## ARTICLES

# Emancipating the Spectator? Livecasting, Liveness, and the Feeling I

Heidi Liedke

In theatre, the ~~audience~~ spectator feels as if s/he regulates the performance.
Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, with an update by the author

## Introduction

As Gay McAuley observes, “theatre is a social event, occurring in the auditorium as well as on the stage, and the primary signifiers are physical and even spatial in nature” (2000, 5). But what happens to this social dimension when there is no auditorium and no actual stage and therefore the dimension of proxemics, that is the relationship of body and space, is eliminated? Or do we have to look at this differently because this social dimension is an illusion in the first place? Put differently, is theatre centred on the “immunisatory paradigm” which in fact always-already saves us from any (social) involvement, as Alan Read observes polemically (see 2014, 13)?

Questions around whether, on the one hand, we live in a Rancièrian epoch of emancipated spectatorship (2009) with its “potential for democratic alliance, somehow in *excess* of the stage spectacle, always somehow more independent than reception theory would have us believe” (Read 2014, 12, emphasis in original), or, on the other hand, an age of growing immunization and alienation and whether and how theatre and performance and especially spectators respond to these issues are of new pertinence. More specifically, these questions become relevant in the context of live theatre broadcasting,[1] which, summed up in a brief formula, is theatre-going without going to a theatre, “being there” without actually being there.

For about ten years now, the Metropolitan Opera in New York (since 2006), the National Theatre (NT) in London (since 2009) and the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford (since 2013), to name just the biggest companies in this field, have produced live broadcasts of their productions that are shown in cinemas worldwide. In 2015, Lyndsey Turner’s *Hamlet* at the Barbican, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, set a new record for global cinema viewing with more than 225,000 people in twenty-five countries seeing it broadcast in October of that year (Hawkes 2015). Especially the NT is following the “imperative of innovation” and the “digital imperative”—a phrase Blake uses to encircle the “new habits of thought that are accruing around the theatre’s engagements with the digital [and that] are indicative of all sorts of change, in both artistic and entrepreneurial arenas” (Blake 2014, 10–11). The RSC also follows suit—yet what impacts do livecasting technologies have on the experience of their spectators? Are they manifestations of what Rancière describes, do they bear the potential for a social and democratic examination of performance and theatre by individuals, or do they bring about a new kind of emotional turn, an inward turn?[2] And, linked to that, how do they influence the perceived liveness of the performances that are being witnessed?

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This article investigates these questions by drawing on concepts from the fields of adaptation studies, performance philosophy, and audience studies. I argue that, on the one hand, livecasting opens up new possibilities of audience participation and fosters a multimodal (see Elleström 2010) engagement with the "translated" sources. In keeping with an age of user-submitted web content, livecasts allow their audiences (the feeling of) a key role in determining its shape, and theatres reach out to audiences to engage with their shows on social media. On the other hand, this new paradigm of spectatorship, with its emphasis on what Eglinton calls "first-person experiences" (2010) in the context of immersive theatre, may come at the expense of more traditional constructions of "liveness" which prioritize community and identification (Oddey and White 2009, 8). Livecasts seem to particularly foster and enhance the manifestation of the "feeling I," one's own and personal position with regard to the cultural product witnessed and particularly one's emotional rather than critical (i.e., more rational, reflected) response. Even though Erin Hurley in her concise *Theatre & Feeling* emphasizes that "in addition to being theatre's reason for being, feeling is what is most consequential about theatre" as it "draws us into the symbolic universe of the theatrical performance by connecting us emotionally with its characters . . . and hooking us with its moving narrative structure" (2010, 9–10), the feeling spectator who feels the need to share his/her (perhaps banal) feelings has not yet been given enough attention in a scholarly context.

One sees the limits of a Bakhtinian reading when thinking about livecasts and the tweets surrounding them: on the one hand, they have the potential to enhance the experience of an adaptation—they suggest a movement toward a humanization of cultural perception (Cutchins 2017, 85). This is a humanization both in the sense of a democratization of access and in the sense that the tweets and livecasts prolong the liveness of a performance with the help of every(wo)men's voices. They can remind us that texts are not dead things (Bakhtin 1981, 252–53). On the other hand, one must ask critically whether the potential of this multimodal complexity—at least in the present moment—is not complemented with and pushed off the stage by experiential simplicity and the manifestation of the "feeling I."

## Spectator-Centric Theatre

The wooing of audiences by major theatre institutions such as the NT, the RSC or the Old Vic (which does not [yet] produce livecasts, only in cooperation with NT Live) via email newsletters and social media to attend—and, most importantly, share their experiences of—their shows and livecasts belongs to the wider shift toward spectator-centrism in recent years in theatre and performance. Several scholars have encircled this development toward a spectator-centric theatre with new terminologies. Andy Lavender detects a shift from *mise-en-scène* to *mise-en-sensibilité* in twenty-first-century performance in general, and especially, but not only, immersive performance. In new theatre, the play no longer takes place "over there" (on the stage) but "with us inside it." This (re)arrangement of affect

> implicates the *matter* of theatre—what it is about, deals with, dramatizes—with its *mediation*. When we are within mediation, as participants or immersants, we are differently response-able. . . . The power at stake here is a mixture of agency, authentic feeling, witness from within and—not least—the power to withdraw, not to participate. (Lavender 2016, 100, emphasis in original)

Lavender's *mise-en-sensibilité* describes how the spotlight is more and more on spectators—at least potentially—and perhaps the term "response-ability" is even more interesting: for to be response-able means to matter and be an important and central element of a performance. One has the ability to participate. When one thinks of the consequences of such a status/position, one can link this to Keren Zaiontz's concept of "narcissistic spectatorship" (2014), which is developed along similar lines as Lavender's, yet more directly focused on the physical engagement and felt experience, and how spectators in a way implicitly compete with each other for "better" experiences.

