

## Internet theatre and the historical consciousness of the Covid-19 era

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Internet theatre and the historical consciousness of the Covid-19 era

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### ABSTRACT

The pandemic is creating the conditions for a new telos of globalisation to emerge in humanity's historical consciousness, which is not expressed in ideological terms, but is instead rendered as a fluid reality of corporeality and virtuality structured by the materialism of the Internet. Internet theatre created during the pandemic functions as a metonym for the transformation of the human subject from corporeal flesh to bio-techno hybrids. To Be a Machine (Version 1.0) (Dead Centre 2020), End Meeting for All (Forced Entertainment 2020) and Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran (2021) are used as case studies in this article to show how today's informational environment augments perceptions of the real in performance through the convergence of media formats, including the fleshy human. This analysis is contextualised from the historical perspective of the post-Cold War period when anxieties about cultural homogeneity and assimilation were prominent themes in theatre and performance discourse in the absence of any viable alternative teleology to Western capitalism.



### KEYWORDS

Covid-19; Online and Digital Performance; Javaad Alipoor Company; Forced Entertainment; Dead Centre; Lockdown

MRS J ... Smartphones were distributed by charities when rice ran out, so the dying could watch cooking ... (Churchill 2016, 54).

### From corporeal fresh to bio-techno hybrids

Live performance has migrated to the Internet for survival during the lockdowns necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This period of profound crisis has seen an assortment of theatre-makers across the globe experiment with creating performances in cyberspace as distinct from streaming live and recorded shows produced in traditional theatre buildings. The pandemic is a 'crack that somehow divides and sutures the multiple nodes of the event of meaning-making' (Daddario and Schmidt 2018, 4). It is a crisis characterised by dichotomous, possibly irresolvable multitudes of perceptions that are an inevitable effect of mediated simultaneity constituting the shared experience that sutured people together during lockdown (Haas and Wicke 2020). Internet theatre has emerged from

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the tear in the fabric of the pre-2020 real as an aesthetic shock that makes visible the instability, intangibility, and inherent unknowability of what we understand as reality during the first truly global catastrophe of the contemporary information age. This phenomenological reading of Internet theatre is posited in relation to what Jacques Rancière calls dissensus, 'processes of disidentification' created by historically seismic events that suspends the series of relations that act as the coordinates of the real (Corcoran 2015, 5). Dissensus events 'reveal [...] a fissure in the relation of the real to the symbolic' and necessitates a reconfiguration of how reality is represented in art (Rancière 2015, 5). Whilst many people may argue that the 'multi-synchronous' elements of time, space, and event (Lavender 2017, 342) renders Internet theatre contra to live performance's felicity to embodiment, online performances of various kinds have existed since the early 1990s (Sant 2013). Indeed, virtuality has long been a feature in theatre discourse and is not, therefore, exclusively associated with online performances (Sant 2013, 256). Lock-down has generated renewed interest in expanding the live medium to include digital spaces (Saville 2020). Ontological debates centred on liveness and presence are well rehearsed in theatre and performance studies (Schneider 2011; Heathfield and Jones 2012; Clarke et al. 2018; Sant 2017), where in some quarters the 'wired world' becomes a metonym for 'losing embodiment - or rather manufacturing replacements for the body' (Kustow [2000] 2001, 193). This article does not provide a thorough overview of these debates but addresses them later to argue that the resistance to recognising the Internet as a legitimate theatrical medium originates from post-Cold War anxieties regarding technological assimilation and cultural homogenisation associated with the digital revolution.

I convened the Internet Theatre webinar (City, University of London 2021) to begin mapping an epistemic framework for this work. A strong theme that emerged from the panel discussion was how the convergence between virtual and corporeal realities the speakers experienced in online performances attenuated their awareness of how the Internet functioned as the primary medium of interrelationality for people unable to meet in person during lockdown. This feeling was nicely expressed by Harry Robert Wilson as 'intense moments of intimacy at a distance' (City, University of London 2021). In the context of digital culture, Internet theatre is an iteration of emerging performance environments 'that will increasingly demand more interface between human and non-human' (Camilleri 2015, 115). Gabriella Giannachi calls this environment 'Archive 4.0'<sup>1</sup> (Giannachi 2016, 16) to describe the computational systems that structure the invisible yet omnipresent interrelations between humans, machines, and data, which are then instantaneously documented for re-interpretation in the cloud. The modern information environment thus 'augment[s] life itself' and acts as the place where we 're-create ourselves' (ibid 2016, 25) into digital subjects, which 'are not stable categories, static, but always in progress' (Camilleri 2015, 112). Consequently, perceptions of authentic reality in performance have altered to the point where

the notion of 'the real' becomes itself contested such that the stage no longer functions as a hypermedium (a medium that stages other media) but as a site of intermediality where the relations among media are redefined and reconstructed (Bay-Cheng 2016).

