centrally due to digitalization, a change that is comparable probably only to the long-lasting effect of the turn to print culture.<sup>9</sup> But the pandemic has not only facilitated this development; it has given it a specific, renewed direction.

Already in 2012 Sarah Bay-Cheng proposed to conceive the ‘record as integral’ to performance, arguing that performances in digital culture no longer appear as discrete events of the past, but rather as multivalent networks of a plurality of entities.<sup>10</sup> Pointing out that performance and performance scholarship are currently undergoing radical transformations due to digitalization, she follows up on a lecture in which Diana Taylor recalls the mediality and historicity of memory cultures, and reflects on the digital as a third category of memory that complicates her earlier juxtaposition of embodied versus archival knowledge.<sup>11</sup> And Bay-Cheng has subsequently argued that the once-central dichotomy of live events and dead documents, pivotal to print cultures, has become complicated, if not outdated, due to digitalization, necessitating a repositioning of scholarship as well.<sup>12</sup>

My argument points in the same direction, but claims a more fundamental shift: performances in digital cultures can not only be encountered *as* networks, but increasingly reveal themselves *as parts* of larger networks – prompting a radical provincializing of performance. And that is not because the aesthetics of performance have undergone some paradigmatic change within digital cultures, but simply due to a shift in the way the knowledge of and about theatre is organized and produced. That is to say, while it made total sense to put performance centre stage of epistemological activities in print cultures, and in a different way in broadcasting cultures, it does less so in digital cultures.<sup>13</sup> Attention needs to be redirected to the many manifestations of theatrical practice that might still be focused on performance but no longer be contained or determined by it.

Little will be said here about what repercussion the lockdowns had for theatrical institutions or whether the ensuing digitality led to some new aesthetics of theatre, which others have investigated.<sup>14</sup> Instead, my only concern here is with the way it has changed what we know about theatre and how we generate that knowledge, or rather what we came to know about that knowledge during the pandemic. I propose to conceptualize the pandemic in relation to theatre along the lines of what ethnomethodologists call a ‘breach experiment’: an intervention into the routines of interaction that provoke reactions to reinstall the status quo, thereby making explicit the usually implicit norms of these interactions.

This argument is developed below in three steps. The first section explores the impression that, during the pandemic, the lack of theatre was countered, at least in the German context, by an abundance of discursive legitimation. It is claimed that this discourse was driven by an imperative of production that shares its fixation on innovation with the performance paradigm of our neo-liberal economy. On the contrary, I argue, facing the post-pandemic, we are less in need of innovative products than of a concept that gives meaning to theatre, even if it does not take place or if nobody attends.

The second section takes a closer look at the patterns of legitimation produced during the pandemic using the examples of a German and a European conference on COVID and theatre. It shows that at the core of the discourse lies an eighteenth-century model that relates theatre to politics by equating both with an ideal of assembly. By envisioning presence as some tele-presence, most ideas of ‘digital theatre’ project an idealistic model of communication as interaction onto the media that legitimate theatre, but obscures the workings both of itself and of the media environments in which it is embedded, because it is essentially power-blind.

The third section then turns to what has fundamentally changed with the pandemic: the online availability and accessibility of theatre content. It argues that it is this datafication of theatre that will have long-term consequences, especially epistemological ones. It creates new ways to process, to know, to think about theatre that are closely connected to the developments of digital technologies and computational methods, which radically question the privileged position of the eyewitness.

In conclusion, I suggest that the future ontologies of theatre will increasingly be negotiated in data models instead of aesthetic theories, and make a plea for an engagement in digital humanities that opens up the enclosed spaces of performance,

instead of cementing it in a new kind of positivism. Post-pandemic, we move post-performance.

### **Ramp up production: staying relevant when doors are closed**

‘We are here – despite the lockdown!’ proclaimed a press notice when, on 30 November 2020, a (German) federal day of action for theatres and orchestras was announced.<sup>15</sup> The idea was to give visibility to the cultural sector. Edifices radiated colourful lights, a chain of people was staged online and the following statement was released, signed by the ‘board of directors of the group of artistic directors of the German stage association’ (an indeed very German designation of a cultural-policy committee):

Theatres and orchestras are open spaces for discussion in our democratic society and an invitation to seek out what unites us and to counter polarization. Through art, we communicate about how we want to live together, practice empathy and courage, and enable participation. Even if the theatres and orchestras cannot make themselves available as places of coming together at the moment, they still want to give an impulse of liveliness and express their belief in artistic utopia. As soon as it is possible again, they will be available for the artistic reappraisal of our social crisis.

