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## Going “Live” Again: Reflections on Zoom, Copresence, & Liveness in a (Post)Pandemic World

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In April 2020—only weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic—the *New York Times* published an article titled “Why Zoom Is Terrible.” Quoting a gustatory simile from Sheryl Brahmam of Missouri State University, the article declared, “In-person communication resembles video conferencing about as much as a real blueberry muffin resembles a packaged blueberry muffin that contains not a single blueberry but artificial flavors,

textures and preservatives.”<sup>1</sup> It has been a year marked by the absence of “in-person” connection, or in the language of our field, of spatial copresence. The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally disrupted our ability to share space. Spatial copresence, it turns out, is what the coronavirus requires to spread. The virus, in this sense, is a phenomenon of the live. While technologies like Zoom have maintained our capacity for temporal copresence, the now ubiquitous status of “Zoom fatigue” points to new ways to consider spatial copresence, and by extension “liveness.”

The phrase “Zoom fatigue” now yields hundreds of thousands of results on a Google search. Twenty-five years after Phelan and Auslander’s famed articulations of the “live,” liveness has reemerged as a timely topic, plastered across headlines in popular media. Rather than reapproaching the earlier discourse on reproducibility and ephemerality, we have the opportunity as scholars of theatre and performance to reconsider liveness as we’ve experienced it in the year of pandemic: temporal presence but spatial absence. Here I offer some brief musings on what a year of social distance has helped illuminate: In losing spatial copresence, what has been absent? How does that absence reinform our earlier notions of liveness, and what does it portend as we begin to share space once again?

In explaining “Why Zoom Is Terrible” in April 2020, writer Kate Murphy details how videoconferencing disrupts the spatially contingent aspects of communication. Interfaces like Zoom limit our perception of a range of factors that invisibly aid and streamline interpersonal communication, from facial microexpressions to direct eye contact. This results, she posits, in our brains working overtime to compensate for the lack of interpersonal data that we unconsciously rely on in copresent communication. The attendant effects of this dearth of spatially contingent perception are not only exhaustion but much lower levels of empathy and trust between people who are communicating via the platform. In February, Prof. Jeremy Bailenson of the Stanford Virtual Human Interaction Lab substantiated Murphy’s claims by publishing the first peer-reviewed article on the phenomenon of Zoom exhaustion. In detailing the “nonverbal overload” of videoconferencing that results in users experiencing fatigue, Bailenson cites studies that demonstrate the deleterious effects of prolonged, close-up eye contact, the limited ability for mobility and gesture, and the cognitive load that accompanies the loss of nonverbal cues within communication.<sup>2</sup> These insights are not new. Since the 1960s, psychologists have studied the dynamic between verbal and nonverbal communication; Albert Mehrabian’s work famously posited that when conveying feeling and attitudes, only 7% of meaning is conveyed verbally; 38% is communicated through tone of voice and inflection, and 55% is through nonverbal means such as facial expression and body language.<sup>3</sup> Based on this, videoconferencing provides us with only approximately 45% of meaningful communicative information (and that depends on how good your Internet connection is.) This isn’t to suggest that technologies like Zoom will remain stagnant or otherwise unable to develop the capacity to counter these challenges; indeed, given the likelihood that remote work will continue at greater levels in the aftermath of the pandemic,<sup>4</sup> it is safe to assume that technology firms like Zoom will be optimizing their platforms to counteract the effects of Zoom fatigue. Rather, I point to the broader turn in the awareness of spatiality revealed by this year of social distancing. As we begin to share space again—

with its accompanying benefits and risks—we are experiencing a larger cultural reappraisal of what the experience of “copresence,” “liveness,” and “in-person communication” means within the performance of the everyday.

