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PRAESENTIA EX MACHINA: The Millennial Technoculture, Liveness and Theatre

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PRAESENTIA EX MACHINA:

THE MILLENNIAL TECHNOCULTURE, LIVENESS AND THEATRE

by

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PRAESENTIA EX MACHINA: The Millennial Technoculture, Liveness and Theatre

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This work examines the modern technoculture, its component parts and the changing role of theatre in Anglo-American culture. Our contemporary society is marked by the ubiquity of digital technologies and has become reliant on their commodities. The emerging Millennial Generation has matured with many of these devices and has embraced the modern technoculture. Many changes in daily life brought on by new technologies are obvious, but fundamental shifts remain obscured by the nature of technology itself. These subtle transformations are cumulative and have caused a technological disorientation with broad reaching implications. Liveness, initially defined as that which is unrecorded, has been perceived in many new technological formats. This phenomenon, combined with pervasive digitization of information and entertainment has minimized the cultural significance of the theatrical arts. Theatre, however, offers a form of liveness that cannot be digitized. In its varied iterations, theatre may be a vital forum for combating technological disorientation and fostering pertinent social discourse as the technoculture develops.
PRAESENTIA EX MACHINA

The Millennial Technoculture, Liveness and Theatre

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Introduction

At the outset of most theatrical performances, the audience is asked to please turn off their mobile devices. The lights and sounds from our handheld machines are distracting to us, other audience members, and to the performers. A ringing phone breaks the liminal connection between the actors and the audience, and draws us out of the ethereal world being created on stage. Outside the theatre these advanced technologies often do the same thing. Conversations are interrupted, distracted drivers cause accidents, and students lose focus during lessons. Mobile devices are ubiquitous, as are their effects on society.

During the brief span of my life the world has witnessed an exponential rise in digital technologies that few outside the realm of science fiction could have predicted. Personally, I have become increasingly dependent on electronic devices as e-mail has become the preferred mode of official communication and text messaging has replaced phone calls for communicating with my peers. In just the last few years in academia I have seen the rise of paperless classes; materials are posted online and assignments are uploaded digitally. I have had thrust upon me new techniques of dealing with day to day life, as well as retrieving and disseminating information. I have witnessed the dawning of a true technoculture. Popularized by scholars Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, the term acknowledges the “postmodernist celebrations of the technological” and our modern culture's fascination with “new information and media technologies.”¹ We cannot deny that our lives are intertwined with technologies more today than at any time in history.

This reliance on, and attraction to, new electronic technologies is not a new phenomenon and has increased with the exponential growth in digital devices and services. How a shift into a technoculture will affect our society, however, is still an open field being explored through multiple disciplines. As a theatre student, educator and practitioner, I naturally look to the performing arts as a base line for change. Yet the focus of this paper does not deal solely with the relationship between technology and theatre. To do so would minimize the scope of this pervasive phenomenon and limit the usefulness of my findings to those in the performing arts. Thus I find it important to first describe the technoculture itself and explore the very nature of how new technologies affect a society.

For the sake of clarity, this document has a particular lens through which to analyze these issues: the mediatized society of the emerging Millennial Generation. An examination of who these Millennials are and how they differ from their predecessors offers the ground work for describing the societal changes the technoculture has wrought. With so many forms of media accessible with internet enabled devices, the Millennials and other tech-savvy members of our society are experiencing new forms of social and artistic engagement. Where and when these forms emerge, and how they may impact our society in the future are vital elements to our understanding of the contemporary world. In order to have a deeper understanding of the current conditions, it is important to examine these technologies both historically and sociologically. It is only after these topics are explored that it becomes helpful to address the question of where live theatre relates to the emerging technoculture.

By its very nature the power of live theatrical performance is ethereal, a combination of societal, intellectual, aesthetic and ritualistic elements, and I believe, something more than the sum of these parts. My intent, however, is not to discover some previously unknown secret to
understanding theatre's appeal. I seek not to answer the unanswerable, nor offer a clear
definition of the right or wrong way in which theatre should proceed in the future. I endeavor to
clarify the questions, address what I see as the strengths and weaknesses in some prevalent
theories of performance, and offer an examination of the role of modern technology from a
Performance Theory standpoint.

There is an inherent problem with any scholarly work which engages contemporary issues.
Chiefly, it is a simple matter of time. New works surface daily, whether in books, journals, articles
or published theses. A scholar can thus never have a complete picture of the most contemporary
work in a field. Like the famous I Love Lucy episode, the chocolates continue down the assembly
line incessantly, and we are left frantically filling our mouths, hats and shirts in an attempt to stay
ahead of the supply. But it is not just a factor of rigor that presents a problem. It is nigh
impossible to determine which theories will persevere and which burgeoning scholars will
develop into leaders in their respective fields. Even the most soundly reasoned argument can
lose its clout with the passage of time and the development of new theories and paradigms. Thus,
this document does not cover all possible scholars and theories that could relate to the topic, nor
does it analyze many of the newest theories. It does attempt, however, to cite specifically selected
texts from seminal authors over the past fifty years, as well as mention some of the more
pertinent contemporary works and studies.

The scope of this document is admittedly quite ambitious. When endeavoring to elucidate
the circumstances of modern theatre in a digital age, it is necessary to begin with a staunchly
inclusive position. As performance theorist Elin Diamond claims, “...it is impossible to write the
pleasurable embodiments we call performance without tangling with the cultural stories,

\(^2\)Job Switching,” September 15, 1952 episode of I Love Lucy (CBS, 1951-1957; Paramount, 2004 DVD)
traditions, and political contestations that comprise our sense of history.”

Accordingly, this work stands at the crossroads of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, media arts, and performance theory, among others. It requires the utilization of demographic surveys, peer-reviewed articles, recent news reports, longitudinal studies, philosophical inquiries and at times simple anecdotal evidence. Assumptions must be made, complex theories must be simplified to their vital elements and data must be seen in a context of continuing trends. By establishing a basic rhetorical structure for argument formation, I hope to combine these divergent elements into a cohesive picture of the role of technology in our society and how theatre has responded. The considerations offered in this work are not exhaustive. I will attempt to deal systematically with the principles and conclusions that form the foundation for more specialized and definitive works.

Before I outline my topics in detail some other important clarifications must be made. Chiefly, these include the definitions of technology, performance and theatre utilized. As discussed in detail in Section II, the definition of technology can be quite expansive. In general, I will be referring to electronic digital devices, especially those that are able to connect to the internet. Often, television and cinema will be evoked as important societal factors, but principally I will be referencing items such as laptops, smart phones, and tablet computers that allow for remote accessing of online information from almost anywhere at any time.

A second important clarification is how I define the terms performance and theatre in this context. As a rule, I use these terms to refer to plays and musicals performed in a theatre in front of a live audience. While other invocations of performance are discussed, this traditional theatre will be my primary focus. This is, arguably, an oversimplification of the terms. Performance studies has expanded to include any number of cultural activities. Some are closely linked to

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traditional theatre, like stand-up comedy\textsuperscript{4} or opera. Others fall much further afield, such as the semiotics of language\textsuperscript{5} or the performance of space in different Holocaust Museums.\textsuperscript{6}

While these areas of study have enhanced how we view the myriad sectors of society in a postmodern era, these contemporary definitions come at a cost. Primarily, the definition of performance has become so inclusive that it borders on an animist analysis of everything. If every word, action, and object is somehow performing, and each of these performances can be examined in a variety of ways, it is easy to tumble down the rabbit hole of reductive and minutia-laden discourse. Again, it is not my argument that these examinations or viewpoints lack validity, nor that they have not added to the understanding of culture and humanity. However, as my main focus is the trajectory of the modern technoculture, with theatre functioning as a point of reference, I will be limiting my discussion to the more traditional definitions of theatrical performance.

Lastly, it is important to note that this document has a strong Western focus, specifically dealing with societal and artistic phenomena in the United States and England. While scholars from many countries are cited, it is Anglo-American culture that I will address almost exclusively. This is not to claim that countless cultures around the world do not contain unique relationships between the digital and the live. In fact it is because of these highly divergent forms that I have chosen to focus specifically on the United States and England as the basis for my examinations.

I begin this inspection of the modern relationship between the technological and the performative in Section I by discussing the emerging generation of young people dubbed “The


Millennials.” I address important demographic markers of the group, including their relative size in the population and their racial diversity. I also discuss in detail the most striking feature of this age group: their connections to technology. This involves not only how often they use the technologies as compared to older generations, but also their advanced proficiency and their expectations of engagement.

In Section II, I examine the role of technology in relation to our overall society. Of particular concern is the tendency for new technologies to create sweeping changes in our society. These changes are rarely perceived until they have come fully to fruition, as the technologies themselves tend to obscure our ability to detect their cumulative impact. This is shown through Albert Borgmann’s Device Paradigm,\(^7\) and supported by the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Previous shifts incited by older technologies are acknowledged, as well as the unique changes in worldwide communication paradigms brought on by the internet. Some of the more deleterious implications of these changes are discussed in this work.

