

Anne Simon

The Jungle of the Virtual, the Desert of the Real

A university professor of mine used to have a major aversion to all things digital. He was from Chili and taught a class called “Ritual and Performance”. The analogue wristwatch he wore when in Britain ran clockwise, as one would expect, but the one he wore back home ran anti-clockwise, just like the sun in the Southern hemisphere. He preferred things around him to work analogically and to visually represent the world around us and be an extension of it, like his wristwatch. In his logic, if the digital is a straight line of binaries, the analogue has a circular form with a nucleus representing the starting point or initial idea which can radiate in any direction within those 360 degrees, like a sunbeam.

Ever since, I’ve greatly admired his rigour, his firm belief in symbols and how they represent the world around us. After all, isn’t that what the theatre’s all about: providing us with symbols and signifiers that help us make sense of our world? From an albeit simplified psychological point of view, witnessing a killing on stage can and should

be cathartic; it becomes a signifier for rage and the act that we might at times feel compelled to commit in real life. The onstage murder stands in for the real-life act.

The shift from stage to screen

Forced to watch performances on screen instead of in person over the last year, we’ve lost those cathartic moments. The virtual representation of these acts diminishes their power. Digitalisation, streaming and virtual performances create new symbols which overshadow the ones that need to be experienced first-hand to have a cathartic effect, resulting in the worst of all Baudrillardian nightmares, namely a symbol of a symbol of a symbol which causes us to lose touch with the world around us.

By the same token, though, isn’t the way things are at the moment just the next logical step in the direction where we’re headed in anyway? Hasn’t the current trend just accelerated what we’ve been moving towards for the last couple of

decades? Namely, moving performing arts into the digital realm and trying to use its greater reach as a way of dismantling social barriers, increasing access and thus moving away from the arts as a symbol and means of class separation and recasting them as a form of empowerment thanks to simplified accessibility and greater freedom of expression and diversity.

That’s certainly true. Digitalising performing arts has the potential to reach a greater number of people and to transcend social barriers. And no one will deny the fact that being able to stream performances over the last months has brought relief to audiences and artists alike. We’ve overlooked two important points in the discourse surrounding accessibility, though.

The problem with accessibility

First of all, the general public that didn’t go to the theatre before the crisis may still have a hard time understanding some of

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what's going on onscreen, just as they would if they attended a live theatre performance. Simplifying access doesn't solve the problems of cultural literacy and make the social and educational barriers that kept people from going to the theatre in the first place disappear.

I worry that the absence of guidance promoting artistic and cultural understanding in our societies will become even more apparent with these developments. So, aren't we in fact talking about a fake sense of accessibility here? If we keep failing to educate people about the theatre and the arts – whether in the real world or online –, greater accessibility will remain an illusion and might at worst widen the existing gap between those who are culturally literate and those who are not.

We need to guarantee a degree of *encadrement* online which provides the audience with the necessary tools to interpret, process and understand what they're watching. If we don't provide this guidance, leaving people to their own devices – no pun intended – might not be the best of ideas, especially in the current climate of wilful misunderstanding and diverging beliefs.

And from the point of view of the creators, the pressure for commercial success, which we're increasingly exposed to as it is, becomes more predominant than ever. The shift into the virtual space means an even more definite move towards the rules of the free-market economy where quantity is valued over quality.

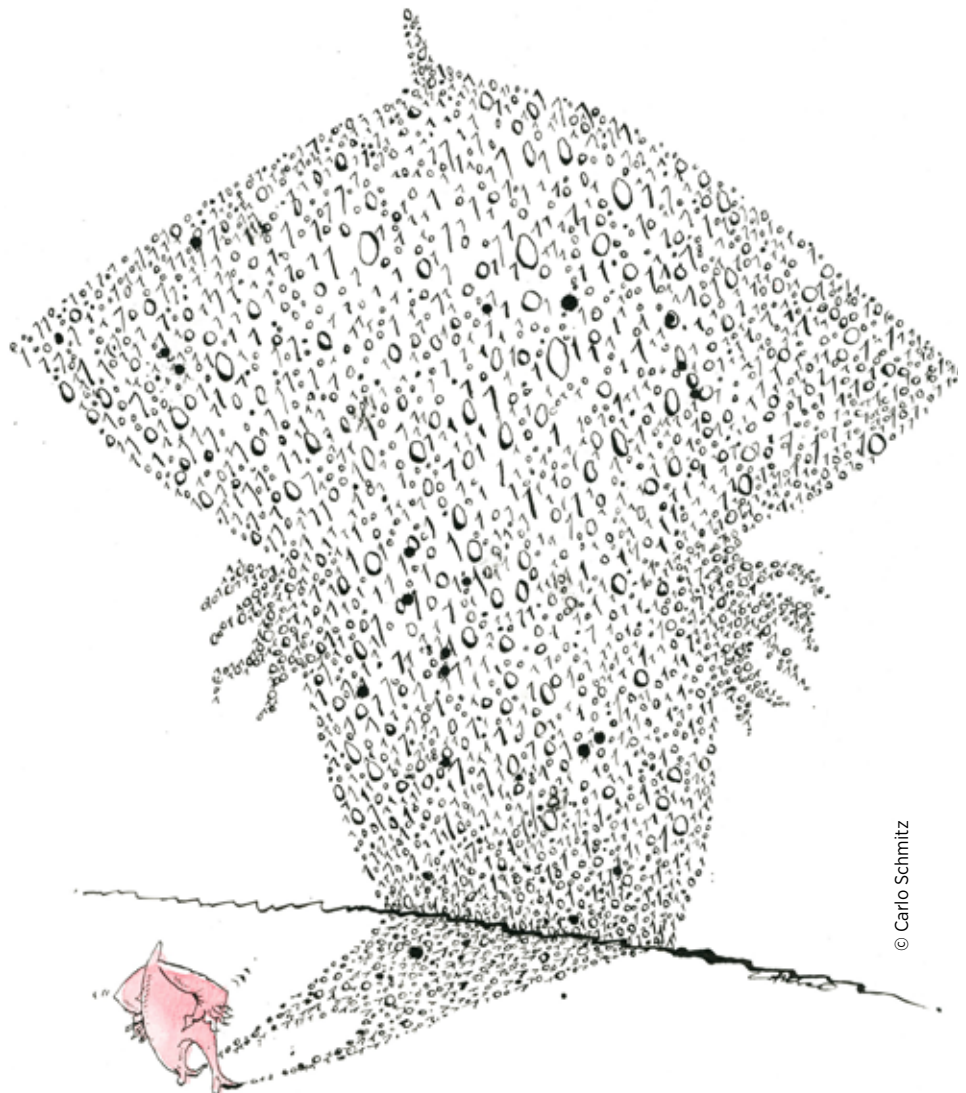
What does online theatre look like?