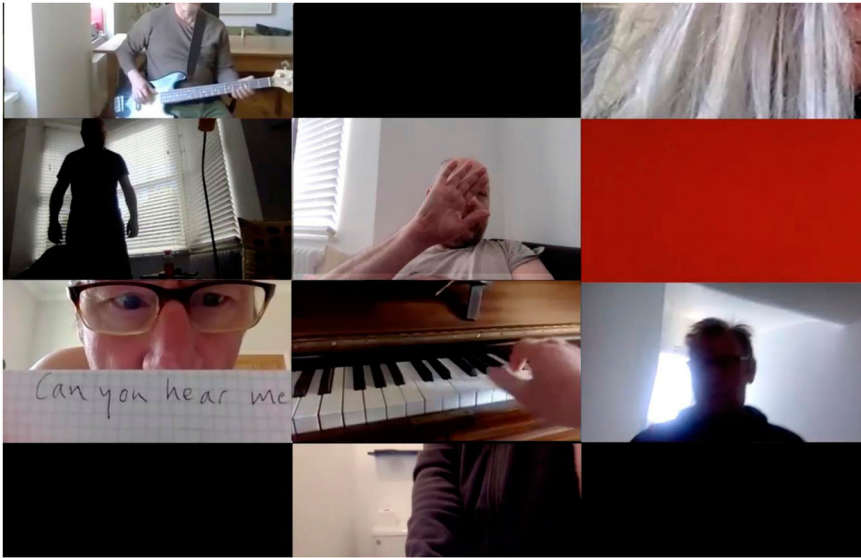
The discourse of online performance must therefore frame the multi-synchronous connectedness engendered by the Internet as part of the twenty-first century human

condition (52group in Papagiannouli 2018, 428). I argue below that the Covid-19 lockdowns reconfigured people's perception of their presence from biological entities into bio-techno hybrids within a transmedial system of interrelations between humans, machines, and data. Internet theatre thus represents the emergence of a new historical consciousness where human agency - our ability to act and define ourselves as conscious political subjects in the social realm - is becoming indissociable from concepts of digitality.

Despite Internet theatre's relatively long history, Christina Papagiannouli argues that the discourse encapsulating concepts of telepresence, transmediality and intermediality has stalled for two decades and more (2018, 428). This stasis can perhaps be partially explained by imprecise terminology applied to a diverse and distinctive range of online performance practices (Sant 2013, 255). To overcome the relative diffuseness of the term 'digital' as a critical term in performance discourse (Blake 2014, 111), the Internet in my argumentation refers to a material place where media are staged as public acts to be seen, interacted with, commented upon, and re-interpreted within 'an insistent and ubiquitous culture of computation, of communication of the image, wrought and formed and presented back, of the always live happenings' (Scott 2020, 141). Confining my discussion to performances produced during the pandemic is intended to emphasise that because no standard model of Internet theatre exists (Lavender 2017, 341) it is crucial for any analysis to not only attend to the specific aesthetic affordances of a particular online performance, but also to engage with the socio-political context of the event to understand how technological developments alter conceptions of the human subject in a globalised world. These ideas are adumbrated below in the analyses of *End Meeting for All* (Forced Entertainment 2020), *To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (Dead Centre 2020), and *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* (Javaad Alipoor Company 2021).<sup>2</sup>

## Fluid reality

The mediatisation of Covid-19 makes it feel simultaneously remote yet immediate, pervasive yet somehow intangible. The impossibility of seeing beyond the time of a crisis locks cultures into 'not being able to think beyond the crisis of thought' (Daddario and Schmidt 2018, 3). *End Meeting for All* (Figure 1) captures the feeling of transitioning from a crisis into a new reality. It is a recorded performance on Zoom in three parts. The grid of screens acts as a collage of 'partially connected realities in different cities' and turns the screen [into] a kind of membrane or imperfect portal between worlds' (Etchells 2020). Six actors located in Berlin, London and Sheffield try to form a connection with each other using bits of poetry and costume, personal confessions, and alcohol. But the meeting never quite happens; it lacks shape, coherence, or any kind of unifying purpose. This failure for full connection evokes the agonistic exchanges that have constituted life in lockdown, agonistic because Zoom has been one of the stages people have used to try and preserve human presence and connectivity. Barbara Fuchs's observation that 'the stripping of context' becomes the actor's 'defining characteristic' (2020) reflects the futility of maintaining the illusion that the real world still exists 'out there' on a platform designed to simulate in person conversations when that world is in a state of collapse. The opening line in the first part, 'Has it started?' reflects an awareness of a shift



**Figure 1.** *End Meeting For All*. Courtesy of Forced Entertainment.

in the collective consciousness about what we understand the real to be but that it is not yet possible to configure a consensual perception of the world that will emerge after the pandemic. The 'it' in Etchells's question refers to a meeting whose medium performs the corporeal body losing its 'privileged position as the reference point by which all other scales are judged as our perception becomes determined and defined by technologies that aid and extend it' (Ball, He, and Tassinari 2020, 221).