Section III explores the varying definitions of “liveness” in relation to both technology and theatre. As society has shifted to a technoculture, our conceptualizations of what is perceived as live have shifted as well. Digital and recorded media’s power to instill a sense of presence and liveness is addressed, including the shortcomings of such definitions and perceptions. Next, I discuss the nature of liveness in the world of theatre. Some origin theories of theatrical performance are elucidated, as well as a discussion of the component parts of live performance. I also address what I see as the unique elements of liveness in theatre that cannot be recreated through mediatized formats.

In Section IV I look at the current state of theatre and how it is responding to the

technology of today. This includes what is being staged and how it is staged, and also, how certain companies are attempting to retain or expand their audience base. I address the tendency toward repetition in big-budget theatre, as well as the use of mediatized technologies on the stage. I explore new techniques of disseminating theatre to international audiences through recorded broadcasts.

In the complex relationship between technology and theatre, few definitive answers are possible. Indeed, I hope that this work elicits further questions and inquiries about the sometimes contentious relationship between the two. By utilizing the inclusive and multidisciplinary tenants of Performance Theory, it is my goal to offer a new way of addressing the pervasive technology in our society for both theatre practitioners and those in other fields. This study offers a glimpse into the multifaceted technoculture in which we find ourselves, as well as the role of live theatre in the future and its myriad responses to maintain cultural validity in our modern world.
Section I: The Millennials

The complexity of society and its subtleties make any cultural delineations based on age somewhat arbitrary. Yet in order to discuss broad reaching trends in our ever changing culture, categorization is essential. Historically, scholars have separated large spans of time into 'ages' marked by changes in political structure or important world events. In the recent past, we more often see the categorization of 'generations'. In the United States, it is the Baby-boomers and Generation X which have been most commonly indicated in discussions of those born from the mid-1940’s to the mid-1960’s, and those born from the mid-1960’s and early-1980’s respectively. According to researchers at the Population Reference Bureau, these generations have lived “through unique times shaped by unexpected historical events, changing political climates, and evolving socioeconomic conditions.”

And this categorical trend continues. Though the exact demarcation varies, many scholars have noted considerable differences in teens and young adults today, as compared to their predecessors.

In their examination of the emerging generation, dubbed the “Millennials,” for example, sociologists and political theorists Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais have defined this group as those born between 1982 and 2003. The New Strategists, a demographic think tank, have alternatively defined the Millennials as born between 1977 and 1994. Another popular term, “Generation Y” is sometimes used as a reference to the previous Generation X. The first such

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usage is from 1993 and describes those born after 1981.\textsuperscript{11} This term has somewhat fallen out of common use as the generation has come into its own. “Millennials” has become the popular term in most scholarly work, and will be the expression utilized in this document.

However the details are defined, there are some important trends in this Millennial group. The first of note, demographically, is their sheer size. Both in actual number and relative to the population, the Millennials are the largest generation in American history. This fact becomes particularly important as we look to the future. By 2020, when most of the Millennials will have graduated high school, Millennials will make up more than one out of every three adults, at thirty-six percent of the population.\textsuperscript{12} This indicates that the Millennials will have a disproportionate influence on society, especially as they reach voting age. As Winograd and Hais point out, “Every generation defines itself first by making it clear how and why it is unlike the generation that preceded it. Then, as it moves into positions of power and influence in society, the new generation demands that the nation’s institutions change to accommodate its beliefs and its values.”\textsuperscript{13} Through sheer numbers the Millennials will be able to incite broad changes in how our society functions.

Other important demographic differences mark this generation. For one, they are much less racially homogenous. “About forty percent of Millennials are African American, Latin American, Asian, or racially mixed backgrounds, compared with nearly twenty-five percent of the two next older generations.”\textsuperscript{14} A full one in five have at least one immigrant parent.\textsuperscript{15} These

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Winograd and Hais, \textit{Millennial Momentum}, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Winograd and Hais, \textit{Millennial Makeover}, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Winograd and Hais, \textit{Millennial Makeover}, 67.
\end{itemize}
statistics mark a trend throughout the population, as a 2000 US Census report on language finds that one in five American households speak a foreign language at home. These numbers vary by region, peaking to forty-one percent in states like California and almost ninety percent in municipalities like Laredo, TX.\textsuperscript{16} This number of home non-English speakers is a fifty percent increase from the 1990 Census figures.\textsuperscript{17} As these demographic trends continue, the United States will likely become a country where no racial group has a clear majority. According to Donald J. Hernandez, a sociology professor at the University of Albany, "The new American majority will consist of a mosaic of diverse, nonwhite race and ethnic groups from around the world."\textsuperscript{18} Speaking at an American Psychological Association Summit on Immigration, Hernandez estimated that by 2030, less than half of American children will be racially white.\textsuperscript{19}

This basic demographic information shows an important trend in the social makeup of the United States. While a certain amount of integration is inevitable, we can also assume that the diverse cultural backgrounds of these growing groups will flavor the American melting pot. How our standardized institutions engage these groups will become increasingly important as our white-dominated generations age.\textsuperscript{20} Theatre practitioners should also take note of these changes, for these diverse segments of the population bring with them their own cultural identities and historically divergent performance styles. Also, as discussed further in Section IV, the non-white population attends theatrical events much less frequently than their white counterparts. As their numbers increase in proportion to the overall population, it will most likely negatively impact

\textsuperscript{17}Shin and Bruno, “Language Use”.
\textsuperscript{18}Rhea K. Farberman, “Immigration’s Impact: Experts at an APA summit explored how immigration is driving America’s changing demographics–and will change the nation.” \textit{Monitor on Psychology}, March 2006, Vol 37, No. 3, 40.
\textsuperscript{19}Farberman, “Immigration’s Impact”, 40.
\textsuperscript{20}Farberman, “Immigration’s Impact”, 40.
audience numbers in the future.

Other Millennial trends may have a positive influence on theatre. According to Winograd and Hais in *Millennial Makeover*, studies show that Millennials are considered to be more community oriented, more politically minded, and more positive “both about the present and future state of their own lives and about the future of their country.” This could lead to constructive involvement in local theatre activities in the future. All of these considerations lay the ground work for understanding the most striking feature of the Millennial generation: their relationship with digital technology.

Born in 1981, I am on the cusp of this generation and have witnessed the growing pervasiveness of digital technologies first hand. Beginning in kindergarten, I have always had a computer in my classrooms. These started with one green-screen Apple unit with a large floppy disc drive and quickly progressed to multiple color CD-ROM PCs by the end of elementary school. My family had our first home computer when I was ten years old, and internet access both at home and school by the time I started high school.

Working with young children regularly over the past decade, I have seen the exponential growth of digital technology use in even the youngest students. For example, working in elementary schools in 2000, students would often go to the school office and ask the secretary to phone their parents. By 2010, the majority of students were calling or texting their parents from their own cell phones. In high school students I have witnessed the shift from passing paper notes in class, to texting one another, and most recently, updating Facebook statuses from their smart phones during lessons.

The Millennials are undoubtedly the most mediatized age group in our society. Like their

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two previous generations, they have grown up with the ever present influence of television. But unlike their predecessors, most have never known a time without the internet. They trained from an early age to interact with media, first with home-game consoles like the hugely popular Nintendo Entertainment System released in 1985, and later on increasingly affordable home computers from Apple and IBM. Proficiency with computer technologies and capacity to learn new technological formats is a natural outcome of this constant accessibility. A Millennial's skills develop with the changing media, learning new techniques as the technology became increasingly complex. By the time the internet became a pervasive force in our society, they were particularly adept at taking advantage of its ever expanding possibilities.

Millenials hold a unique perspective to their media engagement. With nearly unfettered access to media afforded by the internet, from informative articles and news to music and movies, Millennials have become to expect media on their own terms. The prevalence of internet enabled smart phones means that Millennials can gain access from almost anywhere at any time. A representative example can be seen in music accessibility.

A majority of Millennials can access any song from either their personal library or from the internet. Programs like Pandora allow for the exploration of new musical endeavors through the Music Genome Project, offering fully customizable radio stations replete with old favorites, while introducing new artists in the same genre and style. Emerging programs like Grooveshark and Spotify allow for specific songs to be streamed for free, and also link users to what friends are listening to through social media sites like Facebook.

The expectation of payment for this kind of entertainment has also taken a notable turn. As of 2007, studies of over 100 million iPods in use found that ninety-seven percent of songs

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were “copied illegally or ripped from personal CDs with no compensation to the record company.” Beyond music, video programs like NetFlix and Hulu offer thousands of hours of content, including television programs and movies, with little or no charge. Many cable packages offer movies and television shows on-demand. Add to that the ease at which media can be shared and pirated online and we begin to see that Millennials often expect to have cheap and instant access to their media.

These trends carry across a broad swath of society, not necessarily just the Millennials. For their yet to be dubbed generational successors, these changes will be even more marked. The Sesame Workshop, a non-profit that focuses on preschoolers and young adults (and especially on their interaction with media), has been conducting studies for the past thirty years. Though their front man is an eight-foot-tall bird with a penchant for singing about numbers and colors, their research is comprehensive and current.

