

‘Dying ... to Connect’: Postdigital Co-presence in Dead Centre’s *To Be a Machine* (Version 1.0) (2020)

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*This article proposes to address the tension between digital co-presence and embodied spectatorship inaugurated by the pivot to online and hybrid forms of (post-)pandemic performance through the lens of the postdigital. The term is developed as a way of accounting for the complex mediated co-presence between performer and audience in a representative example of this genre, Dead Centre’s *To Be a Machine* (Version 1.0). As its theoretical framework, the article brings together the concept of ‘postdigital performance’ (Causey) with co-presence as a central element of liveness and spectatorship. It puts forth the hypothesis that *To Be a Machine* (Version 1.0) constructs a postdigital sense of co-presence that is characterized by a blurring of the lines between embodied and virtual spectatorship, temporal co-presence and real-time interaction with the remote audience, and an increased sense of emotional alignment with the remote audience in lieu of physical proximity.*

The COVID-19-related closures of theatres and performance spaces, which led to a watershed of innovative approaches to theatre-making in the past three years, have reinvigorated long-standing debates surrounding the ontology of spectatorship and liveness in theatre and performance studies. Originally born out of necessity, shows produced during this time soon developed increasingly complex setups with regard to mediatization and new possibilities of audience participation. The pandemic threw into sharp relief the need to find alternative ways of keeping audiences engaged in performances in the absence of physical co-presence. In her recent monograph *Theater of Lockdown*, Barbara Fuchs outlines some of the strategies employed by theatre-makers ‘desperately attempt[ing] to figure out how to connect with their audiences’ that ranged from scaling down and shortening productions to counter ‘Zoom fatigue’ to productions that ‘explored the tactile, the intimate, the miniaturized’.¹ Noting that ‘the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic hurriedly dissolved [the] fundamental fabric’ of theatre, Paul Sermon et al. discuss ‘telepresence stage techniques’² developed during this time, contextualizing them historically with regard to earlier forms of digital performance.

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In an interview with *Stage Door Live* from 2020, Dublin Fringe Festival artistic director and CEO Ruth McGowan stressed the importance of 'active spectatorship' and the 'connection between artists and audiences' for the festival. She noted that the curatorial process for the online edition involved prioritizing performances 'that would demand the audience's full-bodied ... full-attention, full-energy presence to make them happen' as opposed to such where one could 'press "play" on and walk away from' or that one 'could be doing while also doing the hovering'.³ McGowan's notion of 'full-bodied' attention and 'full-energy presence' is particularly noteworthy, as it implicitly touches on the idea of theatre as an 'art form commonly defined through its reliance on a shared time-space frame between audience and representation'.⁴ It points to the challenges encountered when attempting to translate the energy and embodied connection between performers and audiences to digital or hybrid formats and at the same time to the increased blurring of these ontological boundaries in (post-)pandemic performance.⁵

Taking as a cue Sermon et al.'s statement that there is an 'urgent need for novel approaches with which to explore this networked world of coexistence',⁶ this article proposes to address the tension between digital co-presence and embodied spectatorship inaugurated by the pivoting to online and hybrid forms of (post-)pandemic performance through the lens of the postdigital. As a protean critical term which complicates and challenges binary views of the digital and the non-digital, the postdigital has been invoked in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic in recent work from other fields.⁷ However, it has not been discussed in the context of (post-)pandemic performance or 'viral theatre' specifically.⁸ In this article, I argue that the term is particularly well suited for an exploration of such performances because it encapsulates the 'dialectics of embodiment and disembodiment' in its very conceptualization.⁹ A central aspect of 'postdigital performance', as proposed by Matthew Causey, is the idea that 'the ontologies of the performance and media converge and are experienced as less uncanny and more familiar, less discrete and autonomous phenomena'.¹⁰ The dialectical, dynamic oscillation between the digital and the non-digital implied in this definition appears particularly pertinent to the ever-shifting constellations and dynamic negotiations of liveness and co-presence in (post-)pandemic performance.

In this article, the term 'postdigital co-presence' is developed as a way of acknowledging the complex mediatized co-presence between performer and audience in a representative example of this genre, Dead Centre's *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (2020). The play was an adaptation of Mark O'Connell's eponymous non-fiction book on transhumanism and premiered at Dublin Theatre Festival in October 2020, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ Advertised as a 'live-audience-upload-experience',¹² the performance was livestreamed on Vimeo from Project Arts Centre in Dublin. Before being granted access to the performance, audience members were asked to record short videos of themselves laughing at a joke, following the performance with a neutral expression, or falling asleep. These pre-recorded affective reactions were then uploaded and mounted onto iPads set up on individual seats of the auditorium. During the performance, the character Mark (a fictionalized version

of O'Connell played by actor Jack Gleeson) interacted with both the pre-recorded and the virtually co-present audience. One of the central themes around which the play converges is the complex mediation (in more than one sense) between human performers, technological tools and audiences. Throughout the performance, the boundaries between human and machine, the digital and the organic, are interrogated in various ways, not being presented as mutually exclusive categories.