Combining Lavender and Zaiontz's approaches, Adam Alston coins the term "narcissistic participation" for a similar phenomenon occurring in the context of immersive performances and describes it as being made up of "two mutually reinforcing parts: the participant's internal experience *and* his or her participation (or *potential participation*) with the objects, spaces and people that shape that experience" (Spence and Benford 2018, 5, emphasis added). These parts, taken together, create an "affective experience" and as a consequence "affect then implicates the audience not just as a judgmental and potentially empathetic observer of a fictive world and its inhabitants but as an essential part and co-producer of that world" (Alston 2016, 36). Thus, narcissistic participation consists of both "affectively perceived co-production" and "physically embodied co-production" (Spence and Benford 2018, 5). In other words: the spectator needs others and their (bodily) presence and his/her participation in that group combined with his/her internal experience in order to participate narcissistically. This experience is always shaped by what the spectator "brings to the stage"—that is their autobiographies. Spence and Benford add a further element here:

> We believe that relationships with others must contribute to the autobiography that may profoundly impact a spectator's affect and therefore his or her experience. Rather than existing as a physically co-present or digitally conjured "actor" taking part in each performance (and as such part of the performance environment), the people with whom a participant has an emotionally powerful relationship *may exist solely within the mind of that participant at that time*, but mentally conjuring their relationship involves far more than a dry act of cognition. (2018, 5, emphasis added)

While Spence and Benford speak of (existing) relationships that, when conjured up, form "part of the autobiography that the spectator brings to the performance" and thus can form part of the event itself, the *implied* presence of other spectators can have a similar effect on the individual spectator-as-centre: it can fuel the wish to articulate one's part of the event, even if only on its paratextual brim, even if only in one's own eyes. Thus, the above considerations can be applied as well when examining the reactions to livecasts, that is live broadcasts of theatre productions that are explicitly advertised as inviting a direct response from audiences via social media and enabling them to participate in this event from their "local venue" (each post announcing a new livecast ends with the appeal "Check your local venue for dates and times" and a link with further information).

## Livecasts, Liveness, and "We"

Given that livecasting is so distinctively a "cross-over" formation, it is not surprising that there is a strong emergent tradition of thinking about liveness within media studies.[3] Most recently, Sarah Atkinson and Helen W. Kennedy examine the cultures, economies, and aesthetics of live cinema (which is not the same as livecasting, however, which they categorize as event cinema), and share Auslander's (2012) understanding of the term "live" (Atkinson and Kennedy 2018, 3). Karin van Es

argues that liveness is "a construction, a product of the [dynamic] *interaction* among institutions, technologies, and users/viewers" (2017, 5, emphasis added), that is, a conception of liveness understood as constellations of liveness. This is a timely update to previous conceptions of the concept within media studies and relevant for an analysis of livecasting where a sense of liveness is also explicitly evoked and constructed.

When announcing upcoming livecasts, the rhetoric used by the theatre companies involved (currently the NT and the RSC) and later platforms such as Digital Theatre where some livecasts (except those from the NT) can be downloaded emphasizes the uniqueness of what they are advertising and the immediate experience viewers are about to have. This hyperbole and the use of the word "event" strike "a chord with the debates and politics of this area of cultural production" and are associated with the territory of event cinema but also live and experiential cinema (see Atkinson and Kennedy 2018, 3–5). Digital Theatre announces that it "brings the live theatre experience to your screen by instantly streaming the best theatre productions from around the world anytime, anywhere" (DT "About Us"). Below this text, there are a number of endorsements from several artistic directors from different companies—notably no responses from viewers—among those David Lan's (the former artistic director at the Young Vic). According to Lan, "the combination of new technologies that promise filmed versions of productions that retain *vitality* and *immediacy* and producers who understand the needs of artists is a winning one" (DT homepage, emphasis added).

Similarly, the announcements on the NT Live homepage almost comically repeat the immediacy and "nearness" of the livecasts: on its title page we find four pointers stating "What's on *near* me in [city]," "Experience the best of British theatre at a cinema *near* you," "Productions *near* you," and "Venues *near* you," and usually before livecasts, posts on the NT Live Twitter page (@NTLive) ask its followers "Where will you be watching?" Viewers are very willing to share either pictures of their tickets displaying the name of their (local) cinema or simply write from where they watched it (for example, for the live broadcast of *Macbeth* on May 10, 2018, there was an international audience from The Hague to the Forest of Dean to Dunfermline).

The immediacy conjured up here, and based on that which constitutes liveness, to a great extent relies on placing viewers somewhere in relation to the event they are witnessing. Coming from the field of spatial theory, Robert T. Tally refers to the reassuring power of a "'You are here' arrow or dot or other marker [which] provides the point of reference from which we can both imagine and navigate the space" (2013, 2), and this is what is provided here as well. But also the broadcasts themselves "construct a sense of place at a distance" (Sullivan 2017, 629): both before the beginning of a screening, when cinema audiences can only see the in-house audience and hear their excited pre-show chatter (635) but also during the broadcasts themselves which "use different shot compositions, editing paces, and camera views to produce forms of spectatorship that can vary dramatically in their theatricality" (629).

Thus, we get a new sense of what constitutes liveness here: while according to Auslander, live performance describes "the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both *physically* and *temporally* co-present to one another" (Auslander 2012, 5, emphasis added), live broadcasting, as Auslander also points out, "meet[s] only one of the basic conditions," namely the temporal one. With livecasting, the spatial condition is replaced by an implied and equally dynamic "come together now," facilitated by the potential of the social to construct media and vice versa.