One recent report, synthesizing studies from US Department of Education, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Nielsen Company, among others, offers some fascinating details of the role media plays in the lives of youth today. Though some of the research falls outside of the Millennial Generation, it shows that the trends we see in teens and young adults today will continue as the even younger members of society age. For example, as of 2011, eighty percent of children under the age of five used the internet at least weekly. That means that children are being introduced to the internet in many cases before they are able to read. This trend may indicate an introduction of a new form of literacy. Instead of first learning to read in print media

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23 Winograd and Hais, Millennial Makeover, 140.
and then taking those skills to the computer, many young children are now learning to both read and use standard internet icons together online.

Another finding in the Sesame report is indicative of Millennial media use. In the 2000’s, children ages eight to eighteen were exposed to electronic media for, on average, ten hours and forty-five minutes per day. This means that, given eight hours for sleep, this Millennial group spent seventy percent of their waking hours exposed to electronic media of one form or another. And those forms are ever-increasing. Media studied in the most recent reports included: movies, broadcast and cable television, home video game consoles, desktop computers, laptop computers, DVDs, DVRs, portable hand held video game systems, cell phones, internet enabled smart devices, and tablet computers. Suffice it to say that the young people of today are exposed to a plethora of screens.

Older Americans are utilizing these technologies as well. As of December 31, 2011, eighty percent of all Americans reported using the internet regularly. And social media on the internet has become common as well, with 157 million Americans having a Facebook account, representing half of Americans. How people are accessing the internet is also changing quickly. Smart phone ownership is skyrocketing across age boundaries. In May 2011, a Pew Institute study found about one in three Americans owned a smart phone. Less than a year later in March 2012, the same group found that smart phone ownership had risen to almost one half of Americans at forty-six percent.

26Gutnick, “Always Connected”.
28“Internet Users”.
Further evidence of the pervasiveness of digital technologies abounds. As each new piece of the puzzle is brought forth, a clearer picture of our reliance on these devices emerges. The tech-savvy Millennials are leading the charge of new technologies, and the rest of society is falling in line. But the basic statistics of technology usage hold little import when compared to what that use means for our culture as a whole. The following section addresses this claim, as it explores the societal impacts of the developing technoculture.
Section II: Technological Implications

“Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.”

This quote by French Essayist Paul Valery was written in 1928, and shows a prophetic insight that has come to fruition. Though written over eighty years ago, long before the rise of the internet, Valery had a keen sense of which way the wind was blowing. In our modern industrialized nation, many of our basic needs are met without our having to think about them. Our houses are heated, potable water flows from multiple taps in our homes, and rooms go from darkness to light with the flip of a switch. As these once novel and important technologies have become the norm, we tend to take them for granted. Most living Americans have never known a time without these advances. They have been woven into the fabric of our everyday lives and have progressively become a fundamental part of the world.

The same has begun to happen with more advanced technologies. Cable or satellite television, cell phones and always-on internet connections have become commonplace. This is especially true for Millennials who often have not known a time without them. The novel has quickly and surreptitiously become normal. As technological advancements continue to march forward, this process will most likely continue unabated for the foreseeable future. Whether we are fully aware of it or not, these technologies create subtle changes in our individual and societal

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existences.

In order to have a clear picture of our technoculture and the effects of these technological changes, we must have a better understanding of the relationship between the two. New devices may make small changes in how we conduct our daily affairs, but as the novel becomes banal it is easy to lose sight of incremental impacts. An offhand acceptance of the status quo can blind us to where our society once was, where it has come and, more importantly, where it may lead. Understanding how these changes happen and why they are often not recognized is vital if we are to understand how the Millennials will increasingly shape their world, and where theatre will fit in the future.

In order to systematically engage this theory, however, we must have a fundamental understanding of the nature of technology, and how it affects the culture and society in which it was wrought. Albert Borgmann, philosopher and Regents Professor at the University of Montana, examined this topic in detail in his work Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life. The book was written in 1984, putting it seemingly out of date with our modern digital era. Importantly, however, this text does not necessarily focus on the cutting edge technologies and how, in the present or short-term, they affect our lives. Instead Borgmann examines the nature of technology itself and its overarching role in society, especially from the Enlightenment forward. Of particular interest in this discussion is his proposal of the Device Paradigm.

After addressing the vitality of availability in technological advancements, Borgmann makes an important distinction between what he dubs as “things” and “devices”. The use of the term “things” may seem somewhat jejune on first reading, but the scope of the concept it represents is expansive enough to encapsulate the intentionally vague terminology. For

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32Borgmann, “Technology”
33Borgmann, Technology, 41.
Borgmann “things” are not necessarily the objects themselves, but the cultural significance of said objects. “A thing... is inseparable from its context, namely, its world, and from our commerce with the thing and its world, namely, engagement.” He offers the example of the family stove as a fundamental element of domestic life. The stove not only offers necessary heat for cooking and physical comfort to a family, but also represents a point of focus. In this example, the entire family is connected with the stove. “The mother built the fire, the children kept the woodbox filled, and the father cut the firewood... It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons... the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity to daily tasks.”

The stove as a “thing” evokes the hearth, a sacred and vital part of the human experience for millennia. The “thing” is thus a holistically, culturally, and spiritually inclusive term and tends to help connect us to our reality. It also offers us an understanding of the workings of the technology and increases our comprehension of our place in the world.

A “device” on the other hand, carries none of these social and cultural indications. To summarize Borgmann, a “device” entails the functionality of the object only through its “commodity”, or how that functionality is employed or accessed. In other words, the “device” exists in the mind of its users as no more than its base usefulness. The more convenient and pervasive the “device”, the less the user, and society as a whole, recognize its deeper influences. Thus, the “device” conceals the context in which it is utilized. The commodities of the “device” obscure our understanding of how it functions, and how it affects us in our lives. For example, the visual spectacle, convenience and user-friendly functionality of modern devices blind us to their

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34 Borgmann, Technology, 41.
35 Borgmann, Technology, 42.
36 Albert Borgmann, email to the author, April 22, 2012.
greater impacts.

In its current state, the smart phone has become a “device” that can transmit much more than just audio communication, linking to the internet and conducting an ever-expanding range of internal processing. But the base commodity of a “device” offers little insight to its real impact on society, and in fact obscures them. *What* the smart phone does is of little societal importance when compared to *how or why* it is used. We must look beyond the “device”, to the “thing” itself, to gain any appreciation for the philosophical or culture implications stemming from its ubiquitous nature.

In concert with the Device Paradigm, another helpful access point to how technology affects society is offered by Canadian philosopher and scholar, Marshall McLuhan. Writing in the 1960’s, McLuhan was also working in a pre-digital era. And yet, as with Borgmann’s early work, the concepts he proposes are just as pertinent today. One of his most enduring postulations states the “The Medium is the Message.” First proposed in his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan describes the tenet, saying, “the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves or by any new technology.”

The concept can at first seem like a tautology, or restricted to specific media that convey messages. In fact, the “Medium is the Message” ideology is quite expansive.

McLuhan observed that we often focus on the obvious effects that new technologies, modes, or ideas have on our society: the Medium. In Borgmannian terms, we tend to focus on the “device” and its commodity. But as time goes on, we begin to notice a medium’s unexpected or unintended consequences on broad reaching social, religious, or historical scales. It is these

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unforeseen effects that have the most important impacts on our society; the message lies beyond the initial intent of the medium.

One McLuhan scholar, Mark Federman, offers a helpful example in the genre of theatre. “In the case of a specific theatrical production, its message may be a change in attitude or action on the part of the audience that results from the medium of the play itself, which is quite distinct from the medium of theatrical production in general.”\(^38\) For theatre practitioners, it is important to recognize this possible message early, so that we may gain better control of it, mitigating or enhancing its effects as necessary. For as McLuhan states, “control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it, but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force.”\(^39\) Any theatre maker must have a comprehensive understanding of the themes in a work and how an audience might respond. Without using this knowledge as a baseline for a production concept, the work cannot reach its full potential of audience engagement.

This position is ever more important as we look at the larger, society-wide impacts of new technologies. In *Understanding Media*’s introduction, McLuhan states that “any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment.”\(^40\) Importantly, these environments “are not passive wrappings but active processes.”\(^41\) From fire and the wheel, to cars and planes, new technologies have established new ways for us to connect to the world. These changes can cause important shifts in culture.

One of the major cultural shifts was from tribalized small groups to a more expansive culture. The change is marked, among other new technologies, by the advent of the written


\(^{39}\text{McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 199.}\)

\(^{40}\text{McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, vii.}\)

\(^{41}\text{McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, vii.}\)
language. “By Plato’s time the written word had created a new environment that had begun to
detribalize man.”42 Our ancestors experienced a shift from an oral-based learning process to a
homogenized written format. Gutenberg’s printing press increased this change exponentially.
Ideas and concepts spread, further decentralizing our small-group mentality. But instead of a
linear progression, these shifts can be seen in flux between seemingly intimate connections and
broader scopes. Accordingly, there was another profound shift acknowledged by McLuhan, as
well as other notable scholars.