As its theoretical framework, this article brings together the concept of 'postdigital performance' coined by Causey with co-presence as a central element of liveness and spectatorship. It puts forth the hypothesis that *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* constructs a postdigital sense of co-presence that is characterized by, first, a blurring of the lines between embodied and virtual spectatorship as well as between the organic and the virtual more broadly; second, temporal co-presence and real-time interaction with the remote audience; and third, an increased sense of emotional alignment with the remote audience in lieu of physical proximity. Applying the lens of the postdigital to theatrical co-presence achieves three related aims. First, it complicates and questions binary notions of the digital and the non-digital in the context of theatrical performance, in line with Philip Auslander, Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, Joseph Dunne-Howrie, Sarah Bay-Cheng and others, making the case that the negotiation of the liminal spaces between these terms and the metatheatrical thematizing of this tension becomes a central aspect of the performance. Second, it offers a useful, non-exclusionary and flexible terminology for framing the complex strategies and practices of mediation employed in (post-)pandemic performance. Third, it shifts the focus towards the important relationship between performer and audience, which has not been a central concern of previous research on postdigital performance, in which the focus lies primarily on the 'modalities', 'affects' and/or technologies used.¹³

I'm (not) there: co-presence in a postdigital culture

The title of Florian Cramer and Petar Jandrić's 2021 article 'Postdigital: A Term That Sucks but Is Useful' humorously acknowledges the terminological challenges surrounding this term,¹⁴ with Cramer defining it as 'a perspective that finds the distinction between "digital" and "non-digital" to be less clear than it seems when it is rigorously inspected, and also less useful and relevant than it often seems'.¹⁵ The most noteworthy part of this passage for the present context is Cramer's statement that it may not only be difficult to delineate strict demarcations between the 'digital' and the 'non-digital' in the current media landscape and the omnipresent mediatization of everyday life, but, in fact, that such a differentiation may not be particularly 'useful' or 'relevant'. In a 2016 article on 'Postmedia Performance', published as an 'Intervention' in the *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Sarah Bay-Cheng indeed posits that 'it is time to acknowledged [sic] that we may have entered a moment of "postmedia"', arguing that

perhaps we are now at a point where the very argument in favor of a specific medium possessing unique characteristics and qualities is no longer helpful to the larger project of understanding theatre, television, dance, film, videogames, and performance, among

a diverse media eco-culture. If everything is mediated, mediatized, or viewed as if it is, what is the point of media specificity? What happens if we declare ourselves to be postmedia?¹⁶

Bay-Cheng's notion of 'postmedia' offers a convincing way of addressing the increasing mediatization both of theatre and of everyday life in the twenty-first century, and further reinforces the idea that the boundaries between media have become porous, existing in a constant process of oscillation and (re)negotiation. While in Dead Centre's adaptation of *To Be a Machine 1.0*,¹⁷ a certain awareness of media-specificity is necessary in order for the playful and self-reflexive commentary to 'land' with the audience, the boundaries between the virtual and the real, the organic and the inorganic, become increasingly blurred throughout the performance, for example when Mark discusses uploading one's consciousness to the cloud or likens 'human existence' to a 'suboptimal system'.¹⁸

The 'supplementary logic of opposing media ontologies' is similarly challenged in Causey's understanding of the postdigital, which does not equal a wholesale rejection of the digital but rather contests the 'binary distinctions among media delivery systems' in earlier accounts of the 'ontology of performance'.¹⁹ The central formulation of a 'postdigital culture' according to Causey is 'that of a social system fully familiarized and embedded in electronic communications and virtual representations, wherein the biological and the mechanical, the virtual and the real, and the organic and the inorganic approach indistinction'.²⁰ With the digital becoming the standard – or in some cases, only possible – form not only of theatre but of communication more widely during the COVID-19-related lockdowns, the notion of 'postdigital' as a term that blurs the boundaries between physical reality and technological simulation has gained renewed traction, one that Causey and other early theorists of the term could hardly have predicted at the time.