What had happened? Only a few months earlier, German state theatres had been on the defensive: aesthetic debates that had been so prevalent in public discourse from the 1960s to the 1990s had been largely displaced or overlaid by social questions.<sup>16</sup> Initiated by a new generation of artists connected to new social movements, attention had at last turned to lacks in visibility, structural racism and abuse of power. Despite structural resistance and whitewashing ambitions, a consensus had been growing that despite its ostensibly progressive agenda, more often than not the institution had a problem when it came to representation.

But now, theatres (in the plural) being effectively closed, ‘the theatre’ rhetorically returned in the singular, as an abstract force for good that laid claim to the visibility of itself: while clubs pragmatically conceded that it might not be the best time to party, and went instead to the street for financial support to sustain spaces and workers in the meantime,<sup>17</sup> theatre organizations produced a blooming prose of legitimation that conjured the future of the institution by asserting once more the ideals of the past, from Schiller’s aesthetic education to Wagner’s rituals of healing. The ‘will to unfold relevance’ was summoned by Carsten Brosda, the chief functionary of the German Stage Association, in a radio interview in late 2020, where he went on to stress that theatre is ‘so much more’ than entertainment, ‘beyond the logic of exploitation’ and of utmost relevance for the system.<sup>18</sup> Once more, it was with a claim to social relevance, built on a politics of distinction, that bourgeois theatre affirmed itself.<sup>19</sup> While society was realizing that some infrastructures were more vital than others, functionaries wanted to make sure that theatre sided with hospitals, not brothels – in its lack of performance, theatre was performing itself.

One essential part of this performance seemed to consist not in ceasing, but rather in ramping up production: in line with neo-liberal imperatives, the crisis was framed as a

'chance' and theatres increasingly envisioned themselves as 'platforms' where attractive 'content' and innovative 'formats' (replacing the 'novel forms' of twentieth-century avant-gardes) were developed to reach new 'target groups'.<sup>20</sup> Taking a break rarely seemed to be an option, even when, as in the subsidized German theatre system, it was economically feasible. The show had to go on, the curtain had to rise, it seemed, even if sometimes the only thing left to stage was the relevance of theatre itself.

One notable exception to this logic was the festival *Niemand kommt* (Nobody's Coming) initiated by a group of Berlin-based artists and scholars in July 2020.<sup>21</sup> The idea was intriguing in its counterintuitive approach: participate by *not* showing up. Pay for *not* getting anything back. For once, it was possible to be part of theatre while not attending, and accordingly to remunerate the artists for their work instead of the product. Primarily, the festival was set up as a pragmatic solution, to economically support financially struggling artists. But at the same time, it had theoretical repercussions with utopian implications: what if theatre was thought of as something that *had value even if it did not take place*? What if it was not the product – the performance – that legitimated and gave value to theatre? Did we not owe the artists a concept of theatre that justified paying them, even when shows got cancelled or nobody was attending? And did we not owe the audience, on the other hand, a concept of theatre that permits those unable to attend to still be part of it?

By not attending the festival, it was possible to experience the theoretical dead end that performance theory had hit. If it was the audience that completed a performance, if presence was the essence (at least in theory), then what was left without it? It became evident that what was needed was a concept of theatre that guaranteed the existence beyond the here and now of performance, where everybody could be confident that theatre would not disappear, even if nobody was coming – an idea of theatre being more than performance.

### **Imagine the people: making sense of the digital**

The term 'postmodern' was used by Lyotard in 1979 to designate a *condition*, which he understood as related to the changing status of knowledge in computerized societies.<sup>22</sup> His main hypothesis said that the *modes of legitimation* of knowledge had been changing. Older metanarratives of progress had been displaced by utilitarian ideals of performativity. In other words, overcoming modernity meant valuing knowledge for its ability to *enhance productivity*, rather than according to its promise to make the world more holy or more just.