One of the most important of these theorists is a French Philosopher and Cultural Theorist
Jean Baudrillard. In particular, his writings from the 1960’s are quite pertinent and timely,
especially given the exponential increase in certain technologies and the fifty years of world
events since that time. For Baudrillard, the world of the 1960’s had taken a major shift into what
he called the “Electronic Age.”43 It was marked with a change from the previous era “of visual
culture, of technical specialization, of individualism and nationalism”.44 The Electronic Age,
conversely, “reintroduces instantaneous communication and the tribal relation (which once were
those of the oral cultures, preceding printing).”45 This concept requires some judicious unpacking
as a theory, but Baudrillard offers a succinct interpretation of his and McLuhan’s central themes.
Instead of the linear, systematic societal structures present previously, the Electronic Age
reconfigures our communication structures. “Satellites and electricity bring back the entire
planet, beyond the bygone reign of the towns (typical phenomenon of the Age of Literacy), to
those organic structures of the village (which had institutionalized human functions on the basis

42McLuhan, Understanding Media, vii.
44Baudrillard, Uncollected, 39.
45Baudrillard, Uncollected, 39.
of intense participation and weak organization).”

So as much as written language expanded early civilization beyond the village, both McLuhan and Baudrillard note a cyclical shift back to a more village-like existence. This new shift leads us to McLuhan’s description of “The Global Village” coined in an earlier work, and expanded on in Understanding Media. “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.” Baudrillard puts it this way: “Everything at once becomes contemporary and decentralized, a process of planetary synthesis installs itself... no more continuous, homogeneous, abstract space – each configuration creates its own space-time.” We see ample evidence of this phenomenon in our modern technoculture and internet-enabled world.

New technologies have caused similar reconfigurations in the past. Clay Shirky, an internet expert, is considered a leader in the field of the social ramifications of the internet. During a speech on the power of social media on global affairs, Shirky outlined the track of four recent “revolutions” in technology, including the printing press, two-way communication in the telegraph and telephone, recorded media (in photos, recorded sound, and movies) and finally the harnessing of the electro-magnetic spectrum by radio and television. In the scope of community connection, Shirky points out an endemic problem with all of these technologies. Namely, that these technologies are either good at “creating conversations” or “creating groups”, but not both. “If you want to have a conversation in this world, you have it with one other person. If you want to

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46 Baudrillard, Uncollected, 40.
48 McLuhan, Understanding Media, 3.
49 Baudrillard, Uncollected, 40.
address a group, you get the same message and you give it to everybody in the group, whether you're doing that with a broadcasting tower or a printing press.”

This would all change, however, with the rise of the internet.

The internet has moved us from a linear to a lateral form of communication. It is the first medium to facilitate both group formation and conversations respectively, and at the same time, group conversations. “Whereas the phone gave us the one-to-one pattern, and television, radio, magazines, books, gave us the one-to-many pattern, the Internet gives us the many-to-many pattern.” Instead of a top-down, producer to consumers design, we have seen a democratization of the information format. Blogs, forums, and comment threads are all venues for unhindered sharing of opinions and ideas. Sites like YouTube allow anyone to post personally created video that can be viewed for free, and easy 'share' options encourage the dissemination of the work to users across a myriad of platforms. The ubiquity of camera smartphones makes the process even easier, allowing for near instant posting of photo and video content to the web. The rabbit hole gets even deeper as apps and sites make live streaming possible.

With new formats and technologies coming out daily, further incarnations of internet technologies’ societal impacts are constantly emerging. Each new electronic tool seems to offer a new way to make our lives easier or more interesting, a new way to express ourselves, or a new way to connect with our friends, colleagues or the world at large. The question remains, if these are the Borgmannian “devices” or the McLuhanian media, then what are the deeper social ramifications of all this technology?

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52 Shirky, “How Social Media”.
53 Shirky, “How Social Media”.
Over twenty-five years since the publication of *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, Borgmann is still examining these relationships. In a 2010 article entitled “Orientation in Technological Space” Borgmann notes how television's emergence created a new culture in the United States.\(^{55}\) Looking at television may seem like a step backward, but it is in fact the best way to address our modern technologies’ effects. Most of the internet technology is still too new for us to have a scope of its message, or to examine the “thing” in detail. Television, on the other hand, has had a hand in the fundamental shaping of our social reality for long enough that we can see its effects, beginning with its emergence.

Soon after its inception, people from all around the country were able to enjoy the same forms of news and entertainment. As “television sets became more ubiquitous and programs more numerous”\(^{56}\) however, initial enchantment with television waned. The novel became the commonplace. In the process, a nationwide television culture was born. With everyone watching the same programs, our public discourse became more homogenous. This change had a somewhat unifying effect on the content of programs. And as Borgmann notes “it was limited and selective in its topological reach”.\(^{57}\)

This shift represents just one important social re-orientation in the face of technological advances. How individuals view their place in society changed as they became part of a national audience. The most recent shift of this kind has come from the internet. Borgmann evokes the societal re-orientation that occurred with the proliferation of first the railroad system and then the interstate road system for automobiles. “But unlike the automobile and the Interstate System,


\(^{56}\) Borgmann, “Orientation”.

\(^{57}\) Borgmann, “Orientation”.

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the Internet did not just render distances pliable, it altogether eliminated distances.”\(^58\)

In a relatively short amount of time, the internet has become a pervasive and iconic force in our modern society. Worldwide communication and sharing of ideas is not only possible, but has become the norm. This has caused an unprecedented re-orientation from a local/national outlook to a new global society. News and information from the farthest reaches of the globe are instantaneously accessible. Personal artistic endeavors, as well as mainstream media projects, are freely available to anyone with an internet connection. The digital salon, as a venue for sharing ideas, is complex and ever changing as certain sites and formats come and go.

Yet with this free-exchange of ideas and myriad outlets for expression, we begin to see a certain sociological degradation. In his *Orientation* article Borgmann describes the nature of this change quite eloquently:

> The need to know is replaced by pieces of information that are summoned from nowhere and dissolve into nothing. … When everything is easily available, nothing is commandingly present... What remains largely unattended is the mild and pervasive disorientation that secludes us from one another and occludes the burdens and blessings of reality... We move around in the pleasant and ever promising space of ready information. Yet we must feel sorrow at the spreading shallowness and restlessness of life...\(^59\)

Intrinsically, our culture has become something like a spoiled child whining for another pony; when we have everything we tend to value nothing. With so much free-flowing information, we tend to focus on piecemeal facts instead of comprehensive knowledge. This lack of anything being “commandingly present” has real implications for the role of theatre and other live performance in our society. The accumulated re-orientation begun with cinema and television,

\(^58\)Borgmann, “Orientation”.
\(^59\)Borgmann, “Orientation”.

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and taken to unprecedented levels with the internet, has left live theatre in a tenuous spot. Most people’s expectations for entertainment lie, like their expectations of information, in the intangible and easily accessible world of cyberspace.

The internet and its access technologies have removed all distance barriers to sharing and retrieving information. It has also reconstructed our expectations of time, being able to access the most recent and ancient information instantly. But in his 1984 book, Borgmann points out that these triumphs of modernity exist ironically, in a world where we have eliminated time and space.\(^\text{60}\) "Technology succeeds on its own terms when a greater number and variety of commodities become available and when availability is more and more refined. Success of this sort is surely and abundantly evident. But it is achieved very nearly by definition rather than by measurement against and agreed upon standard."\(^\text{61}\) These achievements exist in the context of technology and commodities only.

In a societal context, we must question whether the success of technology is actually based on anything measurable like happiness, increased leisure time or a quest for excellence.\(^\text{62}\) Among the plethora of studies, researchers have found that though some people claim to be feel more fulfilled when they have new technologies,\(^\text{63}\) the underlying social effects of the technologies tell a different story. Israeli scholar Yair Amichai-Hamburger has been writing on the social effects of media for the last decade. His findings, based on studies from across the world, hold that technologies cause detrimental social effects. Specifically discussing new mobile technologies, Amichai-Hamburger finds they tend to blur peoples personal and professional lives,

\(^{60}\)Borgmann, *Technology*, 191.
\(^{61}\)Borgmann, *Technology*, 130.
leading to a lack of leisure time and mounting personal stress levels.64

We may not be able to completely remove the technologies from our lives, but Amichai-Hamburger claims we need to renegotiate our relationships with those technologies. "We need ways to help recover those increasingly large parts of our lives that we have ceded to technology, to regain mastery over technology and learn to use it in a healthy and positive way." 65 This would require us to be much more aware of the role that technology plays in our lives and some initial sacrifices and adjustments to our technology use.

To gain this perspective could involve planning un-plugged hours where screens and access are intentionally limited. Another option would be to make specific efforts to engage in non-mediatised activities. Live theatre offers such an opportunity. But, as discussed in the following section, even the concept of liveness is inexorably linked to the digitized and has become ever more intertwined as the technologies become more pervasive, especially in the world of theatre.

64.“Technology Linked”
65.“Technology Linked”
Section III: Liveness

From a modern perspective, live performances have been occurring for time immemorial. Counter-intuitively however, the label of “live” has only come about from its relation to recorded media. Philip Auslander, a performance theorist who studies the concept of liveness, describes the scenario this way: “The live is, in a sense, only a secondary effect of mediating technologies. Prior to the advent of [recording] technologies ... there is no such thing as 'live', for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility.”66 Auslander uses the Greeks as an example, citing that when they viewed theatre they would never have considered it live in contemporary usage because there was no possibility of recording it.67 Without the recorded as a counterpoint, everything is live and the term becomes a tautology.