Considered in a broader context, the dramaturgy of *End Meeting For All* represents a decentring of biological corporeality in Internet theatre as the primary mode of human connection. This is a significant paradigm shift from a post-Cold War anxiety regarding the Internet's capacity to homogenise cultures into the globalised economy (Kustow [2000] 2001, xvii). Francis Fukuyama's thesis that Western liberal democracy represented 'the end point of mankind's ideological evolution' (1989 *ibid*, 3) came to signify a triumphalist attitude in the West that capitalism had conquered communism and fascism, and by implication all other existing or potential rivalrous political systems (*ibid*). At the crux of Fukuyama's argument is a view of history as the story of human beings increasing their powers of agency. This story ends when no better ideas for generating prosperity, spreading freedom, and preserving the sanctity of the individual are forthcoming. The significance of the post-Cold War period is not rendered in materialist terms but in the formation of a new consciousness that Fukuyama argues was the root of twentieth century internecine ideological conflict (*ibid*, 8). The end of history is often characterised as an optimistic argument celebrating the birth of a stable, globalised world. But Fukuyama's conclusion is far bleaker than is generally acknowledged:

The end of history will be a very sad time ... the worldwide ideological struggle ... will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demand. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of history (*ibid*, 17).

This sense that humanity had stopped being able to reinvent itself was mirrored in the absence of historical narrative left in the wake of the Soviet Union: 'The former state territory of feelings and experience was transformed into a subjectless, nameless unconscious, a psychological desert ...' (Groys 2010, 59). It is this loss of faith in any alternative historical teleology to the one promulgated by figures such as Fukuyama that provides the context for understanding why the digital revolution was considered such a threat to theatre in the early years of the Internet. Live performance came to represent the 'last resort for resisting the dominant culture of media economy' in the cultural milieu of the 1990s (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 68). Referring to the work of the cultural theorist Yuval Noah Harari, David Runciman states that the twenty-first century version of Fukuyama's thesis has humans enhancing machine agency rather than the other way around (Talking Politics: History of Ideas 2020).

Articulating theatre's ontology in terms of embodiment situates technological interconnectivity as a distinct, intrusive 'mutation' (Kustow [2000] 2001, xvii) of the corporeal time and space of live performance. This argument frames theatre as a practice that resists the contraction of the future's horizon by the accelerationist forces of global capital that are organised and managed by technologically mediated 'exchanges of information' that can merely simulate the 'sharing of experience' through the collective assembly of bodies (Kustow [2000] 2001, xvii). The spirit of resistance to the global free market is echoed in Diana Taylor's statement that performance 'can interrupt the circuits of the culture industries that create products for consumption' because '[i]t is much harder to control bodies than to control television, or radio broadcasts, or Internet platforms' (2016, 51). Implicit in these statements is an almost fundamentalist belief that live performance 'seems to carry remnants of an "authentic" culture that fortifies the opposition to mediated performance as a product of commercialisation' (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 68). If the real world has become a simulation, the thinking goes, then corporeal embodiment becomes the primary means of suturing audiences to authentic reality.

But the metonymic relationship between biological embodiment and authenticity merits interrogation. Contrary to those who predicted that the proliferation of information communication technologies would result in the commodification of human experience, the digital revolution has altered the coordinates of the perceptual field to produce a fluid, contingent, transitory, and mutable reality, where humanity is caught up in the non-teleological flow of history. Richard Seymour describes today's information environment as a 'simulacrum', which is

not a representation of reality. It is reality, albeit generated from digital writing and simulated models. It is simulation woven into our lives, with effects every bit as real as stock-market values, or the belief in God. It is reality as a cybernetic production. Live video game images, or virtual reality, the simulacrum is uncannily too perfect, too real: hyperreal, even. We are now far more incorporated into the system of images and signs, from gaming to feeds; but this simulacrum has its roots in capitalist culture's airbrushed advertising, seductive Hollywood dreams and slack gaming and infotainment industries (2019, 160).

We can see the theatricality of the hybrid reality that Seymour alludes to by briefly turning to *28 Days Later* (Secret Cinema 2016a) and the women's rights protests inspired by Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* ([1985] 2017). *28 Days Later* was an immersive performance based on the 2002 zombie apocalypse movie. Each spectator was required to wear facemasks and hospital scrubs in reference to the main character's

costume. Looking back at the performance from the perspective of the Covid-19 era turns *28 Days Later* into an eerily prophetic depiction of the present. Elements of the real that has established itself during the pandemic are instantiated in the *punctum* (Barthes 1993) of photographs and videos of spectators in costume (Secret Cinema 2016b). This media flows through the Internet and interweaves with images of the Covid-19 crisis. Flowing in this context describes a process of medial reconfiguration whereby the documents produced from *28 Days Later* become part of the materialism of reality in Archive 4.0. The ability of fictional constructs to enter the flow of the real can also be observed in the Handmaid protests. '[T]heatrical gestures' have historically acted as a fecund resource in protest movements 'to convey messages and to spread these messages across bodies' (Shaldon 2017, 74). Protests defending women's rights in the USA, Argentina, the UK, and the Republic of Ireland have seen women dressing as Gileadean handmaids to perform the iconicity of women in the neo-fascist, Christian fundamentalist imagination. The presence of the protestors enters political discourse as fictional constructs through media transmitted online.