Accordingly, any assertion of a 'post-pandemic' theatre evokes the idea of a transition that is associated with a gradual change in conditions and that provokes questions of range, scope and causality: is the change actually here to stay? Has it really affected everything? And was it the pandemic that caused it in the end?

The most common response to these queries contrives the *pandemic as a catalyst* that provoked a reaction to a phenomenon called 'digitality', which then stars as the cause. Being forced online by lockdowns, theatre finally embraced a development that had long been under way and had already been foreseen by pioneering projects.

'Post-pandemic', then, usually equates to some idea of 'digital performance', and scholarly attention aims at describing and defining 'new formats' that have replaced the 'new forms' that the last century was looking for.<sup>23</sup>

The EASTAP conference of 2021, entitled *New Spectatorship in Post-COVID Times: Theatre and the Digital*,<sup>24</sup> carries the formula in its title: 'post-COVID times' are equated with 'the digital', while the opening term names the change associated with the latter: 'new spectatorship'. The opening keynote speech by Gabriella Giannachi proposed 'Seven Axioms for Digital Theatre' that were prominently posed against Schechner's 1968 '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre'.<sup>25</sup> The central idea of these axioms was the 'hybridity' of performance, 'that what happens before and after the event on multiple platforms may form part of the experience'.<sup>26</sup> Here, like elsewhere, 'digital theatre' is thought of as some kind of 'extension' of performance that is associated with new experiences of spectatorship.<sup>27</sup>

Having temporarily lost its *spectators*, theatre in practice and in theory tries to devise new forms of *spectatorship*. It is noteworthy that here and elsewhere the pandemic basically equates to the lockdown – the lockdown then equates to absent audiences, which is in turn usually associated with a bigger crisis, a crisis of theatre that is at the same time a crisis of society. 'The audience is threatened; the Corona crisis is a *crisis of assembly*', announces the promotion of a 2020 online conference on post-pandemic theatre in Berlin, which then asks for new 'playgrounds' for theatre *on the Internet*.<sup>28</sup>

At this conference, German philosopher Armen Avanessian opened with a keynote that associated this crisis of assembly with new modes of community-building in digital media and alternative possibilities of presence as encountered in new social movements, like Fridays for Future or Black Lives Matter.<sup>29</sup> Quoting Rancière, he presented the idea of theatre giving voices to unheard subjects instead of representing conflict, but added new forms of digital assembly to the well-known formula for theatre to 'gain audiences', 'extend reach' and 'widen its scope of action'. Pointing to the reciprocal modelling of theatre and politics since the eighteenth century, he suggested that theatre was a 'predestined place to think about the technopolitical transformation of democracy'.<sup>30</sup> The subsequent panel discussion, which included theatre people plus a Fridays for Future activist, largely revolved around the loss of 'real presence' and its possible substitution. Only Shermin Langhoff, artistic director of the Maxim Gorki Theatre and prominent proponent of the German post-migrant theatre scene, pointed out that there never had been any 'real presence' in the assemblies of German theatres to return to.

While Langhoff patiently insisted on the empirical problems of the social institution, the philosopher had elevated theatre to an ideal realm where it was, at least theoretically, fighting side by side with Black Lives Matter. Central to this operation was the concept of assembly, equating theatre with society, imagining society itself as being *pars pro toto* present in the audience, the audience representing society, and vice versa. Politics is then theatre writ large, and theatre is only politics writ small. Presence is intricately linked to representation: being there matters because a future society becomes temporarily manifest in performance.<sup>31</sup> The logic goes back to the eighteenth-century bourgeois appropriation of theatre to rehearse a future

society while kings still ruled and the French Revolution devolved into terror. This logic is problematic because it abstracts from the complexity of power in (post-)industrial societies as well as from the situatedness of theatre within these societies. It has little analytical value, since it projects an older model onto the present and thereby passes over the empirics; to describe the Internet as a big theatre does not get beyond saying that ‘all the world’s a stage’. But it is highly attractive because it reaffirms theatre’s central place in society and declares its output to be political regardless of legitimation, guaranteeing the continuity of the institution and immunizing it against critique.