Many other theorists have used this basic demarcation as a baseline for analyzing performance. Most notably, Peggy Phelan, a seminal scholar in Performance Studies, describes live performance as, “’unmarked'; that is, performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented but rather, becomes itself through disappearance.”68 This view is helpful in analyzing liveness in orthodox performance on its own terms, but can be seen as somewhat restrictive in scope when we begin to analyze theatre in our current digitized culture.

In a re-orientation of what is considered live, some scholars have made a departure from our general idea that live is unrecorded and happens in the presence of the observer in real time. This expansion of the liveness definition is seen most clearly when we examine more traditional forms of mediatized entertainment. Nick Couldry, a professor of media and communications at

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Goldsmiths, University of London, has been a strong advocate of this expanded usage. He differentiates between the idea of liveness in early television, which was a natural occurrence due to a lack of technology or interest to record a program for later broadcast, and the implicit liveness of contemporary broadcast. In this modern sense, liveness holds a potentiality similar to McLuhan’s “Media is the Message” examinations. According to Couldry, “live transmission (of anything, whether real or fictional) guarantees that someone in the transmitting media institution could interrupt it at any time and make an immediate connection to real events. What is special, then, about live transmission is the potential connection it guarantees with real events.”

This sense of potentiality means audiences have a tendency to fabricate a perception of liveness even when none is intrinsically present.

Another English media scholar and professor, John Ellis, further explores this concept in his book *Seeing Things*. Ellis finds that whether or not a program was actually broadcast live, “the important fact is that all these programs appeared to be live. The announcers talked directly to their audience; the singers sang directly to them; the comedians spoke as if from downstage, in not an even more intimate person-to-person basis.” This form of “direct address” instilled a sense of liveness and real-time to this obviously mediatized format. An audience member certainly knows that the performers are not physically present, and yet an intimate connection is possible. Importantly, Ellis does not exclusively link this liveness to the content of the broadcast, but notes that the sense lies in the act of live (or perceived live) broadcast itself. “Transmission is live, even when the programmes are not. So recorded programmes are able to claim the status of liveness for themselves simply because the act of transmission attaches them to a particular

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moment. ... Broadcasting lived the same moment in time as its audience.” Beyond supporting Couldry’s potentiality claims, Ellis shows yet another link to Borgmann’s Device Paradigm. The initial “device” of broadcast media had the commodity of connecting people to others. However, broadcast media as a “thing” led to this skewed sense of liveness and the disorientation discussed in Section II. McLuhan might claim that no matter what was broadcast, it was the message that you could experience a sense of live connection where none was actually present.

But the mediatized liveness seen in television has been expanded even further with the rise of the internet and other modern technologies. Couldry in particular has analyzed certain perceptions of liveness in many other media. Specifically, Couldry finds two rival forms of liveness in the internet engagement and through mobile communication.

One rival form, dubbed “group liveness”, holds its power in its creation of a “co-presence” amongst social groups who are often not actually in the same physical space. It is exemplified in “a group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting.” Couldry is quick to note that friends being in contact with each other is certainly nothing new. However mobile technologies that have “continuous mediation through shared access to a communications infrastructure whose entry points are themselves mobile (and therefore can be permanently open)” is new. Thus it is the ability to constantly communicate from anywhere that makes this form of liveness a uniquely important one to groups. Though Couldry does not mention them specifically, I would argue this group liveness is particularly prevalent amongst Millennials, who have utilized text messaging specifically as a preferred form of conversation.

71 Ellis, Seeing, 31.
72 Couldry, “Liveness,” 357.
73 Couldry, “Liveness,” 357.
A second form of rival liveness, dubbed “online liveness”, is described as “social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major websites all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure.”\textsuperscript{75} The ability to communicate via chats, updates and instant messaging has, for Couldry, developed a sense of liveness in these discussions. In concert with these formats, the ability to post and access items instantaneously, from personal sites to mass media outlets, also creates a sense for the internet audience that these occurrences are happening in real time, and are thus live.

Auslander has also argued that the internet, as a pervasive force, carries its own sense of liveness. “The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience’s affective experience. To the extent that websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they feel live to us. And this may be the kind of ‘liveness’ that we now value.”\textsuperscript{76}

It is here that I take issue with Auslander and others, and their expanded view of liveness. I acknowledge that audiences can perceive liveness when engaging electronic media, creating a sense of reality in the most fabricated of scenarios. But I do not see this as a replacement for true liveness, as will be discussed below.

Firstly, the fact that this kind of perceived mediatized liveness is pervasive does not necessarily mean it is valued. As discussed in Section II, ubiquitous forms of technology, including internet and communication devices, are not inherently valued and can have detrimental effects on society. These existential constructs may be conceived as a replacement for a truly live experience, but they inherently lack many of its most vital aspects. It may be an

\textsuperscript{75}Couldry, “Liveness”, 356-357.

appreciated commodity of the “device”, but the “thing” and its true effects on society are missing in the equation. Mediatized liveness, I feel, is an insufficient proxy for live interactions. Like a sugar substitute, it may be used as a replacement for the real thing, but there is something unnatural and reductive in its use. It also carries its own negative side effects.

Until the last hundred years or so, present, live storytelling has played a vital role in our society, fostering culture and a sense of community with shared experience. As we have increasingly moved away from these kinds of visceral connections, the void has been filled by mediatized interactions. But I argue this replacement comes with costs that are obscured by the “devices” that are utilized. In an attempt to define these costs, we must briefly examine the origins of theatre and how it shaped our culture.

Anthropologist Victor Turner⁷⁷ and performance theorist Richard Schechner⁷⁸ both trace to roots of modern theatrical performance to rituals and practices of our early ancestors. In my mind, the origins go back even further, to ancient fireside storytelling. I imagine a group of early peoples gathered around a fire after a successful hunt. One of the hunters begins describing how the kill was made. Instead of a simple retelling of the events, the speaker rises and begins acting out the details: Dodging a swinging trunk of a mastodon, thrusting a spear into the chest, avoiding the huge feet. The group is witnessing the creation of a new format of human engagement. The observers may not have been present, possibly a group of women and children that hung back so as not to spook the great beasts, waiting to help process the animal after the kill. But through the retelling, with what we would now consider to be performative or theatrical elements, they are able to experience it nonetheless. It is not the kill itself, but the performance of the kill. A

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transcendence of time and place. No longer sitting by the fire, but there near the trampling feet. By engaging the imagination of the viewers, our performer is able to share the experience in a new and different way. Without knowing it, our hunter has become the first performer, and his tale has become the first form of theatre.

As culture developed performances became an even more inalienable part of our social lives. They ranged from the roaring crowds in the Colosseum to the austere pageantry of the Catholic Church, from beer-fueled pub songs to artfully constructed speeches of politicos in a myriad of public formats. And, of course, there has been theatre. In one form or another, the self-aware fabrication of seemingly real events has drawn people together in important, often intangible, ways for much of human history. This sense of metaphysical connection is described in a more poetic sense by performance theorist Roberta Levitow:

The theatre is a spiritual church. It is a collective experience greater than the sum of the individual members. In singing, laughing, crying or listening – praying together – the community knows itself for what it is, as a community. And the individual knows that life is partly just that: membership in a community. It is a collective experience transcendent of average days and average individuals, infused with that which is greater than ourselves. It celebrates the unique and remarkable holiness of being alive.79

The evolution of what we currently refer to as theatre is long and inherently nuanced, but the live aspects have been one of its defining traits, especially since the advent of recorded media. Auslander points out that most theorists celebrate live performance as differentiated from mediatized performance. They claim “the value of live performance... resides precisely in the fact of their not being mass media, in their ability to engage audiences in ways not available to

mediatized representations, in their possibly serving as alternatives to – even critiques of – those representations.”

Similarly, essayist Walter Benjamin stated in his 1936 work “The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age” that, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” It is thus not just the unrecorded, but the present that is important to the theatrical event. It allows theatre to have a defining and visceral impact on its audiences.

To support the claim that live theatre offers something intrinsically different and more substantive than the recorded, it is important to be familiar with some of the divergent elements of performance defined by those who study the topic. When dealing with abstract formulations of experience, like the liveness of a performance, we must deconstruct the experience to its fundamental elements. French performance theorist Jean Alter offers some important insights into how we can view theatre in a more fundamental and observable manner. In his 1990 work *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre*, Alter points out two divergent functions of theatre: the “referential function” and “performant function.” Alter distinguishes the process of communication “carried out with signs that aim at imparting information” as the referential. For those studying semiotics, this “referentiality clearly constitutes the central function of theatre.” Essentially, he is referring to the content of theatre, often found in the script, and elucidated through staging and the employment of symbolism. The referential also includes the underlying metaphors and themes of a piece, specifically the use of images or objects in order to tell a story.

83 Alter, *Sociosemiotic*, 32.
Conversely, he acknowledges another vital element of theatre, which he refers to as the “performant function.” The performant is linked inexorably with the fact that theatre is a public event with an audience. The performant, “satisfies our natural desire to achieve or witness something extraordinary.”