To Be a Machine 1.0 engages with all seven components or modalities that Causey considers crucial to postdigital performance – 'asynchronous time registers and multidimensional spatial configurations', 'replication and simulation rather than traditional representational models', 'networked interconnectivity and the transmedial', 'bugs and glitches', 'trans-identities', 'the reality of the virtual', 'copy and paste'²¹ – to different degrees. In the context of co-presence, the first two aspects are particularly pertinent to the discussion, as well as 'the reality of the virtual', which is understood as a challenging of the 'binaries of the biological and the virtual, the organic and the inorganic, the machine and the flesh'.²² In the following, the article explores how the aspects of 'postdigital co-presence' identified above – the blurring of the ontological planes between the digital and the physical, real-time interaction with the remote audience and strategies aimed at increasing their affective engagement – are implemented in Dead Centre's *To Be a Machine 1.0*.

To be (or not to be) a machine

Arguing that 'internet theatre created during the pandemic functions as a metonym for the transformation of the human subject from corporeal flesh to bio-techno hybrids',²³ Joseph Dunne-Howrie notes a 'decentring of biological corporeality in Internet theatre

as the primary mode of human connection' in recent discussions surrounding liveness in (post-)pandemic performances.²⁴ Heidi Liedke and Monika Pietrzak-Franger similarly note that 'physical copresence at performances is no longer crucial to th[e] new sense of liveness' developed in the wake of COVID-19 restrictions,²⁵ with a 'sense of a virtual community' becoming a central feature of 'viral theatre'.²⁶ In the case of *To Be a Machine 1.0*, this view is corroborated (among other things) by promotional material relating to the performance: the tagline of the (electronic) programme – 'Thank you for not coming'²⁷ – encapsulates the blurring of the boundaries between physical and virtual co-presence. In an almost Schrödingerian sense, the audience is, indeed, both present and not present at the same time during this performance: present in the sense of watching the performance remotely in real time via Vimeo and as a simulacrum in the physical auditorium, not present in the sense that the audience's bodies are not in the same physical space as that of the performer. Fuchs suggests that *To Be a Machine 1.0* thus 'puts pressure on the notion of theater as an embodied event, one that requires performer and audience to share a space'.²⁸

In the case of *To Be a Machine 1.0*, questions of presence became pertinent even before the start of the show, as audience members were asked to record videos of themselves and upload them in exchange for the streaming link, a process guided by actor Jack Gleeson, who performed the role of Mark in the play. This process led to a conflation of different temporalities as well as spatialities, with a future reaction being pre-recorded at a given moment and later staged in the present as an affective memory of the past. In this, it embodied a sense of 'asynchronous time registers and multidimensional spatial configurations', which Causey identifies as a central feature of postdigital performance. During the performance, the ontological boundaries surrounding co-presence were then further interrogated through 'digital bricolage':²⁹ the staging of the virtual audience on iPads in the auditorium in which Jack Gleeson was physically present and his subsequent interaction with them. Fuchs's use of 'bricolage' for this process is particularly fitting, as it highlights the sense that physical and virtual co-presence are not conceived as mutually exclusive categories, but rather that they are both, in their own way, always already simulacra. This idea was strengthened by the occasional use of point-of-view camera shots through which the remote audience saw the pre-uploaded audience (i.e. in some cases themselves) in the auditorium from Mark's perspective, which even further destabilized the boundaries between performer and spectator as well as those between physical and virtual co-presence. Gleeson implicitly touches on the 'dialectics of embodiment and disembodiment'³⁰ in the context of co-presence when he remarks, 'maybe my job is to try to make the audience feel *as if they are there*'.³¹ In the programme relating to the play, O'Connell further complicates the notion of presence by introducing yet another iteration (in the sense that Gleeson acts as a 'substrate' of the writer): 'Even though "I" am always present on stage (uploaded into the younger and more compelling substrate of Jack) I'm also absent ... I am not here. And you are not here. But something is about to happen in our absence.'³²

In one of the first scenes, Mark proceeds to tell the audience that he can show everyone the view they would have been assigned based on the kind of ticket that they

bought, by using a point-of-view shot that purports to display the exact angle and perspective from which they would have seen the play, giving each audience member the feeling that they are unique. The empty seats replaced by virtual simulacra of the audience stage theatrical co-presence in intriguing ways, reminding us of the absence of physical bodies sitting together and sharing a space as a crucial aspect of traditional accounts of theatre, but at the same time establishing a visual co-presence as well as physical proximity between the pre-uploaded audience and the performer in the actual theatrical space.