This ideal of assembly that stems from eighteenth-century bourgeois theatre culture still underlies big parts of theatre thinking, not despite but because of all the twentieth-century aesthetic ‘paradigm changes’ (and despite more contemporaneous reconsiderations of assembly).<sup>32</sup> In fact, it peaks with post-dramatic theatre and performance theory,<sup>33</sup> both of which reject depiction but embrace the event, bestowing unfathomed transformatory powers onto what happens *in situ* between actors and audiences in their own kind of aesthetic shock doctrine, short-circuiting the detours of aesthetic education.

It is that model that makes *presence* such a central claim of (bourgeois) theatre, because it is only due to this presence that it gains its comparability with parliament and, accordingly, its cultural status and legitimation. What is at stake with the absence of the audience, then, is the missing presence not only of revenue, but also, and more importantly, of an idea of theatre that grounds its legitimation and existence in a notion of an autonomous form of art. It seems that this explains why so many visions of post-pandemic theatre are so focused on the idea of telepresence as an extension of some prior (imagined) ‘real presence’ that would turn theatre, with the help of digital media, into something like the social movement Fridays for Future.

But this idea of theatre as assembly is not only inadequate to describe the post-pandemic situation of theatre; it is this very model itself that is radically questioned by the pandemic. This is because of the way collectives are assembled in our digital present, which has only very little resemblance to social systems of interaction, which are constituted by a local aggregation of human individuals on site.<sup>34</sup> By conjuring a ‘digital theatre’ that is thought of as an extension of an event of social interaction into some virtual space, to overcome the lack of physical encounter during the pandemic, we are effectively projecting old categories onto new media, thereby missing precisely what is new about the new media in the first place.

It is worth recalling that when cinema came up, theatre people were reserved at first, but then tried to understand it as a new form of theatre.<sup>35</sup> This had some influence on what cinema turned out to be, but it did not help much in explaining it, or even noticing that one of its effects was that theatre had already started to turn into something else. Like the horses turned loose when cars took over, the theatre, disposed of its mass-media function, could only become an autonomous form of art that was fully contained in the act of theatre, its proceedings, the performance, when mass media came about.

But with this essence temporarily missing, and its assurance gone missing long-term, theatre is left with two options: projecting itself elsewhere and trying to



find some performance and presence or liveness ‘in’ the digital, or departing from the twentieth-century idea that performance is the essence of theatre.

I make a plea for the latter, taking the closure of venues as a chance to theoretically reopen theatres beyond their enclosure in the event of social interaction – and consequently leave the aestheticist framing of theatre for a more epistemologically reflective approach.

Post-pandemic, then, should be understood in line with Lyotard’s concept of the postmodern, as a term referring to the organization and legitimization of knowledge. Accordingly, what *has* finally changed with the pandemic might be less ‘the’ theatre itself, but rather how it is *stored, distributed and processed*.<sup>36</sup> It is the *knowledge* of theatre that is undergoing profound change and that needs to be investigated to understand the transformations of theatre in digital culture.<sup>37</sup>

### **Performance as resource: affording theatre**

There seems to be little doubt that streaming is here to stay.<sup>38</sup> Theatre too has become home-delivered, not for the first time, but on a scale not seen before. And while theatres are going back to normal they will need reasons to be *only* live in the future, i.e. *not* to provide a stream on top, *not* to be additionally available online, turning to ‘theatre-plus’ or whatever you want to call it.<sup>39</sup>

Accordingly, recordings are increasingly thought of as a part of performance, rather than as a substitute for it. Production processes are changing and that will lead to transformations on several levels in the long run: it will influence theatre *aesthetically* because having a video version in the back of one’s mind will influence artistic decisions; *institutionally* because it makes a difference to be a content provider; but also *ontologically* because streamed theatre necessarily turns into something that is no longer *only* live, but now essentially *live and* something else – something that is not live and colloquially goes by the name of ‘content’, but technically is data.

And while it is reasonable to doubt that theatre will suddenly develop completely new audiences, just because it is now available online, it certainly opens new forms of access for those who are interested – especially researchers. In other words, it is not the social access that might be the game-changer post-pandemic, but the scholarly access: who gets access to theatre and how does this kind of access shape what we know of theatre? These epistemological questions are pivotal because knowledge is always entangled with the allocation of power and positions, as discourse analysis in the Foucauldian tradition has not tired of pointing out. More fundamentally, (feminist) science studies since Haraway have shown that it is the very epistemic cuts we make with our scholarly practices that bring forth the objects and their observers, which we thereafter presume to be pre-existent.<sup>40</sup> So with the epistemic cuts we make since the pandemic, what kind of theatre are we left with, and where does that leave us as observers?