Then, there are the technical limitations, the formlessness and the loss of the defining features of each art form that comes with going digital. I believe that every medium is different and has its own qualities, limitations and possibilities. I also believe in blending and combining different art forms and playing with techniques and genres; a system in which every art form plays a role according to its own qualities, sometimes modifying by learning from another art form rather than mutating into an undefined whole. Having grown

up with cinema, I know that there are fundamental differences between film and theatre. The latter shouldn't try to imitate film and vice versa and I'm quite radically against generic and naïve stage-to-screen adaptations. That doesn't mean that I'm against virtual performances per se, though – quite the opposite. As soon as the first lockdown was announced, my immediate reaction was to create, to keep going and to offer work to the public, by

any means necessary. And the only way to do that was by going digital. Some people did the opposite and took a step back to self-reflect which I also greatly admire.

The live virtual theatre as we rather uninvitedly but not inaccurately called our company's spontaneous, low budget, DIY project followed a single rule, which was to create live digital performance that would



not, under any circumstances, be filmed theatre. Because unless you're the National Theatre – the one on the South Bank, not the one in Merl – or the Royal Opera, you just won't have the money, equipment or skills to film a live stage performance in a way that is enjoyable to watch. Performances like these are staged for the sole purpose of being projected in cinemas around the world and are produced by a team of media and film professionals. The camera is another performer in the act, as is the case with film, of course. From an artistic point of view, there's no argument to be made for filming a work conceived for the stage and streaming it online. No one in their right mind would try and film a stage performance with a fraction of the budget of a film. The audience would switch to streaming providers in the blink of an eye.

Which is why, if I had or wanted to stage online performances again, I'll be sticking to that all-important rule we established for our digital experimentation with Volleksbühn. Whatever I do with that medium, it will have to be specifically conceived and designed for the net. With Volleksbühn, we've experimented with different formats, the most insane of which was to create a 3D animated stage that our nerdy friend and technical mastermind set up within a week and onto which we could project actors as holograms from their respective living rooms around the world in real time. It looked like an experiment and was fun to watch. For the time it lasted. Some of the last year's findings of what web-based live performance could look like are certainly worth pursuing but getting the performances to a place where they're fun to watch beyond the second or third viewing, after the novelty wears off, would involve money that our industry simply doesn't have.

My biggest concern is that online theatre performances shift the focus away from our actual craft. Dealing with the technical challenge of digitalisation means we are left with barely any time for the actual work of thinking, asking questions and failing to answer them. Our time is taken up with finding the right keyboard shortcuts and trying to understand HTML instead of the world around us.

For people who live for and depend on immediate responses and sensory experiences, the online experience really is at the opposite end of the spectrum. Inventive online theatre, the one that I'm in favour of, demands so much technical know-how that we have no time to reflect on our art.

Combining the virtual and the non-virtual

Although it might sound like it, I'm not making an argument against live online theatre per se. But I do have concerns about what greater, uncontrolled accessibility and availability means for the audience as well as the art we'll actually be able to make. I would never completely reject the idea of staging (more) online performances, though; if we were to have

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another lockdown and I'd have an idea for turning a play that wouldn't be able to take place in real life into a web-based performance, I'd go for it. But if I didn't have that Eureka moment for an adaptation, I wouldn't, under any circumstances, simply film a live performance that has been conceived for the physical stage and release it online. What I will keep doing though, even without any further restrictions, is think about how the virtual can add to the real, how it can help enhance rather than replace live performance, how it can generate new audiences rather than further alienate them and how we can use the internet to share what's usually reserved for the cultural elite in an intelligent and guiding way. We should take a collaborative and complementary approach and not be afraid that live performance and the unique experience it offers will be replaced. At the same time, we also need to acknowledge that the current moment is changing our viewing experiences in irreversible ways and that we can and have to be part of that shift.

Arts and culture are seen as part of our social tissue. Indeed, the idea of tissue itself is non-binary; it's a net, a web or a circular structure, just like my Chilean professor's wristwatch. From the nucleus, there are an endless number of trajectories you can take. Funnily enough, this boundless, universal, democratic analogy is similar to the one posited by the founders of the internet. As John Perry Barlow wrote in the Cyberspace Independence Declaration of 1996; "Our world is different. Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force or station of birth". And yet, this utopia has left us with what feels like a radically binary system of beliefs that's not even close to the sense of freedom the arts or the internet should bring in their wake. ♦