Beyond the notion of spectatorship, questions of presence are further negotiated in the merging of the human body with the machine as a central theme of the play as well as its staging, which corresponds to the challenging of 'the binaries of the biological and the virtual, the organic and the inorganic, the machine and the flesh' that constitutes a key



FIGURE 1. Michael Maertens as Mark in the Burgtheater production *Die Maschine in mir* (2021). The digital representation of an arm on the screen overlaps – and thus visually merges – with the human arm of the performer. Photograph by Marcella Ruiz Cruz.

feature of postdigital performance.³³ Figure 1 shows the translation of this idea onto the stage: in this still taken from a production at Burgtheater Wien,³⁴ Michael Maertens's arm is overlaid by the digital representation of an arm on the screen. Almost seamlessly, the still visually aligns the human body with its digital simulacrum, and yet, at the same time, Mark notes that he has 'no great desire to think of [him]self as a machine',³⁵ self-reflexively drawing attention to the screen as a form of illusion, or, as he puts it, 'simulation'.³⁶

Be here now: engaging (with) the audience

To Be a Machine 1.0 begins with a close-up of the character Mark greeting the audience and an immediate breaking of the (virtual) fourth wall as he addresses them directly, using the somewhat hackneyed phrase 'I hope you're doing well in these strange times':

MARK: Hello.
 Good to meet you.
 I hope you're doing well in these strange times.
 I know this isn't an ideal way for us to meet – I'm just another face on a screen.
 You're probably dying to get closer to people, to connect.
 You probably miss being in a crowded room.
 After all, that's why you bought a ticket to the theatre.
 Well, maybe I can help.
 Maybe there's a way we can be together, even though we're not together.³⁷

Mark then asks the audience to 'try to forget about the screen you're staring into – just for a short while' and to 'try to picture [him], not in your laptop, but standing on stage'.³⁸ Mark tells the audience that he is 'here at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin' and is happy that 'so many of you could be here too'.³⁹ The fact that Mark does not distinguish between the physical performance space in Dublin and the audience's remote locations (presumably) in their own homes creates a convergence of different spatialities that challenges dichotomies between physical and digital co-presence from the very start of the performance.

While the audience is initially led to believe that Mark is speaking to them in real time, as Fuchs notes, 'the camera moves back to reveal a digital *trompe-l'oeil*: this is actually Mark's face on an iPad, on an empty stage'.⁴⁰ The notion of *trompe-l'oeil* in this context is particularly fitting, as it refers to a deliberately deceptive representation – or, indeed, simulacrum – of an object that is made to look three-dimensional, even though it is drawn on a flat surface. Again, the performance employs 'asynchronous time registers', this time in a purposely misleading manner, as a way of drawing attention to the 'seams and artifices within the otherwise smooth spaces of the digital',⁴¹ and in this way exemplifying the notion of 'bugs and glitches' as key aspects of postdigital performance. With regard to the notion of co-presence, this opening scene and the ensuing 'digital *trompe l'oeil*' challenge the audience's perception of their temporal synchronicity with the performance as well as – potentially – the reliability and sincerity of Mark as a character.

Perhaps for this very reason, Mark repeatedly assures the audience that the performance is 'authentic' and happening 'live', an assertion visually supported by a red button with the word 'LIVE' in the upper left corner of the Vimeo screen.⁴² In the context of one such statement, Mark admits,

I'm a little nervous, not just because it's the first time I've ever been on stage, but because this is a live-stream and things can go wrong. It's worth the risk though because now more than ever we need to find ways to connect, and live theatre offers that kind of possibility, of feeling like we're in this together. Don't you think?⁴³

This passage is noteworthy in the present context for a number of reasons. First, Mark's statement that it is the first time he has ever been onstage assumes a comic quality and questions the reliability of the information provided, given that Jack Gleeson (whom we do not, at that point, know to be a fictionalized version of O'Connell) has gained worldwide fame as the character Joffrey in the most-watched show in history, HBO's *Game of Thrones* (a fact which is acknowledged in the play at a later point).⁴⁴ Second, Mark addresses the mediatization of the performance, underlining its supposed authenticity and spontaneity by noting that 'things can go wrong', and introducing what Fuchs in the context of digital theatre at large terms 'a Brechtian distance from realism'.⁴⁵ While the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is certainly an important point of reference in this context, in *To Be a Machine 1.0* the 'glitches' do not necessarily – or at least not primarily – seem to have the function of a radical distancing. Rather, they serve as a way of acknowledging the performer's and the audience's shared circumstances during the pandemic (an idea highlighted by Mark's reassuring statement that 'we are all in this together') and thus, in fact, *strengthening* their emotional bond. In this context, the 'post-' in 'post-Brechtian' used by Jarvis and Savage when they describe postdigital artworks as characterized by 'an ostensibly post-Brechtian surfacing of the messy hidden processes that lurk behind the shiny veil of an interface' could be a helpfully relational term,⁴⁶ similar to the 'post' in 'postdigital': a modifier indicating a complex negotiation, rather than rejection, of the concept at hand.