Take, for example, a footnote that I encountered a long time ago when still a student, the first one I had ever seen that referenced a performance: not only giving it a name and a year, but detailing the exact times and places when the author of the paper had actually seen it.



A literary reference usually guarantees retraceability by providing the information a reader needs to find it. Thanks to the printing press, the books of the same edition are actually the same, and so we are able to look up quotes without having access to the exact object cited. Since the advent of video, the same applies to film: a title, a year, a timecode is all we need to know to see it for ourselves, and to validate a statement about it. Whether the author saw it the first time as a youth in a local cinema, again as a student on a blurry VHS, and again last night on Netflix might have phenomenological implications, but does not make a difference when it comes to retracing observations I might have made back then. But this is not the case for performance: even if I admit that the person, the context and the position of the spectator make all the difference in the discussion of a performance, knowing where they have seen it does not provide me with the means of going back and seeing for myself. Instead, it does something else: it lays claim to the credibility and legitimacy of the writing, for who am I to contradict what the author has seen with their own eyes?

But that has consequences: if our theory asserts that theatres' only life is in the present, what happens to those who cannot attend? Not only do they miss the chance to participate; they also lose the right to have anything to say about it unless, of course, they change epistemological grounds, let time pass, and, having grown old at last, come back to what has now turned into sources and study it as historians.

Bronisław Malinowski essentialized participant observation in anthropology, denouncing those who came before him as 'armchair anthropologists'.<sup>41</sup> Since Richard Schechner and the foundation of performance studies, the same ideal of truth rules the domain of theatre.<sup>42</sup> Writing about a performance one could have seen, but did not, is suspect at the very least.

Epistemology and ontology are closely entangled here: if we believe theatre to be alive only in the present, studying recordings becomes dangerously necrophiliac.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, if we use recordings only as an auxiliary means of studying something else, they will necessarily end up as the pale shadows of some primary reality. It is in the combination of theory and practice that theatre studies gains its epistemological stability. As long as scholars eagerly queue to see the shows they study, no celebration of absence or critique of presence will change the fact that having been there is what counts in the end. Having seen the right performances, having been able to provide financial and temporal resources, does not only create cultural capital but also confers epistemological privilege, upon which careers can be built. FOMO, the fear of missing out, can become academically existential.<sup>44</sup> Who would give funding to a project that wants to study a series of performances it cannot attend? Access to research, and accordingly to academia, is closely interlinked with access to the here and now of performance. You need to be able to afford performance to become a performance professor.

This epistemological scarcity of performance has been widely guarded by a widespread theoretical neglect of recordings and practical obstacles to their sharing. Only the pandemic has temporarily suspended this situation: since nobody could attend, everyone missed out equally. Audiovisuals started to circulate online in abundance for the first time, from all over the world and all kinds of times,

temporarily creating equal grounds for those who had the technological means and could access the productions. More importantly, this development not only paved the way for individual observers, but potentially also opened new ways of knowing theatre by turning it into content. Theatre thereby escaped the reign of Gutenberg and became processable by computers.

The lockdowns have created theatre as *content*, i.e. multimodal data of all sorts, that in contrast to the ‘recordings’ of analogue cultures have increasingly developed a life of their own. Being inextricably linked to digital cultures, the performing arts can now be encountered as a growing stock of multimodal fragments, textual discourses and networked communications. All theatre, rather than only a few innovative performances, turned into data and changed medial shape. This does not mean that there is nothing else but data, but that everything is also data, and that it is as data that it makes the biggest difference. I want to argue that this side effect is the real game-changer of the pandemic, rather than the new audiences or novel formats, because it provokes a very simple, but provocative, question: on what grounds do we (still) prefer to study the one show we have seen nearby and not the myriad performances, these strange new empirics, elsewhere? On what (normative) grounds do we give preference?