Beyond the disruptions to interpersonal communication, the pandemic also dis-associated us from the very materiality of space. From its Latin roots, the word “presence” translates to mean “to place before the senses.”<sup>5</sup> Technological interfaces have effectively mediatized the sensory transmission of sight and sound, but have not as yet digitized touch, taste, or scent. In losing access to public and shared spaces, we have missed the smell of our favorite coffeeshop, the taste of movie theatre popcorn, the touch of not only an embrace from a loved one but the glancing brushes of coins and bills exchanged with extended hands across cashier counters. In our ocular-centric culture, these “secondary” senses are often viewed as less essential or efficacious. However, they constitute the invisible but affective nexus of spatial copresence. Within our lived experience of the everyday, we have lost the atmosphere of spaces themselves. Phenomenologist Gernot Böhme has theorized atmospheres as

something between subject and object: they can be characterized as quasi-objective feelings which flow out indeterminately into space. Equally, however, they must be characterized as subjective, in that they are nothing without an experiencing subject. . . . atmospheres are experienced in terms of the affects they arouse, and one can only tell which type of character they have by exposing oneself to them in bodily presence, in order to feel them in one’s own disposition.<sup>6</sup>

Encompassing all the senses, Böhme’s conception of atmosphere privileges “bodily presence” as the medium by which affects are transmitted, perceived, and shared. In *The Transmission of Affect*, Theresa Brennan similarly links affect and atmosphere, defining the latter as “how one feels. . . others’ affects.”<sup>7</sup> Mapping the interplay between subjects and their environment—their shared space—Brennan argues, “the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual.”<sup>8</sup> Citing olfactory and nervous entrainment, Brennan outlines how the materiality of multisensory perception impacts and changes the perceiving subject, ultimately positing that “the mystery really is how a person maintains a distinct identity” at all.<sup>9</sup> For Böhme, this interaction between atmosphere and perceiving subjects is epitomized within theatre; within his larger project aimed at urban planning and ecocriticism, he identifies “the art of set design”<sup>10</sup> as an exemplar for the efficacy of atmospheres: “The art of stage setting again proves that atmospheres are something quasi-objective. Namely, if each member of the audience were to perceive the climate of the stage in a different way, the whole endeavor of stage setting would be useless.”<sup>11</sup> Again, he reminds us that atmosphere, as enveloping all the senses, must be experienced “by exposing ourselves to them by being there physically.”<sup>12</sup> As I have written elsewhere, Brennan and Böhme together suggest that the phenomenon of *affective atmosphere* is not only ubiquitous in our daily lived experience but operates foundationally on spatial copresence, in which spatial materiality is placed fully before our senses and changes us as perceiving subjects.<sup>13</sup> As the spaces we’ve been separated from over these past months begin

to reopen, we'll be reunited not just with long-absent objects and people but with spatial atmospheres and their attendant affects as well.

This short missive ultimately testifies to my curiosity about how theatre and performance as a discourse will reimagine liveness and its varying aspects of copresence in the months and years to come. While we've lacked shared space, we've also witnessed new proliferations of intermedia and digital performance that are expanding our notions of copresence beyond binaries of the temporal and the spatial, the synchronous and the asynchronous. I look forward to the new voices and insights that will emerge within this old conversation about the "live" as we begin to live anew in this brave, new, postpandemic world.

## Endnotes

- 1 Kate Murphy, "Why Zoom Is Terrible," *New York Times*, 29 April 2020.
- 2 Jeremy N. Bailenson, "Nonverbal Overload: A Theoretical Argument for the Causes of Zoom Fatigue," *Technology, Mind, and Behavior* 2.1 (2021): 1–6.
- 3 See Albert Mehrabian and Susan R. Ferris, "Inference of Attitudes from Nonverbal Communication in Two Channels," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* 31.3 (1967): 248–52; and Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Communication* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: AldineTransaction, 1972).
- 4 Kristen Senz, "How Much Will Remote Work Continue after the Pandemic?" *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, 24 August 2020, <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/how-much-will-remote-work-continue-after-the-pandemic>, accessed 14 June 2021.
- 5 See "presence, n." at *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2021, [www.oed.com/](http://www.oed.com/), accessed 15 April 2021.
- 6 Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (New York: Routledge, 2017), 183.
- 7 Theresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 10 Böhme, 168.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 168.
- 13 See Carla Neuss, "The Apocalypse Will Be Staged: Transformative Efficacy and Affective Atmosphere in Scriabin's *Mysterium*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 35.1 (2020): 133–51.

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