During the performance, Mark repeatedly asks questions of the staged pre-recorded audience, calling on individual members and zooming in on their faces. At one point, it also becomes possible for the remote audience to reply to questions via the Chat function in real time. In most cases, these questions are emotionally charged and call for affective responses, for instance, 'what do you miss most about going to the theatre?'⁴⁷ By reading out specific answers and engaging with them (seemingly) spontaneously,⁴⁸ Mark connects with the audience members on an emotional level via an acknowledgement of their existence behind the computer screen. Giving audience members the chance to voice their opinions and visions via the Chat box not only establishes an even stronger emotional bond between performer and audience; it also facilitates a certain sense of community between audience members in the absence of physical co-presence and potential chance encounters during interval drinks (the latter being by far the most common reply to the question posed). By asking the audience to disclose what they miss about the physical act of *going* to the theatre, Mark invites

them to imagine an almost utopian space in the past (and potentially the future) as yet another example of different overlapping temporalities and spatialities in this performance.

This possibility of forming a temporary community between audience members was, however, soon shut down, as the Chat box was closed after a short while, once Mark began reading out some of the responses and reacting to them onstage. On the one hand, this rather sudden preclusion of further communication heightened the sense of ephemerality of the virtual communities established, highlighting the prevalent sense of isolation experienced during the pandemic. On the other hand, it made the audience even more reliant on Mark for a sense of emotional connection and mutual understanding, further strengthening the affective ties between performer and audience.

Where I end and you begin: new forms of connection

When discussing Dead Centre's vision for *To Be a Machine 1.0* in an interview, co-director Bush Moukarzel highlighted that 'the dynamic that happens between the performer and our distant audience is an attempt to make a new kind of COVID-connection ... How can you reach people when you're not in the same room?'⁴⁹ What Moukarzel describes as a wish to find a 'new kind of connection' between performer and audience and to 'reach' the other becomes a central thematic thread woven into the play, which contributes to the creation of an emotional alignment with the audience.⁵⁰

In the opening monologue, Mark discusses the mediatization of the performance we are watching as a necessity, making explicit what at least some audience members may be thinking – that he is 'just another face on a screen' and that 'this isn't an ideal way for us to meet'. In this scene, Mark appears to empathize with the audience, creating an emotional connection to them in lieu of physical co-presence, a strategy that becomes more pronounced over the course of the performance. By acknowledging and relating to the audience's (posited) struggle and desire for connection and interaction in times of lockdown and offering a potential way of 'helping', Mark establishes – or perhaps aims to establish – what Döveling, Harju and Sommer call 'alignment' in the context of their discussion of digital affect cultures: 'discursively constructed subject positions [that] invite emotional identification.'⁵¹ This idea is further strengthened by Mark's use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' and his direct address of the audience via the second-person pronoun 'you', as well as the fact that, having uploaded ourselves into the performance's cloud, we are already familiar with Jack Gleeson's/Mark's face, which leads to a certain sense of familiarity.⁵² Through the use of emotional alignment, the performance thus constructs a sense of emotional sincerity, spontaneity and purportedly 'authentic' liveness not in spite of, but in fact *through*, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of sharing the same physical space at the present moment and the audience's perceived frustration relating to this matter. The emotional engagement of the audience is, of course, not unique to postdigital and/or (post-)pandemic performance, constituting a mainstay of dramatic theory and practice since antiquity.⁵³ However, this aspect becomes all the more

important with the impossibility of physical co-presence, as muting an online performance, opening another tab, or closing the browser or platform altogether is comparably easier than the more arduous task of standing up and walking out during a synchronous on-site performance.⁵⁴

The repeated assurance of sincerity and authenticity – a central aspect of debates surrounding liveness and co-presence in theatre and performance studies – brought forward by Mark is, however, significantly complicated and, to a certain extent, undermined by the uploading of the audience's pre-recorded affective reactions, which foregrounds their performative nature and their function as an abstract form of currency needed to gain access to the performance. When Mark later makes a joke onstage, a single audience member is shown to laugh, which leads Mark to thank them and note that he 'didn't know if anyone would find that funny. Thank God you're here, whoever you are.'⁵⁵ This first interaction works out well for the character; however, at a later point, the audience appears to go rogue, as Mark is no longer able to control their reactions. In vain, he repeatedly attempts to explain that 'that bit wasn't supposed to be funny', as more and more audience members join in the laughter. As Fuchs notes in this context, 'the usual function of canned laughter – to underscore the humor in what the performer has said and encourage a live audience to laugh along – is upended, almost as though the laughter machine had malfunctioned, or the algorithm had some bug'.⁵⁶ Fuchs's notion of a faulty 'laughter machine' or 'algorithm' implicitly seems to hark back to key concerns of postdigital performance, in which 'bugs and glitches ... operate as ghosts in the machine that allow chance computational and electronic phenomena to appear and participate in structure [sic] of the work'.⁵⁷ The recording and uploading process of the virtual audience and the performer's later interaction with them – who at one point display a reaction that can neither be controlled by the performer nor by themselves – thus work to further destabilize a binary, exclusionary understanding of digital 'versus' non-digital co-presence.