In other words, the lockdowns have given us, both practically and theoretically, all we needed to make digital humanities work in theatre studies. Having big data makes the difference because only computers are able to process it, and because it is when the machines watch the artworks that digital humanities really start. ‘What to do with a thousand books?’ is the famous question that has led to the development of distant reading, as opposed to close reading, machine reading as opposed to human reading. Art history has similarly come up with a plethora of ideas of what to do with a thousand images. But a thousand performances have never been a subject for theatre studies – neither practically nor theoretically. The only viable question so far has been: what to do with a handful of scattered collections of recordings of miserable quality and missing metadata, most of which are jealously guarded, of dubitable legal status, and thought of as pale shadows that betray the real thing they depict?

But now, with theatre available as data,<sup>45</sup> a novel theatre analytics based on computational methods might be within reach;<sup>46</sup> this might not only open up new perspectives on theatre, but provide the necessary means to address a theatre that has changed state.

Accordingly, a central question post-pandemic will be: what will the machines be taught about performance? What properties and relations do we tell them to map? What shows do we give them to watch? Who do we get to be involved in these processes? Or, to put it more generally, how do we, not as individuals, but as socio-technical collectives, process theatre in the future? Do we embrace a neo-positivist agenda that neutralizes the disruptive potentials of singular works and reproduces the biases contained in the established collections? Or do we use the digital to found new forms of collectivity, new ways of referencing theatre, new practices of knowing theatre? If we tell computers to watch, could they watch what we cannot or do not want to watch? Could they find things we have not been looking for

(minute changes, similarities, decentering the canon) and offer us a more symmetrical perspective that might even call our own aesthetic preferences and exclusions – the human choices usually made less by humans than by very specific social groups – into question?

In the best case, this would not lead us to deny the singularity of art, but rather to change the ways of finding it, provoking a rethinking of what differences we are looking for and thereby challenging implicit but fundamental epistemological premises. Why give more importance to the recording than to its discussion on Twitter? Why study the shows next door when the faraway ones are as close? And why have humans watch the plays when theatre has basically become machine-readable? Attention would need to shift from witnessing the performance to witnessing its witnessing, paying more attention to the diversity of perspectives and experiences. If print cultures established a rule of the book over theatre, which is in many ways asymmetrical, maybe it is digital cultures that can help us find new symmetries.

### **Conclusion: farewell to the street scene**

Post-pandemic, we can go back to the theatre (or the archive). It might be a return to a problematic normal,<sup>47</sup> but it will certainly be back to a new normal because whatever we encounter in theatre henceforth will have to be recognized as stemming from a particular and privileged perspective that has lost its self-evidence. Compared to the growing repertoire of possibilities for accessing theatre, it becomes increasingly visible as a very specific cultural practice within a given historical context, which will no longer guarantee an encounter with the essentials of theatre. Going to the theatre will still remain one way to study it, but it might need increased methodological justification, especially if it is supposed to stand on its own.

As I have argued above, one central issue that the lockdown has emphasized is the question of access to theatre. I claim that it is specifically the epistemological dimensions of the question that will have long-ranging consequences post-pandemic. The datafication, which has been under way for some time, and which has long been underestimated in its consequences for the performing arts, is starting to shape things.

The central question in the future will be what to make of this data, and this is intricately linked to the question of what machines will see in this data. What is beyond the here and now can equally become part of it because what keeps theatre apart from the movies in the digital is basically a different set of metadata. What counts is how the data is organized: its ontology is increasingly taken care of within the realm of data models, while theory in general is losing influence. The coming digital humanities will not restrain itself to being just another tool in the kit; it will have long-ranging epistemological consequences, transforming the object of study as much as the position of the observers. Accordingly, it is the politics rather than the possibilities of digital methods that need to be addressed before the standards are set in stone. Consequently, now might be a good time to reconsider how the concept of 'the human' helped to disregard the social empirics in the epistemological equation of

theatre studies and turned attention to the socio-material ensembles in which theatre and its scholars have always been entangled.