These two examples show that the corporeal space of live performance is not immune from the ubiquity of mediatisation that flows into all spheres of life. Indeed, this was prefigured in the art practices of the late twentieth century. The art critic Boris Groys argues that rather than instrumentalizing art in the service of technological assimilation and control - the telos of the end of history - art after the Cold War became a fluid entity that no longer 'promised a materialist eternity' (2018, 2) through the preservation and display of objects bequeathed to a future whose emergence became partially secured by the institution of the museum. Rather than signifying a risk to cultural autonomy, the digital revolution has made the idea of a stable, secure, predictable future far less tangible, meaning that

[m]odern and contemporary art practices precisely the prefiguration and imitation of the future in which things now contemporary will disappear. Such an imitation of the future cannot produce artworks. Rather, it produces artistic events, performances, temporary exhibitions that demonstrate the transitory character of the present order of things and the rules that govern social behaviour (Groys 2018, 3).

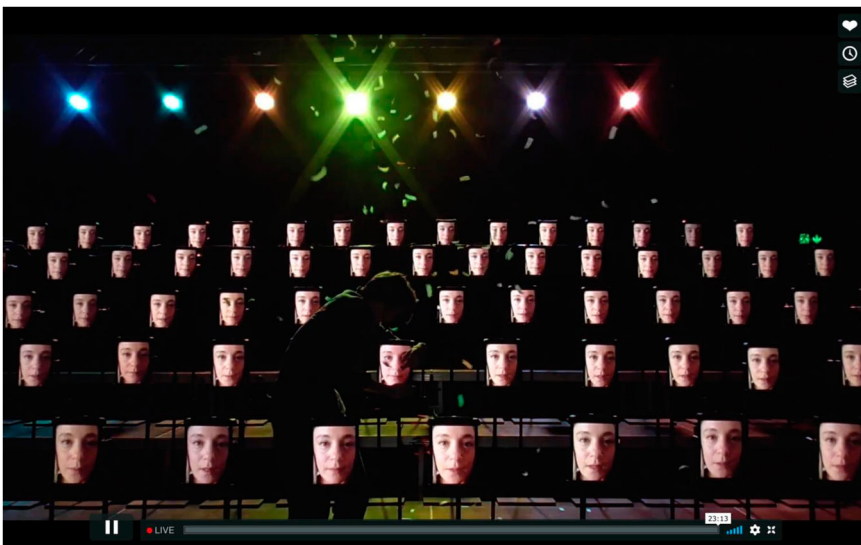
Unlike Fukuyama's model, the historical consciousness of the Covid-19 era does not originate from political ideology; it is born from the materialism of the Internet constituting how reality is structured. The medium of Internet theatre is structured by the same coordinates that humans configure our perceptions of reality by. There is no 'authentic' reality separate from digitality that performance can suture a culture to. Internet theatre therefore brings humans far closer to the materialism of the real in contemporary digital culture by acting as 'an extension of ourselves' (McLuhan [1964] 2001, 7) in performances devised for cyberspace. As has been said earlier, online performance has not yet been fully absorbed into the corpus of theatre 'proper', despite its long history, and so continues to exist as 'other' in relation to corporeal performance. It is the *perception* of live performance being transformed into an ostensibly alien medium that allows Internet theatre to function as a metonymic event for the transition from fleshy human into bio-techno hybrids. This process effectuates a '*redistribution of the sensible* [perceptible]' (Corcoran 2015, 4 emphasizes in original) field by erasing the borders that constitutively divide corporeal and virtual realities that are sustained by citation and reiteration in public

discourse. Living online in lockdown involved a disidentification from the idea of the human as a fleshy, corporeal entity into living as a presence within ‘a disjunct present that permeates virtual and actual spaces’ (Lavender 2017, 346). Processes of disidentification can be traumatic but are also ‘crucial to the rearticulation of democratic contestation’ (Butler 2011, xiii) by actualising the possibility that the human subject may cross the border into ‘excluded sites’ (ibid xvii) of discourse that are foreclosed to them within a reiterative, normative, articulable matrix. This feature resonates with the indeterminacy and narrative synaesthesia of the real in performances clustered under the banner of post-dramatic theatre, ‘because such recourse to external, reliable, authentic reality is assumed to be unavailable’ (Jürs-Munby-Munby, Carroll, and Giles 2013, 26). The real in theatre is thus ‘liberated from the strictures of conceptual, determinate meaning or messages’ (ibid, 11).