To Be a Machine 1.0 ends with the thematically appropriate song 'My Body Is a Cage' by Arcade Fire played after the opening line of the play, 'I hope you're doing well in these strange times', is repeated twice by Mark, this time only as a digital simulacrum on the iPad, which is becoming increasingly faulty as the video starts skipping. At its ending, the performance thus comes to a (glitchy) full circle, which could be read as an implicit comment on common conceptualizations of drama as a unique and unrepeatable event that no longer seem to be applicable to postdigital performance. The faulty technology leaves the virtual Mark on the screen in a seemingly endless state of limbo, as the 'real' actor has disappeared while we were – unwittingly – watching his virtual alter ego. In the context of co-presence, the final sentence of the playtext, 'We see a wide shot of the iPad [sic] on stage and the audience: *machines singing to machines*',⁵⁸ is particularly noteworthy. Rather than implying a final transition from human to machine, it could be read as a process of gradual convergence from embodied to postdigital spectatorship that has taken place throughout the performance. *To Be a Machine 1.0* shows that the organic and the virtual, the human and the machine, are no longer mutually exclusive categories in a postdigital culture, but act as flexible containers that are subject to constant (re)negotiation and (re)mediation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which thinking through the postdigital can be made productive for (post-)pandemic performance. It proposed the idea that Dead Centre's *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* as a representative example of this recent form of theatre constructs a postdigital sense of co-presence, characterized by a staged version of spatial co-presence on the one hand and temporal co-presence with the remote audience on the other hand, as well as metatheatrical commentary. The term brings together notions of postdigital performance with a stronger focus on the interaction between performer and audience as well as new forms of connection inaugurated by the pandemic. More specifically, the article put forth the hypothesis that postdigital co-presence in *To Be a Machine 1.0* entails a testing of the boundaries between virtual and physically present spectatorship and, by extension, of the organic and the digital; of temporal synchronicity between the performer and the remote audience, which makes possible an interaction in real time; and of strategies which foster emotional alignment across the digital divide.

One of the central themes of *To Be a Machine 1.0* is the tension between Mark's wish to present the performance as 'authentic' and to connect with the audience on an emotional level and elicit genuine responses from them and a certain distancing effect introduced by the frequent metatheatrical commentary and acknowledgement of the performance's mediatization. Rather than creating a sense of complete detachment in the audience in the sense of a Brechtian distancing effect, the 'post-Brechtian'⁵⁹ self-reflexive commentary, as well as the glitches deliberately incorporated into the play, serve as yet another way of reinforcing the affective ties between performer and audience.

To Be a Machine 1.0 thrives on the playful deconstruction of the boundaries between embodied and virtual spectatorship and co-presence, incorporating this dialectic as a thematic thread that runs through the play. In its employment of postdigital strategies, modalities and art-making practices, which challenge a dichotomous distinction between human and machine, the play probes the porous boundaries of the 'postdigital membrane'.⁶⁰ In the process, it engages with postdigital 'models of performing [but also of understanding] the self that are states of becoming outside of traditional ordering systems, biological imperatives or binary restrictions'.⁶¹ In its always relational and provisional (re)negotiation of the boundaries between performer and spectator, human and machine, the virtual and the real, *To Be a Machine 1.0* is a complex reflection on liveness in times of COVID-19-related theatre closures and audiences 'dying to get closer to people, to connect'.⁶²

NOTES

- 1 Barbara Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown: Digital and Distanced Performance in a Time of Pandemic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 11–12.
- 2 Paul Sermon, Steve Dixon, Sita Popat Taylor, Randall Packer and Satinder Gill, 'A Telepresence Stage: or How to Create Theatre in a Pandemic – Project Report', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18, 1 (2022), pp. 48–68, here p. 49.
- 3 Interview with Kelly O'Doherty, 27 August 2020, *Stage Door Live*, 'Episode 19: Dublin Fringe Preview', at www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEc6djfvftM (accessed 15 April 2022).