The sense of place implicates a sense of community, which can be summed up in the formula "place + community = liveness."

Taking the example of the RSC Live broadcast of *Romeo and Juliet* (attended by the author at the Barbican in London on July 18, 2018), the sense of place was highlighted on several levels: first, in the pre-show interview with the director Erica Whyman who outlined how central the idea of having young *British* people in the play (as the chorus) was for her in order to make a connection to the topics of love and violence important to those youths normally unheard and visible "also *on UK streets*." Afterwards, pictures of previous RSC productions of *Romeo and Juliet* were displayed on the screen, showing well-known dramatic actors as the famous couple, such as Zena Walker and Laurence Harvey, and Sia Brook and Matthew Rhys, among others, thus placing this new production in relation to its predecessors. In the interval, a film was shown that again emphasized the involvement of young people from all over the UK and their diversity at a point in history where the UK has to redefine itself as a nation, thus linking back to Whyman's words. With regard to NT Live, Peter Kirwan has critically referred to these extras as attempts "to ensure interpretation is as homogeneous as possible" (2014, 276)—when looking at the reception, however, such a problematic homogeneity does not occur, as Kirwan points out later.

The creation of place during the broadcast itself was established through a balance of medium shots and close-ups and many scenes where one could see the in-house audience watching the play, thus creating "a steady awareness of the space surrounding" the actors (Sullivan 2017, 639). This aesthetic is typical for the RSC's productions and also brought about by the layout of the apron stage, which makes it harder to avoid capturing audience members than in the NT theatres that feature proscenium stages. Therefore, there is a threefold placing process going on: geographically, paratextually and intratextually.

What is the consequence of evoking such a fabric of different, specific places from which people are enjoying a live broadcast? Despite the distance, it is the communal experience they are sharing, and that connects them. While their situatedness is different, the experience is similar, and thus, for the purposes of this argument, one can conceive of liveness as primarily enabling the experience of a "we" (Zahavi 2014), of making the social dimension of a cultural event palpable. According to Dan Zahavi,

> experiential sharing isn't merely individual experience plus reciprocal knowledge; rather, what we are after is a situation in which the experiences of the individuals are co-regulated and constitutively bound together, that is, where the individuals only have the experiences they have in virtue of their reciprocal relation to each other. (2014, 245)

In the livecasting context, even though a viewer attending a livecast, say, at the Barbican in London will never actually know the vast majority of other viewers all around the world, experiential sharing can manifest itself with—or between—these people. After all, at the same time, one is aware that they—or rather we—are all shown the same prompts before, during, and after the show. This comes close to a sort of collective "thinking assignment," a co-regulation of expectation and experience. One can tie this back to Spence and Benford's argument and their focus on the role of relationships: I argue that one has to single out the role of [implied] relationships as a) establishing the feeling of liveness by combining the evocation of a community with a fabric of places and, paradoxically, b) increasing spectator-centrism and thus upholding the balance between similarity with and difference

from others. While livecasting attendees all around the world potentially share the same encounter with a performance they all—and this is another uniting element—would normally not be able to see it at the actual theatre venue. A tap of a finger on the smartphone screen and a look at the social media feeds, however, suffices to remind one that one is thrown back onto one's very own viewing situation.

Similarly, in their introduction to *Modes of Spectating* Alison Oddey and Christine White ask, "What is radically different about how we spectate now?" (2009, 8) and outline how in a live spectatorship setting the viewing situation fluctuates between that of relating one's self to what is being viewed and the perceived impression of being "the nullified being" that is just one individual in an anonymous crowd. Liveness, in this day and age, indeed seems to have become to some extent "a mode of entering the live event; a means of display" (8), as, for instance, screens on stage and auditoriums proliferate (for a thorough discussion of liveness and mediality, see Georgi 2014). According to Oddey and White, the "new mode of spectating" is the event itself (2009, 10) and the activities of the "audience" (as a group of people *listening* to something) and "spectators" (as individuals *watching* an event) collide in the twenty-first century (12). "The new definition of spectatorship," they continue,

> is interactivity. It is the combination of hearing and observation and it has fewer of the negative connotations of the late twentieth century ideas of passive viewing, which have led to an uninformed binary of passive and active, valuable and non-valid cultural activities . . . *Inter* [is] a prefix to the senses, as is all twenty-first century spectatorship. (Oddey and White 2009, 13, emphasis in original)

Crucially, with regard to livecasts, the senses are already prefixed with an "inter" before the actual spectating starts—I am calling this space for the engagement and "luring" of audiences the paratextual brim surrounding the broadcast (still present when the show is over). This brim is particularly constructed on Twitter, but also on Instagram and Facebook. The specific responses can be conceived of as "tactics," in de Certeau's sense, that is, actions that enable—in this case, the spectators—to create a place for themselves within the "strategies" set out by the theatre institutions. As Rachael Nicholas has discussed, in the theatre broadcasting context, the relationship between "strategies" and "tactics" can shift. For instance, tactics can become part of the "strategies" of theatre companies when tweets are co-opted as part of their publicity campaigns (Nicholas 2018, 79). Yet crucially, the tweets are audience performances that are "neither neutral nor irrelevant to an understanding of the production and distribution of broadcasts . . . [T]hey constitute tactics that operate within, and sometimes disturb, power structures and cultural hierarchies" (90).