*To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (Figure 2) explores this disidentification through the prism of transhumanism, ‘a liberation movement promising nothing less than a total emancipation from biology itself’ (O’Connell 2018, 6). The performance is based on the book *To Be a Machine* (O’Connell 2018) that documents Mark O’Connell’s journey through a tech-utopian sub-culture dedicated to augmenting the imperfect corporeal human through mindfiling, biohacking, cryogenic freezing, artificial intelligence, and cyborg engineering. Whilst this may sound like the stuff of science fiction, O’Connell contends that transhumanism is a merely a more extreme expression of how technology is used to improve our lives:

If we have hope for the future - if we think of ourselves as having such a thing as a future - it is predicated in large part on what we might accomplish through our machines. In this sense, transhumanism is an intensification of a tendency already inherent in much of what we think of as mainstream culture, in what we may as well go ahead and call capitalism (ibid).

*To Be a Machine (Version 1.0)* (abbreviated to *To Be a Machine* hereafter) combines live and recorded media to produce a powerfully evocative sensation of mediated simultaneity



**Figure 2.** The uploaded audience in *To Be A Machine (Version 1.0)*. Courtesy of Dead Centre.



redolent of bio-techno hybridity. Audiences are required to upload recordings of their faces responding to prompts from the actor Jack Gleeson (who plays himself and O'Connell in the live performance). By augmenting themselves into data they can assume will be a presence in the performance, the audience becomes aware that parts of *To Be a Machine* already exist in devices and computer servers as data. The performance is therefore already performing within the Archive 4.0 information environment we all live outside of the 'actual' performance. The uploaded video footage makes the human audience a living part of this environment without their corporeally fleshy presence. As data, they exist as materials that can be potentially interacted with during the live event and as documents born out of *To Be a Machine* that can be saved in Dead Centre's archive.

The main event of *To Be a Machine* is live streamed from an empty auditorium. He communicates with the audience watching at home directly to camera. His presentation style emulates the semi-casual format of a TED Talk, but the professional gloss slowly disintegrates over the course of the hour as Gleeson's identity converges with O'Connell's. The show begins with some reflections from Gleeson about the meaningless of the term 'live' in the time of lockdown when he and the audience are present to each other *sans* embodiment. In a neat reversal of the Turing test, the audience are invited to prove that they are humans and not bots by typing messages to Gleeson. As the messages appear on screen, he wonders how he can truly know there are real humans on the other side of the camera when artificial intelligence can simulate human interaction on the Internet. This question lingers over the rest of the performance, because from the audience's perspective there is no way to determine if they are only sharing the experience with other fleshy entities or if bots are also part of the event. But in the medium of Internet theatre there is no concrete distinction because all components of a performance are augmented into data.

There is a moment when the camera cuts to an auditorium with dozens of tablets mounted on chairs where humans should be sitting. The tablets are playing looped recordings of the audience's faces reacting to Gleeson. The fleshy audience watching through their screens encounter themselves as streamed data being transmitted along digital networks into a physical space, which becomes a further digital stream from the corporeal audience's perspective. The bio-techno hybrids that transhumanists are attempting to create are represented as diffracted pieces of media and flesh within the medium of Internet theatre. But at another level these hybrids transcend theatrical representation by acting as the digital embodiment of human presence during lockdown. *To Be a Machine* shows that one of the affordances of the Internet as a performance medium is to multiply the presence of bodies by augmenting them into data whilst sustaining their wetware components. The act of typing makes the audience part of a communication system between the performance's virtual and corporeal components. The performative effect is to construct a human subject that is no longer a singular individual but a heterodox entity who flows along networks as data whilst sustaining a corporeal presence. Performances in Internet theatre are not representations of a reality that exists 'out there' but events that make visible the Archive 4.0 environment as performative data.

Dead Centre play with the fluidity of digital identity by acknowledging how the audience's perception of the actor Jack Gleeson are intertwined with their knowledge of his character Joffrey Lannister in the HBO serial *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). The meta-

narrative of the performance is the story of Gleeson meeting Mark O'Connell in a cafe as part of his preparation for the role. Gleeson reflects on his disillusion with acting following the phenomenal success of the tv show. Expressing his desire to lose the trappings of celebrity culture (a feature of Seymour's simulacrum), the iconic set piece of the iron throne from *Game of Thrones* appears on screen, signalling that even Gleeson's corporeal identity bares remnants of fictionalised media constructs that are sustained through their circulation online. Joffrey and Gleeson are not synthesised, but neither are they separate entities in *To Be a Machine*. Aligning with Bay-Cheng's argument that all components onstage can now be perceived as media (2016), *To Be a Machine* opens a pipeline for *Game of Thrones* to leak into its aesthetic through the image of the iron throne which then reconfigures perceptions of Gleeson as a further media construct. The idea of media convergence is taken further when Gleeson uses the transhumanist vocabulary to describe acting as a process of uploading data (the character) to a computer (the actor). O'Connell also acquires a presence in the performance through Gleeson's recollections of their meeting together. Holding up an iPad playing a recording of O'Connell speaking, Gleeson's face slowly transforms into O'Connell's. Gleeson's presence becomes multiplied into data and flesh simultaneously, each one becoming interconnected with all the other data points that enable *To Be a Machine* to sustain itself within the Archive 4.0 information environment.