In film studies, the term ‘post-cinema’ has been established to refer to those moving images that are dissociated from analogue media dispositives, but remain within their tradition.<sup>48</sup> Adding the ominous ‘post-’ to theatre could similarly refer to a theatre that exceeds its dispositive enclosure within the event and can no longer be contained within the here and now because streaming suddenly became second nature, an essential part that neither replaces nor reproduces the performance, because it is already a part of it. Even if theatre solely plays out onstage, it already has its digital existence in mind. Even if it is local, it transcends the local. Even if it is present, it transcends the present. Entering the convergence culture of the digital, theatre necessarily loses its material specificity – the very specificity its mediatization was foundational in defining. Whatever else it might be, performance in digital cultures is at the same time already appearing as data, and this might change theatre as much as the printing press did.

Post-performance theatre has become both less and more than before: less, because it has lost its essentials, and more, because it can now connect to a plenitude of non-essentials and envision entirely new forms of assembly that are neither composed only of humans nor reduced to representing the social.<sup>49</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012; first published 1935), p. 29.
- 2 Compare *A Room of Our Own* by Swoosh Lieu (Mousonturm, 2021).
- 3 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 4 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).
- 5 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.
- 6 Tancredi Gusman, ‘Between Evidence and Representation: A New Methodological Approach to the History of Performance Art and Its Documentation’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 29, 4 (2 October 2019), pp. 439–61.
- 7 Heidi Liedke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, ‘Viral Theatre: Preliminary Thoughts on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Theatre’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 9, 1 (May 2021), pp. 128–44; Ramona Mosse, Janina Janke, Judith König, Christian Stein and Nina Tecklenburg. ‘Viral Theatres’ Pandemic Playbook: Documenting German Theatre during COVID-19’, *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media*, 18, 1 (March 2022), pp. 105–27.
- 8 Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 9 Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 2003).
- 10 Sarah Bay-Cheng, ‘Theater Is Media: Some Principles for a Digital Historiography of Performance’, *Theater*, 42, 2 (2012), pp. 27–41.
- 11 Diana Taylor, ‘Save As ...: Knowledge and Transmission in the Age of Digital Technologies’, *Imagining America*, 7 (2010), at <https://surface.syr.edu/ia/7>.
- 12 Sarah Bay-Cheng, ‘Postmedia Performance’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2016, at [www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2016/postmedia-performance](http://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2016/postmedia-performance).
- 13 Peters, *Theatre of the Book*.
- 14 Ramona Mosse et al., ‘Viral Theatres’ Pandemic Playbook’.