This interplay between "strategies" and "tactics" occurs to a great extent within the paratextual brim of Twitter. For instance, in the days and hours leading up to the live broadcast of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* on September 12, 2018, the RSC Twitter page (@TheRSC) encouraged viewers to "head to our Instagram @TheRSC and check out our Costume and Wigs takeover as we get ready for our live broadcast of Merry Wives happening tonight" followed by two emojis of a dancing woman and a pink lipstick and a video loop of one of the actresses in the makeup room. Another post read, "Shut up! Merry Wives is broadcasting at my local cinema? Tonight?! Don't miss it, find your nearest screening here [followed by a link]" and included a gif of David Troughton as Sir John Falstaff captured with an expression of disbelief.

The NT also regularly posts intimate "behind the scenes" features. In September 2018, for instance, the actress portraying Christine in *Julie* (dir. Carrie Cracknell), Thalissa Teixeira (@thalteixeira), took over the NT Live Twitter account (@NTLive) on the day of the broadcast for an hour and shared pictures from rehearsals, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, but also creating a feeling of virtual intimacy, by giving those following the Twitter feed the impression that their experience was closer to the real thing than for regular theatre-goers. Thus, prospective livecast viewers are given intimate insights into the performances, as if the shows were made specifically for them; but to make the best out of it, they have to jump between several social media platforms—they have to prefix their auditory and visual senses with an "inter."

This new definition of spectatorship, that is, the idea that the mode of spectating (on different media) is the event itself, demands quite a bit of labour (unpaid, of course; but the connection between Jen Harvie's [2013] argument in the context of immersive theatre practices and its relevance for livecasting will have to be taken up elsewhere) from its spectators since—as is always the case when there are many options available—one constantly runs the risk of missing out on a particular extra. It can feel a little bit like having to do one's homework first before being able to have the (quantitatively and qualitatively) enhanced experience of the livecast. Yet the presence of the paratextual brim and the availability of the resources described above does offer the potential for a truly multimodal engagement. As Lars Elleström suggests in his multimodal theory of medium which does away with any traces of essentialism and conservatism (of which former definitions of "medium" have been accused), every medium operates with four necessary conditions/modalities: the material, the sensorial, the spatiotemporal and the semiotic. The spatiotemporal modality is of greatest relevance for this discussion since it concerns the "structuring of the sensorial perception of sense-data of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time" (Elleström 2010, 18). It is this modality in particular that is enhanced and expanded in the livecasting context and, thus, contributes to a timely and more permeable understanding and position of what a medium is or can be. It enables spectators to arrive at a more rounded, informed impression and opinion of a given cultural event, and they are given room to become a (speaking, writing) part of it.

## Bakhtinian and Benjaminian Traces—Fabrics of Engagement

Conceiving of twenty-first-century spectatorship as being constituted by an "inter," let us briefly zoom out of the field encircling the spectator and give that which is being spectated its space in order to sketch what effect such an "inter-ization" has on its status. There is a certain potential latent in the livecasting phenomenon, the potential for a more human encounter with a given text when it is no longer there "merely" as an original. This stands in friction with the risk that occurs when an original is turned into a copy, or a play into an adaptation.[4] There is always the risk of "making the play [or any work of art that moved the beholder] seem vacuous" (Cutchins 2017, 79). Adapting Mikhail Bakhtin's theses for the purposes of adaptation studies, Dennis Cutchins points out that Bakhtin describes this experience of wandering between original and copy or adaptation when he writes that "every cultural act lives essentially on the boundaries, and it derives its seriousness and significance from this fact" (Bakhtin 1990, 274). Cutchins continues:

> meaning, for Bakhtin, is always contextual, always dependent on the *interdetermination* of the texts we have experienced. . . . For adaptation studies, this model suggests that what is being adapted in any particular case cannot be the text alone, nor the essence

> of the text, but rather a particular understanding of the text that is *dialogized*, or constantly negotiated along its boundaries. (2017, 79, emphasis added)

What is described here is both the ultimate instability of experiencing any artwork (and this can be extended to refer to performance, too) and the idea that every such experience always-already feeds on/is determined by a multitude of sources. The experience of *being there* with the artwork/original and sharing its place and time, its Benjaminian aura, is crucial and a highly individual experience. In his discussion in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," Walter Benjamin does not focus explicitly on the part and experience of the "receiver" but roots the aura firmly with the artwork, which has to be experienced in its entirety. When the aspect of technological reproduction comes into play, and Benjamin uses the example of photography but also film here, the artwork is immediately broken up into pieces. He claims, for instance, that

> in photography technological reproduction can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and chooses its viewpoint arbitrarily) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether. (Benjamin 2010, 14)

The same holds true for a theatre production being reproduced in a livecast. While being praised as "prime seat access" by the institutions advertising it, there certainly is a parallel between the photograph presenting a person or object in an especially flattering light and the various cameras at the theatre venue making it possible for viewers to see the sweat drops on an actor's face and the flicker of joy, panic or sadness in their eyes. In the context of his day and age, Benjamin argues that

> it is easy to grasp the particular social determination of the aura's present decay. It rests on two circumstances, both intimately linked to the increasing spread and intensity of the mass movements. Namely: the desire of the present-day masses to "bring things closer" and their equally passionate concern, the tendency to overcome the uniqueness of every reality through its reproducibility. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image [*Bild*], or, better, in a facsimile [*Abbild*], in reproduction. (2010, 15–16)

Yet what he describes can be easily transported to a time when the ways in which people are consuming culture is often measured in economic terms, in what a particular experience is "worth." When Benjamin writes that the criterion of authenticity is no longer relevant (2010, 17), and the social function of art changes when it is no longer based on ritual but politics, one can argue for the twenty-first century that it is still, but often not overtly, based on political, but especially economic, considerations by theatre institutions on how to make a performance feasible. The fact that livecasts foster a multimodal engagement with the adapted source text/performance means that they can be understood as part of a new "emotional turn" that prioritizes personal experience.[5] Livecasts enhance the experience of an adaptation—they suggest a movement toward a humanization of cultural perception, in a Bakhtinian sense (Cutchins 2017, 85).