- 4 Kurt Vanhoutte and Nele Wynants, 'Performing Phenomenology: Negotiating Presence in Intermedial Theatre', *Foundations of Science*, 16, 2–3 (2011), pp. 275–84, here p. 276. Sermon et al., 'A Telepresence Stage', p. 48, similarly note that in common definitions of theatre, it is 'first and foremost [conceived of as] a live and collaborative artform where performers and audiences come together in a physical space'. See also Toby Malone and Chris Jackman, 'Spectatorship as Embodied Practice', in Malone and Jackman, eds., *Adapting War Horse* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 39–49.
- 5 With the increased proliferation of digital and postdigital theatre and performance in recent years, the central concept of presence has been increasingly debated and critically evaluated. Recent overviews of the ongoing, long-lived and complex debate surrounding the place of temporal and/or spatial co-presence as a central aspect of liveness in theatre, performance and media studies and its interdisciplinary applications can be found in Joseph Dunne-Howrie, 'Internet Theatre and the Historical Consciousness of the Covid-19 Era', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18, 1 (2022), pp. 176–90; and Suk-Young Kim, 'Liveness: Performance of Ideology and Technology in the Changing Media Environment', in Kim, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), at <http://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.76>. See also Sarah Bay-Cheng's and Ulf Otto's articles in the present issue.
- 6 Sermon et al., 'A Telepresence Stage', p. 49.
- 7 See, for instance, Mark Coeckelbergh, 'The Postdigital in Pandemic Times: A Comment on the Covid-19 Crisis and Its Political Epistemologies', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 3 (2020), pp. 547–50; Zoë Hurley and Khadija Al-Ali, 'Feminist Postdigital Inquiry in the Ruins of Pandemic Universities', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3, 3 (2021), pp. 771–92; Michael A. Peters, 'Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 3 (2020), pp. 556–61; Mark Tschaepé, 'Seeing and Viewing through a Postdigital Pandemic: Shifting from Physical Proximity to Scopic Mediation', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 3 (2020), pp. 757–71.
- 8 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 (2021), pp. 128–44.
- 9 Vanhoutte and Wynants, 'Performing Phenomenology', p. 280.
- 10 Matthew Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 68, 3 (2016), pp. 427–41, here p. 430.
- 11 Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta, 2017).
- 12 Dead Centre Website, at www.deadcentre.org/tobeamachine (accessed 25 May 2022).
- 13 See Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', p. 432.
- 14 Florian Cramer and Petar Jandrić, 'Postdigital: A Term That Sucks but Is Useful', *Postdigital Science and Education*, 3, 3 (2021), pp. 966–89. Cramer and Jandrić's joint interview is symptomatic of the definitional uncertainties surrounding the term more broadly. It has been employed in fields as diverse as literary and media education (Stephen Abblitt, 'A Postdigital Paradigm in Literary Studies', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38, 1 (2019), pp. 97–109); theatre and performance studies; and artificial intelligence, cybernetics and deep learning (Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley, 'Critical Philosophy of the Postdigital', *Review of Contemporary Philosophy*, 18 (2018), pp. 64–79). For a detailed summary of the terminological challenges of 'postdigital' in the context of theatre and performance studies see Liam Jarvis and Karen Savage, 'Introduction: Postdigitality: Isn't It All "Intermedial"?', in Jarvis and Savage, eds., *Avatars, Activism and Postdigital Performance: Precarious Intermedial Identities* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2022), pp. 1–13, particularly pp. 5–13.
- 15 Cramer and Jandrić, 'Postdigital', p. 971.
- 16 Sarah Bay-Cheng, 'Postmedia Performance', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26, 2 (2016), at <https://www.contemporarytheatrereview.org/2016/postmedia-performance/> (accessed 25 May 2022).
- 17 For reasons of space and better legibility, the title of the play *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* will henceforth be shortened to *To Be a Machine 1.0*.
- 18 *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)*, p. 6. References to the unpublished rehearsal script generously provided by Dead Centre will subsequently be cited as Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0* + page number.