- 15 See spectyou-aktionstag, at [www.spectyou-aktionstag.com](http://www.spectyou-aktionstag.com) (accessed 30 November 2020).
- 16 Elisa Liepsch, Julian Warner and Matthias Pees, *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).
- 17 Clubcommission, 'Clubkultur und Corona 2020/21' (30 December 2020), at [www.clubcommission.de/clubkultur-und-corona-2020-21](http://www.clubcommission.de/clubkultur-und-corona-2020-21).
- 18 Deutschlandfunk, 'Carsten Brosda: Theater auch in Pandemiezeiten relevant halten' (21 November 2020), at [www.deutschlandfunk.de/neuer-buehnenvereins-praesident-carsten-brosda-theater-auch-100.html](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/neuer-buehnenvereins-praesident-carsten-brosda-theater-auch-100.html).
- 19 The European Theatre Forum, 'The Dresden Declaration', at [www.europeantheatreforum.eu/page/the-dresden-declaration-of-the-european-theatre-forum](http://www.europeantheatreforum.eu/page/the-dresden-declaration-of-the-european-theatre-forum) (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 20 E.g. Amelie Deuffhard, 'Gesellschaft neu denken: Die performativen Künste haben die besten Voraussetzungen dafür', *Theater Heute*, 2020 annual, at [www.der-theaterverlag-de.emedien.uni-muenchen.de/theater-heute/archiv/artikel/gesellschaft-neu-denken](http://www.der-theaterverlag-de.emedien.uni-muenchen.de/theater-heute/archiv/artikel/gesellschaft-neu-denken) (accessed 14 April 2022), Deutschlandfunk Kultur: 'Chance oder Bürde: Wie sich Theater nach Corona ändern muss', *Der Theaterpodcast*, 27 (14 August 2020), at [www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/folge-27-chance-oder-buerde-wie-sich-theater-nach-corona-100.html](http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/folge-27-chance-oder-buerde-wie-sich-theater-nach-corona-100.html).
- 21 Niemand Kommt, <https://niemandkommt.de/?lang=en> (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 22 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).
- 23 'Viral Theatres: Post/pandemic Performance in the Anthropocene', at <https://viraltheatres.org> (accessed 11 April 2022).
- 24 EASTAP 2021: New Spectatorship in Post-COVID Times: Theatre and the Digital (conference), 23–4 September 2021, at <https://eastap.com/2021/04/10/eastap-2021-new-spectatorship-in-post-covid-timestheatre-and-the-digital> (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 25 Richard Schechner, '6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre', *Drama Review*, 12, 3 (1968), pp. 41–64.
- 26 Gabriella Giannachi, 'Keynote: Seven Axioms for Digital Theatre', at EASTAP 2021, 23 September 2021.
- 27 Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
- 28 Sophie Diesselhorst, 'Postpandemisches Theater', at [https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=18833:nachtkritikstream-online-konferenz&catid=1517&Itemid=100416](https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18833:nachtkritikstream-online-konferenz&catid=1517&Itemid=100416) (accessed 12 April 2022).
- 29 Armen Avanesian, 'Keynote: Postpandemisches Theater', *Postpandemisches Theater: Die Krise der Versammlung* (online conference) (Literaturforum im Brechthaus, 11 November 2020), at <https://youtu.be/wYogKOSIU6I>.
- 30 *Ibid.*, at 15:00.
- 31 Marita Tatari, 'On the Change of Change: Handlung und Bühne unter gegenwärtigen Bedingungen', in Ulf Otto and Johanna Zorn, eds., *Ästhetiken der Intervention: Ein- und Übergriffe im Regime des Theaters* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2022), pp. 225–34, here p. 228.
- 32 Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 33 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).
- 34 Bruno Latour, *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft: Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).
- 35 Anton Kaes, *Kino-debatte* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1978).
- 36 Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986).
- 37 Felix Stalder, *Kultur der Digitalität* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016); Mercedes Bunz, *Die stille Revolution: Wie Algorithmen Wissen, Arbeit, Öffentlichkeit und Politik verändern, ohne dabei viel Lärm zu machen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013).
- 38 Mark Brown, 'Young Vic to Livestream All Future Productions, Says Artistic Director', *The Guardian*, 6 May 2021, at [www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/may/06/young-vic-to-livestream-all-future-productions-says-artistic-director](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/may/06/young-vic-to-livestream-all-future-productions-says-artistic-director).

- 39 'A Manifesto for the Future Stage: Performance Is a Human Right', *Theatre Times* (blog), 20 November 2021, at <https://thetheatretimes.com/a-manifesto-for-the-future-stage-performance-is-a-human-right>.
- 40 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007).
- 41 Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922).
- 42 Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
- 43 Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham, 'More-and-Less-Than: Liveness, Video Recording, and the Future of Performance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16, 61 (February 2000), pp. 88–96.
- 44 Katherine Nolan, 'Fear of Missing Out: Performance Art through the Lens of Participatory Culture', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 17, 2 (4 May 2021), pp. 234–52.
- 45 Miguel Escobar Varela, *Theater as Data: Computational Journeys into Theater Research* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).
- 46 Clarisse Bardiot, 'Theatre Analytics: Developing Software for Theatre Research', *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 14, 3 (25 September 2020), at <http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/14/3/000476/000476.html> (accessed January 2023).
- 47 Haiko Pfost, Wilma Renfordt and Falk Schreiber, eds., *Lernen aus dem Lockdown? Nachdenken über freies Theater* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2020).
- 48 Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016); Dominique Château and José Moure, eds., *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).
- 49 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

ULF OTTO (ulf.otto@lmu.de) is Professor for Theatre Studies and Intermediality at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich and holds a BSc in Computer Science. Current areas of research include: theatricality and media ecologies in historical perspective, with a focus on the nineteenth century; production cultures of theatre and performance and their empirical investigation from the perspective of Science and Technology Studies and Actor-Network Theory; and digital memory cultures and the epistemological challenges of digital humanities in theatre studies. Recent articles have been published in *Drama Review*, *Theatre Research International* and *Theatre Journal*. An English translation of his latest monograph, *The Theater of Electricity: Technology and Spectacle at the End of the 19th Century* (2020) is scheduled to appear in 2023.