While it would be amiss to use the term "experiential" as defined by Aleks Sierz as "work that provokes, usually in a violent manner, its audiences to *feel* as opposed to *think*" (in Wallace 2010, 88, emphases added) in this specific context as well—and it is too early in the stages of the young livecasting history for a definite assessment—it does point into a direction that livecasts may be

classified in and that this article puts to the fore. The centrism on feelings in livecasts is also reflected in the wording of the questions in online questionnaires following some of the RSC's livecasts. After the livecast of *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, there was the possibility to take part in such a survey. There was a set of statements, explicitly regarding "attending *Romeo & Juliet* in a cinema" with which one could "strongly disagree" or "strongly agree" (with five gradations in total). These statements were (all emphases are mine):

- "I felt *real excitement* because I knew that the performance was live."
- "Being in the cinema was a *very different experience* from attending a live performance."
- "It was *totally absorbing*."
- "I felt an *emotional response* to the performance."
- "Watching the performance on screen gave me a good sense of what *experiencing* it live in a theatre would be like."
- "Being in the cinema was *more engaging* than if I had been there live in the theatre audience."
- "I would recommend the *experience* of attending *Romeo & Juliet* in a cinema to other people."[6]

What is noticeable here, and this will be taken up in the discussion of users' comments on their favourite NT livecasts of 2017 on the NT Live Facebook page, is that there is a strong focus on the somatic and emotional component of attending a livecast already instigated on the part of the theatre institution itself. There are no questions about the acting or thoughts on the production but instead a clear focus on how it was experienced. It is not only one's opinion that matters but also especially one's emotions—something everybody can relate to and something that one does not, for instance, need to have a particular educational background for to understand.

Thus, livecasting, with its inherent—and, as I argue, *constitutive*—invitation to audiences to be a part of it and to *feel* it, can remind us that texts are not dead things. As Bakhtin put it with regard to translations, a discourse that has also been made fruitful in the realm of adaptation theory, "beginning with any text—and sometimes passing through a lengthy series of mediating links—we always arrive, in the final analysis, at the human voice, which is to say we come up against the human being" (1981, 252–53). With their appeals to follow and comment on their livecasts and contribute to their paratexts, the involved theatres do encourage something like a slight shift with regard to "who has the say": of course, the audiences do not (yet) have a say in choosing which show staged in the NT, the RSC or other theatres[7] will be livecast. Yet in entering and participating in this space on social media created for them, the spectators in a way have the final word. This is not political emancipation, of course, but it is an emancipation that demands activity on the part of the spectator and provides visibility. Quite importantly, this activity is purely self-regulated; while, during the RSC's livecast of *Romeo and Juliet* in July 2018 the presenter Suzy Klein repeatedly reminded the audience to fill in the online questionnaire after the show, this was, of course, purely voluntary, and not, as Lauren Wingenroth has recently aptly problematized, an instance of "non-consensual audience participation" (2018). And this is precisely where the potential lies: the spectator has the option to engage in and share both one's opinion of the play and simply the experience of being there.

## I Feel, Therefore I am (a Spectator)

There is, however, a problem with the possibilities livecasts offer with regard to providing a space for spectators in which they can share their impressions and opinions: as much as they can create an atmosphere of being part of a whole, they also increase levels of subjectivity and foster first-person experiences that valorize solely *one's own* position and feelings with regard to the cultural event witnessed over that of a given community's, however broadly the latter is understood. Complicating the issue of what exactly is limited or expanded, Bernadette Cochrane and Frances Bonner utter their skepticism toward live broadcasts and argue that they take away or deprive audiences of "the ability, indeed the right, of each audience member to select and compile his or her own edit of the proceedings" (2014, 127). While this comes close to a sort of aesthetic censoring, one can ask if such editing does not inadvertently create a channelling of one's view (a tunnel vision). In my experience, the fact of being forced to look at particular spots on the stage creates high levels of impatience and annoyance, unnervingly so in livecasts of productions starring famous actors. For instance, in the NT's livecast of *Macbeth* on May 10, 2018, the focus was mostly on the protagonists' (played by Ann-Marie Duff and Rory Kinnear) faces instead of giving a permanent sense of the stage design. Many viewers, however, do not mind this tunnel vision at all: a NESTA study into the impact of NT Live in its early stages reported that levels of absorption and emotional engagement in a given production were actually higher with regard to NT Livecasts (Bakhshi, Mateos-Garcia, and Throsby 2010, 5, 9). Some of the reactions on Twitter regarding *Macbeth* (collected on the @NTLive page as "Moments") indeed attest to that: the livecast is described as "Blimey @NTLive my heart is hammering out of my chest #Macbeth #NTLive" by @scrufflove, user @butler_way also writes the production was "insane," "intense" and the acting "INCREDIBLE," according to @dellerms it is "[f]ull on, frenetic, terrifying to watch Macbeth's descent," @Miss_Informed86 is "completely gripped" and all @Jenstra1 can write is "OMFG Goosebumps #macbeth @NTLive." Apart from a colloquialization of responses that the format of the tweet posted casually from one's smartphone brings about, it seems that if a spectator accepts and perhaps even wished for a mildly "pre-shaped" show in the first place, then s/he can thoroughly plunge into it.