With further examinations of the performant, we can begin to clarify what is happening between the onstage action and those who are observing and participating in it.

Marvin Carlson, a professor of drama and theatre at The City University of New York has, in his many prolific writings, examined similar elements that Alter proposes. Specifically, he elaborates on Alter’s delineation between the referent and the performant. Carlson describes the performant elements as, “not primarily concerned with communicating with 'signs;' they stress instead the direct physical experience of the event.”

The prerequisite of “physical presence” is acknowledged, as is the “technical skill and achievement of the performer”, as well as production elements like costumes and sets. Carlson concludes that these considerations “are dependent for... their power upon the fact that they are actually generated in our presence.” But the relationship between the referent function and the performant function must be acknowledged as well, for it is not just the elements that exist, but their symbiotic relationship that has a great impact on audiences, and which accumulates to be a vital part of theatre itself.

While it is important to recognize that the referential and performant functions exist in concert, Alter is very clear that he views them to be very separate influences. “Mutually exclusive, they compete, at any given moment, for the attention of performers and spectators.” While both elements are almost always present, an audience does not hold both in their minds at the same

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84 Alter, *Sociosemiotic*, 32.
86 Carlson, *Performance*, 86.
87 Alter, *Sociosemiotic*, 32.
time.

They do, however, have a positively shared influence, one making up for a deficit in the other at any given point in a performance. This is a key element to theatre’s appeal. As Alter states, it is “the tension between the two functions ... [that] ensures a permanent diversification ...”\(^{88}\) We see this diversification often when observing theatrical performances. A script lacking in compelling content can be bolstered by robust spectacle that is being generated live in our presence. Our attention is kept not because of the story being told on stage, but the creative and spectacular ways in which the story is told. Reciprocally, relatively low production values, which lack initial engagement of an audience in their own right, may be sufficient if the text or themes are appropriately employed.

The success of these techniques hinges on another important aspect of theatre that has been described in myriad ways across multidisciplinary fields. It has been dubbed disinterestedness by Aristotle,\(^ {89}\) Verfremdungseffekt by Brecht,\(^ {90}\) and has been considered a vital part of anthropological liminality.\(^ {91}\) Though subtly nuanced and containing important differences, all the concepts boil down to one basic claim: A live performance establishes a consciously different reality from that in which we typically exist.

One of the clearest explanations of this phenomenon is from performance theorist Daphna Ben-Chaim who explores this distinction as a concept of distance. “Many dramatic theorists have suggested that a fundamental difference between reality and drama is that the psychological protection from the event is a condition of our experience in the theatre.”\(^ {92}\) We are able to be

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\(^{88}\) Alter, *Sociosemiotic*, 32.
\(^{91}\) Turner, *From Ritual*, 82.
intrinsically involved in the staged action without the consequences we face when participating in real life encounters. “Our engagement during theatrical experience may be intense, but it is not the kind of engagement that occurs in life experience.”

We may empathize with those on stage, but do not necessarily internalize those feelings. For example, a well-staged act of violence may evoke sharp emotional responses from an engaged audience member, but those members do not actually fear for their own safety, nor the safety of the performers. As Ben-Chaim puts it, “Our involvement as audience members – the reason we peep – is an involvement of a special sort. We may cry when Desdemona is smothered to death, but we do not run onstage to save her.” It is this departure that Ben-Chaim credits to distance.

The Concept of “distance” has become quite central to both theatre practice and dramatic theory in the twentieth century, especially since the influential work of Bertolt Brecht. The concept is usually related to some quality, component, or perspective in the spectator's perception of the theatrical event. Since most theorists agree that the spectator's involvement is a crucial dimension of theatrical art, the notion has important implications for explaining how theatre “works,” how it creates a particular experience.

The presence of this distance and all its other possible definitions makes the liveness of theatre distinct from the mediated liveness discussed previously. It also expands the idea of liveness from Auslander's distinction of live being that which not recorded. This definition, as discussed previously, minimizes the effect of liveness as a force. If liveness is simply that which is not recorded, it leaves little room for exploration in its own right. Whereas the nature of liveness in relation to the recorded is vital to its fundamental definition, I argue that liveness is actually an

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93 Ben-Chaim, *Distance*, ix.
94 Ben-Chaim, *Distance*, ix.
95 Ben-Chaim, *Distance*, x.
aggregate of myriad elements that establish it as a force.

Dramaturge and author DD Kugler has stated, “...theater isn't just 'live', but alive, dynamic, variable – a nightly process of re-creation in communion with the audience.”

As discussed above, theatrical liveness is separate from reality in a unique way. At any point, as we participate as an audience in a live performance, we could rise from our seats, shout our disapproval of the performance, hurl our wadded program onto the stage, and walk out. Though this certainly does happen on rare occasions, it is far from common place in modern theatre. Those in attendance follow established social norms and etiquette, but are not necessarily passive observers.

As a performer, I know the impact of an audibly involved audience in a performance. The show seems to truly come alive for both performers and observers. A lack of response can be just as powerful. Rarely in our lives are we present with five hundred people sitting in silent anticipation. The bated breath of a well-timed moment is just as visceral for me as a performer and audience member as the most thunderous applause. These musings indicate the importance of the unexpected and the value of the performant function in theatre. These concepts have been explored in many ways by author David Saltz.

Saltz is a professor of theatre and film studies at the University of Georgia and was editor of the Theatre Journal from 2006 through 2009. His research has focused specifically on the interaction between live performance and digital media. In a 2001 article he offered these insights:

The value of live theatre, especially in a mediatized age, lies precisely in its variability. Regardless of how rigorously scripts and the rehearsal process constrain performances, each performance within those constraints is a unique event … The thrill of the live is to

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see a performance event unfold, with all the risk that entails. Live performance is inherently interactive. The spontaneous give-and-take between performers and spectators, and among a group of sensitive performers, is integral to theatre’s appeal as an art form, both in the most highly stylized genres of theatre and in 'realistic' theatre.\(^9^8\)

By establishing theatre as a distinctive art form and point of social engagement, Saltz legitimizes the live experience on its own terms. So, counter to the claims that the live is simply a non-recorded event, we can begin to appreciate the power of live theatre in a societal context. Though the perceived liveness in mediatized endeavors should be acknowledged (whether broadcast, online, or through mobile technologies), it is clear that these formats lack certain components that make theatre unique. The current relationship between theatre and digitized media, however, is one of intricate nuances. To fully comprehend the multitudinous interactions between the two, their correlations in modern theatrical endeavors must be explored.

Section IV: Theatre in Technoculture

Theories of performance are inherently complex. Much of this is owed to the fact that there are relatively no rules for what can be done on stage. Alter asserts that, “In the absence of rules, whether to be followed or broken, anything goes or may go as theatre as long as it is asserted to be theatre. No authority sets limits; and no one can predict what could be presented and accepted as theatre. Because of its open-ended nature, the process of theatrical creation thus displays a lucid freedom...”99 In this lawless territory, theatre has the opportunity to forge new relationships with its changing audience base.

Given its inherently varied nature, all of the possible theatrical techniques and trends cannot be addressed in this work. By highlighting some of the most pervasive or innovative of these, however, the claim that theatre can still play a vital role in our technoculture will become clear. The first of these trends involves what is being produced on the big-budget stages in the United States and England. Much of this centers on an attempt to bring in audiences who have been wooed away from the stage by digital media, specifically films. Next I offer an extended discussion of the use of digital technologies in live theatrical performances. I show that high-tech theatrical elements can create spectacular effects that will appeal to Millennials and other technoculture members. But I argue that these are not, and should not, be the only forms of theatre offered to audiences. Finally, I discuss companies who have chosen to disseminate their works through live and recorded broadcasts of their stage performances.

Though no rules officially apply, there are factors that may shape or constrain what most theatre companies decide to stage. One of the largest elements is the combination of

99 Alter, Sociosemiotic, 90.
theater attendance and finances. A National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report shows that audiences for all forms of public art activities have been declining over the last twenty years.\textsuperscript{100} Theatre has seen a particular loss in audience numbers. Much of this loss is attributed to the aging population of theatre attendees. As the proportion of Baby-Boomers and their predecessors drops in our population their seats are not being filled by younger audience members. This “graying of audiences”\textsuperscript{101} is combining with young people's access to digitized media, causing a continual decline in attendance. Divided between musicals, and non-musical plays, the NEA report indicates that, between 1992 and 2009, there has been a ten percent reduction in attendance for musicals and an over twenty percent decrease for non-musical theatre.

Another factor to consider is the rise of racial diversity in the population and their relative attendance for theatrical events. For example, in 2008 the NEA reports an average of twenty percent of white adults reported attending at least one musical play during the year. This number drops to just eight percent of African American and Hispanic adults. Discussed in Section I, as these racially diverse groups become an increasingly large portion of the population, the reduction in theatre attendance will most likely continue.

This is not only a concern for the survival of theatre as an art form, but also draws into focus the increasing need to bring in younger and more diverse audiences for their own sake. Without the experience of liveness in their lives, the disorientation caused by pervasive media may continue unabated. If theatre can increase audience attendance, it follows that it can help mitigate the more detrimental effects of technological


oversaturation through its liveness.