### The end of history has ended

*To Be a Machine* shows that the medium of Internet theatre turns the real into something that is re-programmable and thus dissociable from conceptions of embodied corporeality as its 'constitutive outside' (Butler 2011, xvii) that act as a border between online and offline worlds. The human in the contemporary bio-techno reality of lockdown 'haunt[s] those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation' (Butler 2011, xvii) by remaining perpetually unconstituted as a subject in performance discourse because they can never become present in the singular form associated with corporeal identity. As bio-techno hybrids, Gleeson and the audience possess the same level of fluidity as data. The sense of boundlessness is exhilarating in its refutation of uniformity to a normative matrix of citational identity. But as an image of humanity's future, bio-techno hybridity is equally capable of producing feelings of anxiety, panic, and ennui. This feeling of psychic disjunction is powerfully rendered in *End Meeting for All*.

The actor's presence feels glitchy. Claire Marshall and Cathy Naden are always talking past each other, frequently saying 'I can't hear you' (Forced Entertainment 2020). Richard Lowdon prowls about his living room and basement, a silent and remote figure in all three parts, a nominal presence who haunts the meeting whilst Terry O'Connor methodically drinks gin to keep her spirits up. The actors appear distracted, tired, depressed, and lonely. In the long periods of silence, they often stare outside of the Zoom grid, looking at a world the audience can sense is slowly dissolving, making corporeal reality a spectral presence in the performance. The confinement of Zoom comes to represent how the pandemic traps us in a perpetual moment of crisis by removing us from the world of action into a digital reality that leaves us floating through cyberspace in search of authentic human connection. An exchange between Robin Arthur and Tim

Etchells captures the intense feeling of non-action that typifies the experience of living in lockdown:

TE I like this bit. Yeah, I always like this bit. It's great.  
 RA This is the best bit.  
 TE Do you think you like it?  
 RA Yeah, I love this bit.  
 TE I love this bit. Good.  
 RA This is the bit I really look forward to.  
 TE Yeah, I like this bit. Every time it happens, I like this bit.  
 RA There's just something about it. I'm laughing but it makes me sad.  
 TE Me too. (Forced Entertainment 2021)

Lockdown put life on pause so there were no dramatic or significant 'bits' in *End Meeting for All* that would signify a reality in motion. Interacting with the world through Zoom produces a peculiar temporal sensation where there is no gap between an action occurring and its documentation in the cloud. Zoom transforms *all* action, whether it is performed by humans, machines, or data, into live events. Zoom constituted a primary material component of Archive 4.0 during lockdown and is therefore able to affect 'the viability of a particular state of consciousness' (Fukuyama 1989, 8). As Cathy Naden says, 'As long as it was happening then it was live' (Forced Entertainment 2021). This line synthesises the epistemology of the consciousness that has developed over the pandemic by perceiving digital operations as a further instance of human activity within Archive 4.0.

The gaze of the actors in *End Meeting for All* act as glitches in the smooth fabric of the Zoom grid. Switching between gazing at the world that exists outside of the tight screens to the digital space of the meeting evokes the absence of unmediated reality and the absence of the new real as a fully formed construct in the world of the performance. The mere presence of the computer in each actor's home that enables Zoom to function automatically mediates their world so no separation between the corporeal and the virtual concept of the real is possible. A constant exchange of information occurs across the porous digital boundary between the reality of the audience, what dramaturg Marianne van Kerhoven calls a 'minor dramaturgy' (Haas and Wicke 2020), and the world inhabited by the actors. The Internet acts as the infrastructure for these realities to exist, so neither reality is entirely closed off from the other. They are sutured together by the experience of living through a global crisis online. Zoom allows the Covid-19 crisis to be documented in real time in a format that enables the documents to exist as a living element within Archive 4.0. The performance loses its 'precondition for the functioning of fiction as fiction' through the absence of borders between the real world and a world of simulations, the 'dissimulation of the material, technological, institutional framing that makes this functioning possible' (Groys 2018, 172).