So what else is entailed in this purported closeness of the performance to the recipient? Despite the potential engagement the paratextual brim makes possible, the experiential dimension of the "feeling I" dominates responses on social media to livecasts. When answering the call by NT Live on its Facebook page, on the question which livecasts from 2017 were the favourites among the audiences, those spectators giving more detailed answers tended to insert *themselves* into their answers: who they were watching the livecast with, from where, but especially what it felt like (for instance, to have the "intimacy of the theatre" transported onto the "big screen"). The call for opinions posted on December 25, 2017, received 344 Likes, which may not be so much in social media dimensions but what is striking is the length of the responses (certainly motivated by the fact that there was a chance "to win [a] bundle of signed goodies"). As of July 12, 2019, the post has received 406 comments. Most users began with naming the livecast they had liked most, followed by an appraisal of the actors and often a comment on how they (the commentators) would not have been able to play such an emotional/demanding part every night. While there were several comments on the atmosphere in the cinema (see the first two comments in the list below), there was no interaction between the respective users, apart from occasional likes of what others had posted. Instead, in about one out of four comments, people explicitly related *their own emotional state* with regard to the favourite play.[8] *Yerma*, *Angels in America* and *Follies* were most commentators' favourites.

The responses that are given do not focus on, for instance, specific scenes or detailed references to a given play's content but relate quite extensive descriptions of the commentator's emotional state of mind during or after a show. With regard to *Yerma*, for instance, such phrases included "I felt like I was living a life and not just watching a show. Billie Piper was absolutely phenomenal, I couldn't believe someone's acting could actually make me feel such a spectrum of emotions" (Alexandra Bonita) and "Thoroughly engrossing, provocative and affecting production with an extraordinary central performance from Billie Piper. . . . Absolutely loved the modern, innovative stage design. . . . Won't forget" (Matthew Floyd). Regarding *Angels in America*, Sophie Elizabeth felt taken back to her "uni days" and reminded of why she loved "Drama," and for Lynda Fogg, it was such a joy "to watch the very talented actors that [she] didn't want it to end." Similarly, Amber Bytheway reported being left "aghast with amazement and vulnerability and hope" and, after watching *Millennium Approaches* (the first part of *Angels in America*), Kit Rafe Heyam wondered how she "was going to emotionally get through the next week." Several commentators would also insert biographical information and context for how they came to watch their favourite livecast (a sibling's birthday; parents ill but friends took care of them so person could go to the cinema) and, in the case of *Angels in America*, several members of the LGBTQI community reported being especially grateful to have seen the play. The following list shows more examples of observations made:

> "Angels in America was an incredible feat of emotional theatre. It took you through a rollercoaster and left you almost breathless. I could only imagine what it was to be there in person soaking it all up in the theatre—the cinema was a good second best." (Lizzy Balmain)
>
> "Angels in America. . . . A [sic] amazing 8 hours, I laughed, I cried I was 100% emotionally involved with the character's [sic]. Can't even describe the '"electricity"' in the audience watching it, it was a shared experience that can't properly be explained unless you've seen it." (Sara Griffin)
>
> "Overall, the experience of nt live has always been good to us. . . . That day made us feel like we were in the right place at the right time." (Peter Malmquist)
>
> "I was completely blown away by Follies. . . . Lots of laughter & tears—I was emotionally wrung out and exhilarated by the end. Saw it in Munich with a lovely bunch of girlfriends." (Dagmar Burnett-Godfree)
>
> "Angels in America, without a doubt! . . . It took me to places I didn't know existed and I don't think there'll ever be another play to affect me so profoundly." (Chloe Bisset)
>
> "It changed my life." (Laura Jane Northmore)
>
> "You completely forget that you aren't in the original audience." (Jenny Angel)
>
> Selected responses on NT Live Facebook page December 25, 2017, accessed July 12, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/ntlive/posts/10155211513058857.

When surveying these responses one can detect a superimposing of the spectators' own (feeling, sensitive) selves onto the production: the NT Live's prompt was to name the favourite production

and say why and *not* how it had made them feel, but this for the majority seemed to be synonymous. Occasionally, there is certainly an exhibitionist dimension to it, the need to tell "the world" about one's life—not so much in order to engage in sharing and experiencing a "we" but rather to "get it out."

Is this because of the specific (technological) format the responses are solicited in and the fact they can only be given from one's computer or smartphone? For such a collection of statements that are not interconnected but run in parallel to each other is certainly not what is meant by being socially interdependent. Jen Harvie has perhaps phrased the most poignant critique of how contemporary cultural trends and technologies jeopardize "essentials of social life" and "prioritize self-interest":

> communication may appear to be enhanced by contemporary technologies, for example, but in many ways they inhibit it, isolating individuals in silos of blinkered attention to personal mobile communication devices. The kind of self-interest evident in that scenario is actively cultivated by dominant neoliberal capitalist ideologies which aggressively promote individualism and entrepreneurialism. (2013, 2).

This "blinkered attention" is captured by Keren Zaiontz in similar terms in her insightful article, "Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance" (2014). Zaiontz is mostly concerned with performances that are in their set-up already spectator-centric (in this context, Punchdrunk's Felix Barrett [2007] speaks of "the audience as epicentre" on which the performance hinges). One might therefore as well speak of narcissism-inducing performances. Zaiontz examines "how the consumption of self through interactive and immersive performances produces a narcissistic spectatorship" (2014, 407) by which she does not mean the clinical definition but rather "how self-absorption serves as a primary mode of experience for audiences within particular types of participatory art and performance" (407). The spectator is, therefore, positioned not as an author or agent but as an experiencer (Nelson 2010, 45).