In response to diminishing attendance and the rise of internet accessed media, theatre has attempted to bring in audiences by offering them versions of what is popular in other media, especially film. Repetition has become the norm for what is produced by theatre companies, especially big-budget theatre like that of Broadway. As arts critic David Ng stated in a 2012 *Los Angeles Times* article, “Like them or not, Broadway musicals based on movies have become a staple of the New York theater scene. Risk-averse investors see them as a safe bet in an industry marked by escalating costs.”

A brief examination of current Broadway offerings supports Ng’s claim. A list of the top 15 “Popular Shows” at Broadway.com (a site for purchasing tickets to all Broadway productions) includes: *The Lion King, Ghost, Mary Poppins, Once, Sister Act, Priscilla Queen of the Desert,* and *Spiderman*. These shows are all based on popular films. The list also includes revivals which have had successful movies adaptations to increase audience interest, including *Chicago, War Horse,* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Another, *Jersey Boys*, is based on the music of Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons, drawing heavily from another popular media genre. Yet another, *Rock of Ages*, is a rock opera based on songs from popular 1980’s bands. Referred to as “the latest in the ceaseless parade of jukebox musicals”, the *New York Times* review describes it as “a towering stack of heavy-rotation favorites from the glory years of MTV.” In fact only two of the shows are based on original material: *Memphis* and *The Book of Mormon*. The first dealing with race relations and the rise of Rock and Roll as a genre, again linking to popular music, and the second drawing much of its selling power from the popularity of its writers, Trey Parker and Matt Stone (of *South Park* fame).

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One particularly indicative example of repetition in cultural selection comes from the musical *Wicked*. The show is a direct adaptation of the bestselling book of the same name by Gregory Maguire, but the characters and setting are based on a book series by L. Frank Baum.104 The first in the series, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, written in 1900, was adapted with great success into a lavish stage musical just two years later.105 Multiple stage and film versions followed in quick succession, including certain productions that combined both film and live performance.106 And then, of course, there is the wildly popular 1939 film version starring Judy Garland, which, according to the Library of Congress, is the most watched movie of all time.107 Thus the modern musical *Wicked* can be seen as yet another iteration of a popular storyline that has entertained audiences for over one hundred years. There is obviously something about the story that draws us, as a society, to it.

Many viewpoints can be taken from this prolific trend of cinema-to-stage in big-budget theatre. For example, Mark Lawson, critic, journalist and essayist explains, “In choice of material, the contemporary West End more resembles a DVD shop more than a celebration of live performance.” He gives examples of many staged movie adaptations being performed in London at the time. “…it’s hard to see [most of these productions] as anything but a crisis of confidence in theatre.”108 He goes on to state that, “[R]ecent British theatre has suggested not so much a co-existence between stage and screen as the old red velvet theatre curtains being flapped in surrender.”109

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106 Swartz, *Oz Before the Rainbow*, 2
109 Lawson, “Video Performances.”
Others, like Roberta Levitow, suggest a misuse of the function of theatre. An international theatre practitioner and Fulbright Ambassador,\textsuperscript{110} she claims that what we see are “revivals, classics and some new work that generally steers clear of the controversial, politically or socially.”\textsuperscript{111} Instead of a present and malleable form of art that can be used to inspire and evoke deep reactions as discussed in Section III, Levitow claims that we are not utilizing the power of theater to help make important social change. “We are, in the theatre, out of touch. Going to the theatre, more often than not, is an escapism of a great denial.”\textsuperscript{112}

However, I do not agree with a full-scale demonization of these productions. This would tend to ignore some of the vital elements of theatre that are being advanced. No one could claim, for example, that these productions are not amazing works of collaborative art. Hundreds of the most talented performers and designers in the nation, often leaders in their field, work for months or years on these productions. The moral and ethical issues derived from watching \textit{Spiderman}, for example, may be somewhat tired and generic. But the work of the riggers and acrobats to send people believably flying around a theatre is impressive nonetheless.

And, although attendance is waning, these productions are successfully bringing people into the theatre. The spectacle and the performant nature of, as Alter puts it, “witnessing something extraordinary”\textsuperscript{113} is certainly being fulfilled. In the week of March 5-11, 2012, the twenty-six shows on Broadway grossed $18.6 million and played to houses of over 200,000 people.\textsuperscript{114} With ticket prices averaging around ninety dollars,\textsuperscript{115} audiences are clearly willing to

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\textsuperscript{111} Levitow, “Some Words,” 26.
\textsuperscript{112} Levitow, “Some Words,” 26.
\textsuperscript{113} Alter, \textit{Socio-Semiotic}, 32.
\textsuperscript{115} Cox and Doperalski, “Broadway”.
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spend to see theatre, even if it is a glitzed up version of a well-known story. The fact a person could watch the film version of many of these stories for the fraction of the cost shows that the live performance holds some sway. It also acknowledges the role of Broadway productions as a tourist attraction, with about 65 percent of audiences living outside the city. Theatre has seen other trends related to film as well. These appear, not necessarily in what is being staged, but how it is staged.

In *Liveness*, Auslander describes a trend toward emulation that has occurred between live and recorded performance since the emergence of radio and cinema. He points out that, just as television and cinema initially attempted to emulate theater [radio dramas and recorded musical extravaganzas], theater has in turn, attempted to emulate recorded media. Bright electric lights, amplified sound, and use of digital image projection have become commonplace.

Reviewer Alexis Soloski, writing for *The Village Voice* points out that this is simply a continuation of trends that started with the earliest theatrical productions. “Theater has long embraced tech, from the *deus ex machina* of the Greeks to today’s latest digital effects. Designers have moved eagerly from daylight to gaslight to complicated electric plots, from natural acoustics to body miking. Directors began to use film onstage as soon as the 1880s, with video and computer graphics later to follow.” With this historical context in mind, Lawson’s cries that new technologies are killing theatre seem somewhat reactionary and short-sighted.

Instead of fighting the prevalence of media, many theatre companies, like the Denver

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Center in Colorado, have chosen to embrace it. According to Denver Post theater critic John Moore, the Denver Center unashamedly uses copious amounts of integrated media.\textsuperscript{120} In fact, according to Moore, they have become a national leader in such use. “In 2008, it became the first regional theater company in the country to hire a full-time ‘resident multimedia specialist.’”\textsuperscript{121} That specialist, Charlie Miller, states that, for the first time, new technologies are not a threat. “We have an opportunity to use what is threatening us to make us better ... There is visual information overwhelming our senses at all times. So it is only natural that we take advantage of that as a storytelling technique.”\textsuperscript{122} For Millennials accustomed to the highly engaging visuals of digitized media, utilizing modern technology to increase the visual impact of a show makes sense.

Many scholars agree. In his 2007 book, Staging the Screen, Greg Giesekam of the University of Glasgow intricately examines some reasons why video has become so pervasive. Of particular importance to our Millennial generation is the attempt to draw in new audiences. “[I]t is believed that such work will appeal to the media-savvy younger audiences which theatres are desperate to attract.”\textsuperscript{123} He evokes famous British set designer William Dudley, who, in a personal interview with Giesekam, elucidated the concerns of non-mediated theatre and its effects on youth. Dudley purports that in order to engage a younger audience, “theatre needs to get away from bare-stage productions.”\textsuperscript{124} These media-infused audiences are, supposedly, not engaged by “the stillness where you are in one locale for two or three hours ... They like high visual dynamics and action, all those things people think theatre can’t do ... fine language full of profound thoughts

\textsuperscript{121} Moore, “Will a High Tech Revolution”.
\textsuperscript{122} Moore, “High Tech Revolution”.
\textsuperscript{123} Greg Giesekam, Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4.
\textsuperscript{124} Giesekam, Staging the Screen, 4.
and plays on words pass them by.”

Lawson agrees, stating, “Theatre’s generic envy and camera-copycatting ... are easy to understand. Today’s babies are born with a video gene. For their generation, entertainment takes place behind screens, not curtains.”

While these viewpoints have validity, they also seem to miss some salient points. Of particular concern is that the alternative to low-tech theatre seems to be a direct pandering to young audiences. By making theatre visually stunning, we may be doing our audiences a disservice by not requiring them to engage in proactive, imaginative thought. As John Moore reported in *The Denver Post*, “The more vividly and completely theater productions strive to create an exact visual world on a stage, the less active intellectual participation of the audience is required.” If theatre needs to become as spectacular as film in order to survive, it follows that its unique importance as an art form is co-opted.

I would argue that these value judgments, whether for or against technologically advanced theatre productions, are somewhat convoluted. I agree that our technoculture values spectacle on stage, and producing shows that lean toward the performant may be the best way to draw in new audiences. Conversely, I feel that primarily focusing on spectacle can diminish the socially important aspects of the art form. What these two divergent camps seem to miss is that, given the near-endless permutations available in the theatre, there is room for variation. The two views are not mutually exclusive because theatre can be produced in such widely varying forms. Simply because the big-budget theatres of Broadway and the West End tend toward the spectacular doesn’t mean other companies can’t produce more referent based productions.