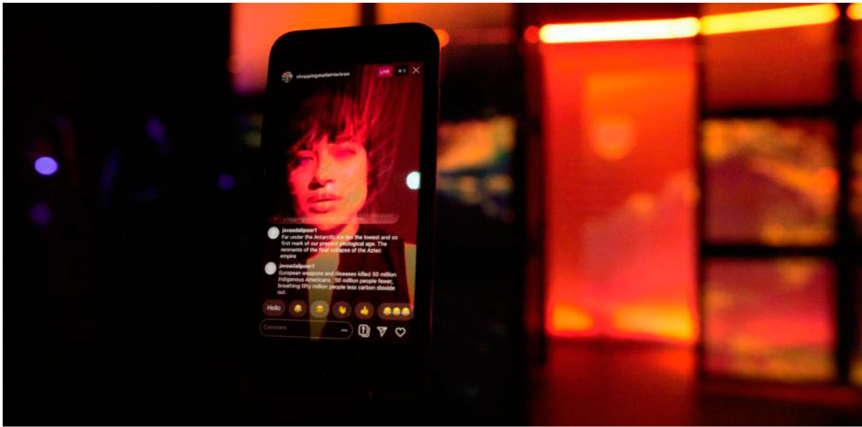
Living in a state of technological fluidity evokes associations with past imaginaries of the future where communication technologies have engendered an enhanced sense of solidarity in a global humanitarian community. These futures have failed to materialise yet continue to haunt the cultural imagination (Fisher 2014, 26). The new real we have become accustomed to during the pandemic reminds us of the utopian hopes, dreams and desires of technological futures rendered most powerfully in science fiction movies and novels. These artworks continue to act as fictional prophecies for how technology will produce digital humans. Even before the pandemic forced us to experience reality

through the computer screen, the imbrication of digital technology in the everyday made many people feel they were outwardly living 'science-fictional lives' (Geef 2015, 175) yet were still bound by pre-Internet conceptions of what constituted reality and fiction. The failure for reality to correlate with imaginaries of the future makes the experience of lockdown feel like a simulation of these imaginaries, yet we cannot escape the knowledge that living online is, in fact, real. We may feel as though we are moving towards a future that is familiar, yet we never seem to get there. Another possibility is that we have reached a future where humans have become technologically augmented by the Internet during lockdown, but we remain confined to antiquated concepts of what counts as simulation and what counts as reality. The belief that consumer capitalism would produce infinite 'newness' has given way to the 'crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion' in the twenty-first century; 'it doesn't feel like the future' (Fisher 2014, 8). Tim Etchells's final speech in *End Meeting for All* echoes this feeling as he reflects on what has happened in the performance whilst looking out at the world through a computer screen:

TE I thought it was going to be more uplifting. I thought there'd be more about someone going for a walk late at night and looking up at all the buildings and wondering about the people inside them. Wondering if they were sick or well or wondering if they were the kind of people who could afford to stay inside, or if they were the kind of people who had to work all the time and be in public space and drive things from one place to another, or something like that. I thought it would be more about people working or people lying in hospitals or people looking out of windows and wondering about other people. I thought it would be funnier. I thought it would be shorter. Or longer (Forced Entertainment 2021).

Internet theatre shares the ideological affordances of theatre of the real (Martin 2013) not through any overt uptake of political issues but through its medium. The contemporary information society transforms what we mean by political theatre. Power is de-centred, interconnected, and opaque in the globalised world. The forces of late capitalism cannot be grasped in their entirety so cannot be meaningfully represented in theatre as a totality (Borowski and Sugiera 2013, 67). *Rich Kids: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran* (abbreviated to *Rich Kids* hereafter) shares some of the same fragmentary structure as *End Meeting for All* by mobilising Internet theatre as a mode of digital archaeology. *Rich Kids* (Figure 3) addresses the question how digital technology is altering humanity's historical memory through the fictional story of Hossein Rabbani Shirazi and Parivash Akbarzadeh. Hossein and Parivash are *Aghazadeh* (Iranian slang for 'new rich'), children of the 1979 revolution whose romance and tragic death in a car crash are documented on Instagram. Javaad Alipoor and Kirsty Housley act as digital archaeologists who present information as evidence of humanity's footprint in cyberspace. *Rich Kids* is performed live on YouTube and on Instagram. An Instagram feed of photos and text adds a further layer of digital strata to the event. Joanne Scott describes these strata as 'processes in uneasy engagements' (2020, 146) that create 'a productive unease at the otherness of such processes in ... everyday existence' (2020, 147).

The mobile phone is framed as a 'technofossil' (Javaad Alipoor Company 2021) that could theoretically become the most enduring artefact of the information age. Instagram in this context documents the story of humanity's addiction to shaping reality with media by compressing the present into increasingly smaller moments of time in digital images. As a social media phenomenon, *Aghazadeh* are the new elite of Iranian society and represent a historical shift from the era of the revolution to one saturated with



**Figure 3.** *Rich Kids*: A History of Shopping Malls in Tehran. Photo by Pete Dibdin. Courtesy of Javaad Alipoor Company.