These positions form the nodes of my analysis as well, but in contrast to Zaiontz, I am interested in highlighting how a specific practice of presenting (and, by extension, advertising) theatre and performance can foster a "narcissistic" encounter quite similar to that she describes in the context of immersive performance. Crucially, however, it is necessary to strip considerations of spectator-centrism of any negative shade and speak of the welcome manifestation of the "feeling I." The frame this is embedded in does not oppose depth of emotion to depth of thought: I am not suggesting that the responses, as "off-the-cuff" as they are, do not represent a form of cognitive labour and post-show reflection. The boundaries between cognition and emotion are fluid, as Alf Gabrielsson has observed in his study *Strong Experiences with Music* (2011), assigning a multitude of experiential dimensions to the listening of music, from bodily, to mental, to religious and therapeutic sensations (see especially 120–44). The responses are not as complex as what Axelson calls "vernacular meaning-making" in the context of film studies, but related to that: the viewers who then tweet about their experiences do evaluate the aesthetics of the narrative, they engage with them emphatically and they relate them to (their own) life (Axelson 2015, 144, 151).

For this reason, a concept that is even more relevant for my above considerations is Andrew Eglinton's "first-person experiences" which he has coined after examining the work of immersive theatre companies such as Punchdrunk, Blast Theory, Shunt, and others. He argues that through its

> persistent blurring of boundaries between theatre and non-theatre, and its emphasis on first-person experiences, Punchdrunk has captured something of a "coming of age" in general perceptions of British theatre in a twenty-first-century digital age: that is, the recognition that the theatre contributes to a society driven by networked digital technology and real time media, marked by the myriad "social gestures" and "sites of gesture" that communication devices induce. From smart phones and GPS devices to cloud computing and augmented reality interfaces, new "frames" of performance continue to emerge in the public domain, rendering discourses of theatre reliant on the proscenium structure ever less stable. (Eglinton 2010, 48–49)[9]

While Eglinton here thinks of the specific context of immersive theatre and the intramedial employment of all sorts of new technological devices as "new 'frames' of performance" which focus and hinge on the first-person experiencer, my point is to extend this notion also to the realm of, a) the livecasting context, and b) that of post-production discourse. What could be problematic is, that, as much as they bear the potential for opening up a new and vast field for experience (both that of a given performance and that of reflecting on it afterwards), these new "sites of gesture" can also create quite an opposite effect, namely one of a sharpening of the private, first-person singular position and a softening or devaluation of the communal, first-person plural position. Oddey and White's remark that the "new mode of spectating is to focus only on what 'I' want to see; on my perception of the world as 'I' see it" (2009, 8) thus also applies to the playground available on social media for twenty-first-century spectators of livecasts.

It should not come as a big surprise that such a kind of engagement "works" so well, for it is precisely this *assumption* of engagement that Alan Read has identified as characteristic of "performance in general, and theatre in particular" and that he calls "the 'immunisatory paradigm' to protect us, the spectator, the audience, from the implication of involvement" (2014, 13). This logic, or the "pathogen of performance" as he calls it,

> is the contract *we make* as an audience member at each stage of the dissembling of the stage to reassert the very protocols of distance from involvement we thought we were paying to see dispelled. My proposal here is that this repertoire of *affects of adjustment* is what makes sitting in the dark watching illuminated stages so interesting. This is the "immunisatory logic" of theatre, something that performance in all its guises has done little to destabilize, so powerful is its hold on us. And, in my view, this is the inherent *power of theatre* that uses all its theatricality to unpick its own communitarian stupidity. (Read 2014, 13, emphasis in original)

In the livecasting context, too, the invitation to engage, to get closer (behind the scenes even, or to see a performance from "the best seats in the house," see NT homepage), suggests a dispelling of distance not dissimilar to that in immersive theatre performances, yet the immunisatory logic, that is, the notion that one is *actually* free from engagement is more pronounced here. One has the option of sharing one's feedback and telling others about the livecasts one has seen, but this is entirely voluntary and does not have any direct or immediate influence on the outcome of a given show.

The responses on Facebook and Twitter are united in their cheerfulness, which casts a long shadow of doubt on Anne Ubersfeld's "one is less happy when alone." Similarly to McAuley's (and others') emphasis on the social dimension of theatre, Ubersfeld holds that "theatrical pleasure is not a solitary pleasure, but is reflected on and reverberates through others. . . . The spectator emits barely

perceptible signs of pleasure as well as loud laughter and secret tears—their contagiousness is necessary for everyone's pleasure. One does not go alone to the theatre—one is less happy when alone" (1982, 128).

The "OMFG Goosebumps" tweet you see pop up on your smartphone screen—while probably verbalizing a very similar emotion—certainly cannot have the same somatic effect on you as the hearty laugh or gasp of disbelief emitted by the stranger or friend sitting in the seat next to you. Yet when one looks at the responses, one clearly sees the joys of a first-person encounter with theatre and a solitary reflection, no matter how casual and perhaps banal it may be. Even if one attended the broadcast with other people, the reflection itself takes place when the individual is on their own. For you, for me, it is exciting. While the experience of a "we" manifests itself implicitly, it is not more valuable than the experience of an "I," and certainly not a greater source of happiness: on the contrary, one gets the impression that for viewers it is quite pleasant to have experiences of their feeling I. In the context of NT Live, where the program attempts to "impose a collective voice on its audience," as Kirwan has observed, it is quite pleasant to see how these attempts fail and are dispersed in the shape of individual, whimsical and nevertheless productively engaged responses (2014, 278).