Professor and playwright Len Berkman, for example, believes that less is more. Berkman

126 Lawson, “Video Performances”.
127 Moore, “High Tech Revolution”. 
proposes that theater can exist in its most fundamental state. It can return to its bare bones, even informal format to promote discourse amongst its audience.\textsuperscript{128} He asks “Do, in fact, ‘incomplete production values’ [such as lack of set or costumes] constitute an actual absence? Is a play that actors read in a living room... less truly ‘theatre’?”\textsuperscript{129} In a time when financial concerns are a major factor in how theater is formulated, Berkman asks, “...what modes of presentation remain freer of these [financial] constraints than readings and workshops? What modes are freest to embrace risky, adventurous, old as well as new work?”\textsuperscript{130} This return to simplicity could change the face of modern theater. And it is certainly not a new suggestion.

Few have so strongly advocated this regression as Jerzy Grotowski. As an experimental Polish director, Grotowski worked with increasingly divergent forms of theatre in order to create meaningful connections between the audience and the performers. His body of work is daunting, but for this document it is his concept of The Poor Theatre that offers an intentionally low-tech form of performance that is particularly interesting.

In his debut publication, \textit{Toward a Poor Theatre}, written in 1968, Grotowski shuns the heavily mediated performances of “The Rich Theatre” of his time.\textsuperscript{131} Like Lawson, he takes issue with theatre’s attempt to emulate film or stray from its fundamental structures, calling attempts at high production value “all nonsense.”\textsuperscript{132} But unlike Lawson, Grotowski didn’t just cry foul and throw in the towel. Instead, he experimented. “By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc.

\textsuperscript{129} Berkman, “More Enterprise”, 90.
\textsuperscript{130} Berkman, “More Enterprise”, 91.
\textsuperscript{132} Grotowski, \textit{Poor Theatre}, 19.
It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion. This is an ancient theatrical truth."\textsuperscript{133} By consciously minimizing unnecessary elements, Grotowski found the fundamental aspects behind the increasingly technologically saturated medium. He was able to see beyond the many "devices" of theatre, back to the "thing" itself. "The acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form."\textsuperscript{134}

As inspiring as these claims may be, in our mediatized technoculture many audiences may not be receptive to the experimental performances Grotowski proposes, at least not at first. But I propose that if audiences can learn to enjoy theatre through the spectacle-rich techniques then simplistic or experimental performances may be more approachable. The key here, as I see it, is that modern audiences must learn to think of theatre as an engaging and pleasurable experience before they are able to appreciate its more socially significant aspects. As critic Lyn Gardner of \textit{The Guardian} states, "There will always be that place for low-tech, gadget-free theatre. But there is room for other things, too."\textsuperscript{135} Striking a balance between the varying available formats may be the answer.

A prime example of this balance comes from The Denver Center. The Center is known as a proving ground for big-budget musicals either before they go to Broadway, or as they start on national tours.\textsuperscript{136} As mentioned previously, they are on the cutting edge of theatre technology and utilize spectacular performance techniques. But these are not the only works being staged in the

\textsuperscript{133} Grotowski, \textit{Poor Theatre}, 20.
\textsuperscript{134} Grotowski, \textit{Poor Theatre}, 20.
Center. In their four main performance spaces, ranging from almost 3000 seats in the Buell Theatre to 200-seat Jones Theatre, a wide breadth of performances are staged. According to their website, the Center has offered a “variety of classic, contemporary and new plays [totaling] more than 375 productions, including 125 premieres.” They also host the Colorado New Play Summit, and claim to educate 50,000 students. So even though big-budget musicals are their major draw, the company offers a plethora of performance experiences that engage audiences on a multiple levels.

I feel this multi-faceted technique offers vital social art and also brings new audiences into the theatre. In the contentious battle between spectacle and simplicity, the Denver Center seems to have found a way to have its cake and eat it too. But there are other ways to draw in new audiences.

There is now a growing trend in large production companies of broadcasting performances to audiences far afield from the original venue. This has taken on different formats. In 2006, for example, the Metropolitan Opera in New York City began broadcasting live transmissions of some of its productions to select movie theatres in the US, Canada, and three other countries. The productions were filmed in front of a live audience and broadcast in real time. The MET Live program has been quite successful. For its 2012-2013 season, productions will be simulcast to around fifty different countries, with each show attended by tens of thousands of people. Given that attendance to Opera has been much smaller than theatre's,
and has diminished even more drastically\textsuperscript{142}, the success of the Met's program is a boon for the art form itself.

A different format of broadcast comes from the National Theatre of England. Recently they engaged in broadcasts of live stage productions called NT Live, beaming the performances to movie theaters around the world.\textsuperscript{143} The program is different from the Met's in that instead of live broadcasts of productions in real time, NT Live records live performances which are then released to theatres. The difference is between “broadcast live” and “a broadcast of a live recording”.

Worth noting is the reaction of audiences to this new mediated theatrical format. The National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts in England (NESTA), conducted studies with surprising results. Reports of attendees to NT Live found that, “cinema audiences report even higher levels of emotional engagement with the production than audiences at the theatre.”\textsuperscript{144} This phenomenon may be credited to the fact that the film version contains close-ups and other cinematic techniques that direct a viewer's attention and offer more details of action.

The program has proven successful in its own right, but it has implications for in-house theatrical attendance as well. The NESTA report found that those watching in movie theaters, “claim that they are now more likely to visit the theatre in the future, suggesting that there may be positive spillovers on the wider sector.”\textsuperscript{145} As the NT Live plans its third season of broadcasts, it could provide a worthwhile model for other big-budget theaters and large scale productions.

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\textsuperscript{142} Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, Office of Research & Analysis, \textit{National Endowment for the Arts}, June 2009.
\textsuperscript{144} “Beyond Live,” \textit{NESTA}, accessed November, 17, 2010, \url{http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/reports/assets/features/beyond_live}
\textsuperscript{145} “Beyond Live”.
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Another notable example comes from a company deeply steeped in the tradition of live classical performances: The Globe Theatre of London. In 2011, The Globe partnered with NCM Fathom to record and disseminate productions of Shakespearean classics to hundreds of movie theatres around England. They have followed the model of recording live performances for later broadcast. As Domonic Dromgoole, the Globe’s artistic director conceded, "We are very much aware that recorded live theatre, although that is an oxymoron in itself, is increasingly going to be part of what every theatre does... And it has increasingly become part of how you reach out to new audiences." The repackaging of classic theatre productions as digitized events may be growing in popularity, but it is certainly not the only technique used to draw in new media-savvy audiences.

Spectacle rich performances may be the safe bet financially, but there is still something fundamentally engaging about the purified relationship between audience and performer. It is impossible to forge this relationship, however, if the audience is not in attendance. As an art form theatre must remember its roots of ancient live storytelling. In order to gain new audiences, however, theatre may need to utilize the pervasive technology to which these audiences have grown accustomed. Finding a balance between the two is a challenge that theatre practitioners must face as they proceed into the future.

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Conclusion

In the complicated and sometimes caustic relationship between theatre and technology, few tangible truths come to light. But certain indicative trends can be noted, and by following their trajectory we can gain a better understanding of our modern times. Digitized technologies are undoubtedly a prevalent and powerful force in our society. The youth of today are not only capable of using these technologies, but seem compelled to do so at an exponential rate. The resulting effects may not always be apparent without careful scrutiny. For, as discussed in Section II, the more we engage in our media the more we become alienated and disoriented. Thus, as a society we strive for a feeling of live connection, so much so that we begin to perceive it when none is truly there. Theatre offers that sense of presence, but faces challenges when competing with easily accessible digital forms of entertainment. Many theatrical works have tended to emulate those recorded media that threaten their place in society, but it is theatre’s unique liveness that may be fundamental in correcting the deleterious effects of technological disorientation.

The Millennials’ large numbers and interest in community involvement mean that societal changes could be on the horizon. The direction those changes may take is hard to predict. The internet, the dominant source of information and entertainment in the modern era, is inherently fickle and decentralized, thus poorly equipped to establish social norms and connect our society in meaningful ways. Theatre, with its highly divergent performance styles and content, is well suited to fulfill these roles in a modern technoculture.

Fostering a relationship between the Millennials and the theatre community is important for two reasons. Firstly, theatre obviously needs the Millennials. It needs their attendance at its
shows. It needs their actors and technicians to fill vital roles in the future. It needs their unique insights into the changing world in order to make vibrant works of art. Secondly, I argue that Millennials need theatre as well. With the exponential rise in technological innovation, the new will become banal at an ever increasing rate. If this leaves our population disoriented and seeking something more visceral and real, as some scholars have postulated, theatre could be cast into an influential role in society. For when everything is new and novel, the old can become new again. When the newest technology is seen as just another step toward isolation, the engaging live experience, with all its social and spiritual implications, will be ever more important.

As the technological tsunami continues unabated, and our society finds itself more and more controlled by our devices, theatre can offer safe harbor. Audience and performers can converge in the theatre, finding common ground and vital presence though the sharing of art. There may very well come a time when, at the beginning of a performance when the audience is asked to turn off their mobile devices, it is met with a round of applause.
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