- 19 Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', p. 428.
- 20 Ibid., p. 432.
- 21 Ibid., p. 434.
- 22 Ibid. The transhumanist impetus of *To Be a Machine 1.0*, with its celebratory – at times utopian – embrace of technology, complicates the notion of postdigital performance as one that 'thinks digitally in order to resist ... the systems of electronic and computational control'. Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', p. 432, emphasis added. However, Causey's typology is not necessarily prescriptive and he suggests that it requires further sustained analysis and 'expansion' (Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', pp. 433–4), to which this article aims to contribute.
- 23 Dunne-Howrie, 'Internet Theatre', p. 176.
- 24 Ibid., p. 179.
- 25 Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger, 'Viral Theatre', p. 134.
- 26 Ibid. While the present article is concerned with the relationship between performer and audience to a stronger degree than the sense of community-building between audience members outlined here, the ideas are comparable in the sense that both presuppose a strong(er) emotional engagement on the side of the audience in lieu of physical co-presence. A similar focus on the social aspects of liveness can also be observed in Couldry's idea that 'liveness – or live transmission – guarantees a potential connection to shared social realities as they are happening'. Nick Couldry, 'Liveness, "Reality", and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone', *Communication Review*, 7, 4 (2004), pp. 353–61, here p. 355.
- 27 Dead Centre, programme for *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* at the Dublin Theatre Festival, Dublin, electronic playbill, 2020.
- 28 Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 106.
- 29 Ibid., p. 110.
- 30 Vanhoutte and Wynants, 'Performing Phenomenology', p. 280.
- 31 Burgtheater Wien, 'PROBENEINBLICKE #6: DIE MASCHINE IN MIR (VERSION 1.0) Mit Bush Moukarzel & Ben Kidd', 30 December 2020, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=HP5PmEqVQU (accessed 15 April 2022), emphasis added.
- 32 Dead Centre, programme for *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)*.
- 33 In the German translation of the title, *Die Maschine in mir (Version 1.0)*, human and machine, the organic and the digital, have become virtually – in more than one sense – indistinguishable: rather than the hopeful, utopian subjunctive of O'Connell's original, the machine is now located *inside* the human character (but also, implicitly, in the audience). *Die Maschine in mir (Version 1.0)*, by Mark O'Connell, directed by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd, translated by Henning Borchert, performance by Michael Maertens, Burgtheater Wien, 27 January 2021, online.
- 34 The still is taken from the Burgtheater production, since no publicly available still of the English-speaking performance showing the same scene exists. However, save for the difference in language, this version is an exact replication of the original adaptation staged at Project Arts Centre, and thus the argument made applies to both versions.
- 35 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 5.
- 36 Ibid., p. 3.
- 37 Ibid., p. 1.
- 38 Ibid., p. 1.
- 39 Ibid., p. 2.
- 40 Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 108.
- 41 Sy Taffel, 'Perspectives on the Postdigital', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 22, 3 (2016), pp. 324–38, here p. 325.
- 42 *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)*, by Mark O'Connell, directed by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd, performance by Jack Gleeson, Dead Centre, 2 October 2020, online.
- 43 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 1.

- 44 Taking up Bay-Cheng's notion of 'postmedia', Dunne-Howrie, 'Internet Theatre', p. 184, argues that 'To Be a Machine opens a pipeline for *Game of Thrones* to leak into its aesthetic ... which then reconfigures perceptions of Gleeson as a further media construct'.
- 45 Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 88.
- 46 Jarvis and Savage, 'Introduction: Postdigitality', p. 5.
- 47 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 8.
- 48 In an act of illusion-breaking in itself, Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 113, notes that 'the witty answers' were, in fact 'scripted'; however, while this background information certainly adds to an accurate representation of the technical side of this performance, the audience during *To Be a Machine 1.0* was likely unaware of this choice, which is why this information is not incorporated in my own analysis.
- 49 Burgtheater Wien, 'PROBENEINBLICKE #6'.
- 50 Although the play employs a range of metatheatrical techniques, co-director Ben Kidd insists that it is not meant solely – or primarily – as a 'metatheatrical investigation of theatre' but rather as a way 'to explore' the questions, 'what do we mean when we talk about human beings? What is a person, now?' Burgtheater Wien, 'PROBENEINBLICKE #6'.
- 51 Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju and Denise Sommer, 'From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion', *Social Media + Society*, 4, 1 (2018), pp. 1–11, here p. 4. Döveling, Harju and Sommer's research is primarily focused on social media, rather than (post)digital theatre; however, their starting point is 'the connection of mediatization and emotion' (*ibid.*, p. 1) more broadly.
- 52 In a somewhat ironic twist, the fact that we learn at this point that Mark's opening monologue on the screen is likely the *exact* same video that we encountered during the uploading process creates a certain alienation effect, rather than heightening the sense of alignment created by our familiarity with Mark's face.
- 53 For detailed discussions and theorizations of the connection between theatre and affect see, for example, Mireia Aragay, Cristina Delgado-García and Martin Middeke, eds., *Affects in 21st-Century British Theatre: Exploring Feeling on Page and Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Erin Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Martin Welton, *Feeling Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Peta Tait, *Theory for Theatre Studies: Emotion* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2021).
- 54 This aspect is discussed by Liedke and Pietrzak-Franger, 'Viral Theatre', p. 141, in the context of interactive performances on Zoom, where the platform makes it possible to 'abandon the role of the witness ... and become stealthy onlookers'.
- 55 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 7.
- 56 Fuchs, *Theater of Lockdown*, p. 113.
- 57 Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', p. 434.
- 58 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 21, emphasis added.
- 59 Jarvis and Savage, 'Introduction: Postdigitality', p. 5.
- 60 See Robert Pepperell and Michael Punt, *The Postdigital Membrane: Imagination, Technology and Desire* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2000).
- 61 Causey, 'Postdigital Performance', p. 434.
- 62 Dead Centre, *TBM 1.0*, p. 1.

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