In his discussion of livecasting and its effects on the experience of the viewers, Daniel Schulze briefly discusses whether Twitter and blogs manage to create a kind of (virtual) community and borrows the concept of "hyper-immunity" from Read with regard to the experience of the audience watching a livecast on the laptop screen at home. By this Schulze means the wish to be "safe" (and isolated) as a spectator who at the same time is part of a (virtual) community (2015, 321). "Hyper-immunity" seems to be a rather pleasant manifestation in this presentation, but Schulze is not explicit enough about this matter. He argues that in the context of NT Live broadcasts, "in terms of politics, audiences are condemned to absolute passivity, they are deprived of their voice in the form of booing, heckling or cheering" (315), which he contrasts with the "participatory climate" surrounding Forced Entertainment's broadcasts where spectators "become active, emancipated spectators in Rancière's sense" (316)—a simplification that I disagree with. Thus, while Rancière has dismantled the dichotomy between spectator/passive and actor/active, Schulze introduces a new dichotomy that is puzzling and inaccurate, namely between NT Live spectators/passive and Forced Entertainment spectators/active. While Schulze then relativizes the quality of this "activity" by asking whether tweeting can indeed be considered a form of social exchange, a more nuanced assessment of what is manifesting here is necessary. Schulze's observation—made with regard to the tweets in response to Forced Entertainment's *Quizoola24* (#Quizoola24) and *Speak Bitterness* (#FESpeaklive)—that "the vast majority of the Twitter users were not seeking any meaningful exchange but only had the aim to be recognised . . . an almost exhibitionist pleasure that seeks to display one's own partaking in a cultural exercise" (2015, 230–31) is certainly apt. Yet it should be acknowledged that there is another dimension belonging to the spectrum of "theatrical pleasure" that gains greater importance in the context of livecasting: namely the pleasure—apart from that of creating a sort of visibility and being seen—the individual derives from the experience for him- or herself. Schulze's phrase "schizophrenic state of mind" (321) is problematic in that it pathologizes the complexity of being an audience member. His argument seems to exclude the possibility of the need to engage in a "shallow," self-sufficient way, to be primarily a feeling I and not a member of an audience.

## Conclusion—Outlook

In my analysis I have agreed with Keren Zaiontz who critically maintains that most discussions suggest that spectators want to be agents, emancipated, those "reading" theatre, and argues that sometimes they want to (just) be an integral part of the performance. She therefore outlines how in the performances she has analyzed, the spectator is positioned not as an author or agent but as an experiencer (Zaiontz 2014, 408); a position that I share, with the specification of identifying a feeling experiencer, and that embeds my reflections in spectator rather than performance studies, thus following Susan Melrose's suggestion (2006, 120–22). One can also draw a parallel to Nicholas Ridout's term of the "mis-spectator." He argues for a distribution of the non-sensible by the inexpert/mis-spectator, which, as I see it, basically means a revaluation of the banal/private experience. According to Ridout, "this inexpert figure closely resembles Rancière's 'emancipated spectator,' who . . . emerges as the producer of meaning upon whom the theatre does not need to exercise its powers of educational reform" (2012, 174).[10] What Ridout and Rancière, and in a way Zaiontz as well, put to the fore—and which crucially contrasts with Bertolt Brecht's "expert spectator"—is the appreciation of such a kind of spectator who does not *need* or does not *want* (educational) support. He or she can rely on his or her opinion—or impressions, however subjective they may be. While one can see tendencies of more communitarian communities of inexpert (understood positively) critics emerging as well and livecasts as constitutively embedded in the digital space of social media do bring about a slight shift in this regard, the solitary tweeter and the presence and the need to verbalize a feeling I is an equally important part of this discourse in the context of twenty-first-century theatre production.

## Notes

1. As has been pointed out on numerous occasions already, for instance by Erin Sullivan (2017) and John Wyver (2014), there is no set term for this phenomenon yet. I will henceforth adopt Martin Barker's (2013) neat neologism "livecasting."

2. I am thinking of an emotional turn in a post digital-native age, that is, a going back to an emotional turn in the sense of eighteenth-century *Affektpoetik* (developed by Lessing in the context of drama) and not the 2000s cultural studies emotional turn (see, for instance, Anz 2007) which was primarily concerned with poetry.

3. For an interdisciplinary study combining case studies from the fields of theatre, music, dance, and performance art, see Reason and Lindelof (2016). The authors argue that liveness is produced through processes of audiencing—that is, audiences in a sense "activate" a given performance's liveness through their own (a)liveness—and is then materialized in these acts of performance or archiving as a form of remembering.

4. To compare livecasts with adaptations seems apt, but this question shall be analyzed in detail in my current research project, *Livecasting in the Context of 21st Century British Theatre. Spectacle, Materiality, Engagement*. By way of a general introduction to the question of adaptation in this context see Wyver (2014, 104), and Krebs (2014).

5. This aspect will be developed in more detail in my ongoing research project.

6. Selected statements from the online survey posted on July 18, 2018, after the livecast of *Romeo and Juliet* on the RSC's Twitter Page. Link to survey: https://survey.euro.confirmit.com/wix/5/p1866732945.aspx

7. The NT sometimes also livecasts other companies' plays, in 2018, for instance, the Chichester Festival Theatre's production of *King Lear* starring Ian McKellen in the title role, which was livecast on 27 September that year.

8. In the following, I am using the users' Facebook names as they appear on the page, even though they may not necessarily be their actual names, of course.

9. This "first-person experience" appears in an extreme form in Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007) where some audience members (but not all) are led away by performers into separate rooms, something critic Lyn Gardner calls "intimate theatre" (2009).

10. I am developing this line of thought in the essay "In Appreciation of 'Mis-' and 'Quasi-': Quasi-Experts in the Context of Live Theatre Broadcasting," to be published in autumn 2019 in *Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts*.

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