Western consumerism. The Koroush Shopping Mall in Tehran stands as a monument to this jumbled history of modernity in the Middle East. *Rich Kids* frames the story of Hossein and Parivash as emblematic of how humanity remains wedded to the illusion that societies can remain static when the archaeological record documents many different forms of civilizational collapse. As Alipoor states, ‘We spend a lot of time thinking about how the world will end, but we almost never think to ask whose world has already ended’ (Javaad Alipoor Company 2021). The audience is directed to switch their attention between their computer screens and their phones at different moments in the show to dig into the history of Hossein and Parivash’s relationship on an Instagram feed. The repetition of the instruction to ‘scroll back’ (Javaad Alipoor Company 2021) through the posts turns the phone into a document connecting the audience to countless histories that become infused with a sense of intense immediacy through their digital meditation. Data on social media locks humans into a perpetual present devoid of historical memory through its ubiquity in the everyday. Hossein and Parivash’s story is intermixed with philosophical musings on deep time, the Anthropocene, and the ancient history of the Middle East.

Instagram in *Rich Kids* is thus a kind of archive that documents humanity’s futile efforts to photoshop reality into a frozen moment of time. The psychic topography of the Internet in the age of social media in *Rich Kids* is characterised by a medium designed to withstand entropy. But beneath the jittery relentlessness of the social media strata the data remains from an earlier period in the history of twentieth century globalisation are buried in cyberspace. Alipoor and Housley reflect on how vaporwave, the process of recycling parts of retro software into new artworks, are the data ghosts of the futures that were promised in the 1990s but never fully came into being. Mallwave is a subgenre of vaporwave that remixes music and CCTV footage from shopping malls as a celebration of the ‘last heroic age of consumer capitalism’ (Javaad Alipoor Company 2021) at the end of the twentieth century. *Aghazadeh* live in the shadow of late capitalism’s splendour online.

The memory of the recent past in *Rich Kids* is rendered as data fragments that flow beneath the horizon of the contemporary historical gaze. This affordance of the Internet becomes an analogue for the Orbis Spike, the name given to the geological impact centuries of globalisation have had on the planet. The performative effects of Mallwave and

Instagram in *Rich Kids* reconfigures the Earth into a hard drive laced with the traces of humanity's story over a much longer period than the bandwidth of our historical perception can manage. *Rich Kids* mobilises the audience through the medium of Internet theatre to turn their perceptual gaze of the real away from the immediacy of the pandemic by stretching their sense of time beyond the Covid-19 era to periods when other civilisations have ended. The end of history in Fukuyama's model did occur if we accept that it produced the consciousness that shaped the material world to the precepts of consumer capitalism. But by crawling through the archaeological data remnants of this consciousness, *Rich Kids* shows that the end of history has itself ended. The data archaeology of consumer capitalism signifies civilizational collapse at the level of post-Cold War consciousness. Archive 4.0 is recording a similar historical shift in consciousness that is occurring during the pandemic. Internet theatre thus enables audiences to experience how modernity is no longer experienced 'as a moment of transition from the familiar past to the unfamiliar future' (Groys 2018, 137–138) but as a fluid form of informational subjectivity.

*To Be a Machine, End Meeting for All* and *Rich Kids* each represent as 'the constitutive form of unrealised democracies' (Pollock 1997, 78) by evoking the absence of a world where the boundaries between simulation and real life, fiction and reality, offline and online communication, digital and analogue technologies, live and recorded media, human and machine, are separate components in the matrix of citations that distinguish the corporeal from the virtual. Living online in lockdown has altered the consensus of what constitutes the authentic experience of the real world from events traditionally associated with simulation and mediatisation. Absence does not signify mourning for the loss of a fictional time when we had a unitary understanding of the real. Rather, it is a performative absence that activates a new mode of perception to penetrate the shimmering digital veil that blinds us to how reality has become bifurcated in the information society. Covid-19 has hastened rather than created the new real. But it is important to acknowledge that the transition from corporeal reality to bio-techno hybridity is occurring during a period of crisis to consider what new symbolic systems of identification are emerging. Internet theatre is the place where these systems can be represented in performance.

But I do not wish to suggest that the transition from corporeal theatre to Internet theatre is seamless. We are living through the prodrome phase of the Covid-19 crisis and do not yet know how reality will remain permanently altered after it has ended (if indeed a catastrophe on this scale can ever truly 'end'). But Internet theatre is the place where this absence of knowledge allows us to gaze into the unknown in the presence of other bio-techno hybrids so we may experience what it might be to live permanently as non-teleological humans. Dissensus in Internet theatre does not therefore refer to a purely symbolic process of disidentification from the concept of the pre-pandemic real by structuring experiences of the new real as a medium of performance within a pervasive information environment.

## Notes

1. This is a concept building on Michael Shanks's work on the historical development of the archive. Archive 1.0 was the earliest form of bureaucracy, Archive 2.0 refers to the mechanisation and digitisation of information through such means as the printing press and databases, and Archive 3.0 is the new methods of producing and sharing archival resources using 'new prosthetic architectures' (Shanks in Giannachi 2016, 1)

- An in-person version of *Rich Kids* precedes the online one. The production I refer to was adapted for the Internet during the pandemic.

## Notes on contributor

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