Mediatized Cultures

Raymond Williams, in "Drama in a Dramatised Society," his oft-cited inaugural lecture at Cambridge University in 1974, spoke of the pervasive ways in which the televised experience of what he called "drama" was then being "built into the rhythms of everyday life."[1] On the mediated construction of quotidian experience, he proved prophetic. The word *media*, once properly used as the plural of *medium*, has since morphed, not only into a singular noun itself, as in "the media spins the news," but also into a verb: "to mediatize" is to dramatize people and events by passing them through the hall of hyperbolic mirrors that is modern mass communication in the networked world. Williams rather quaintly described this process of mediatization as a kind of theatrical casting or miscasting on a revolutionary and world-historic scale, whereby electronically designated substitutes stand in for pretty much everybody else: "On what is called the public stage, or in the public eye, improbable but plausible figures continually appear to represent us."[2]

Such representations have been of principal interest to scholars in the fields of cultural studies and critical theory, of which media studies has emerged as an increasingly significant part. Already in the pretelevision world of radio and film, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno had influentially identified and analyzed the power of what they called "the culture industry" to substitute representations for reality through the false harmonization of the particular and the general: "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned."[3] For them the culture industry under late capitalism was itself a culture. Responding to this emerging phenomenon in *Keywords* (1976; rev. ed. 1983) and cautioning that *culture* is one the "two or three most complicated words in the English language," Williams strove to relate the material productions of culture (institutional continuities of physical practices such as manufacture) to its signifying or symbolic systems (such as literature and media).[4] But he was writing at a time when broadcast television was unchallenged as the premiere medium. Then it still seemed to him remarkable, however increasingly commonplace, "to watch simulated action, of several recurrent kinds, not

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just occasionally but regularly, for longer than eating and for up to half as long as work or sleep."[5]

That was then.

Now culture itself has been mediatized to the point at which the most frequently quoted authorities see relations between material productions and signifying systems collapsing into a *Matrix*-like web of (dis)simulation. In this brave new world of virtual reality led by computer-generated simulations and robotic surrogates, everyone is implicated as spectator and participant simultaneously, awash in the streams of electronic data that pool into ever-deepening truth-effects. Jean Baudrillard, for example, argued in *Simulations* (1975) that postmodern simulation disguises the fact that originals no longer exist, a condition he termed "hyperreality."[6] Donna Haraway in "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) opined that new technologies, including mediated ones, change the previously understood conditions of what it means to be human: the word *cyborg* is a contraction of "cybernetic organism"; in the brave new worlds it describes, traditional relationships such as those between biology and gender, for example, alter with each innovation of high-tech prostheses, producing the cyborg as "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality."[7] More recently, tracking the rise of what he calls "the performance paradigm" in postindustrial economies, Jon McKenzie, in *Perform or Else* (2001), has mapped a new terrain of technological organization in which the historic notion of "performative presence" has been transformed by "hypermediation of social production via computer and information networks."[8]

In theater and performance studies, these questions have particularly manifested themselves in an extended but worthwhile debate over the ontological status of "liveness." Ontology concerns itself with the nature and relations of being; it is the philosophy of what actually is. In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Peggy Phelan highlights what she takes to be the nonreproducibility of live performances, an ontological claim that gives liveness priority over mediated recordings of all kinds in resisting commodification and capitalist appropriation. For Phelan, the liveness of performance is predicated on the fact of its disappearance: the time of performance is always now; it remains behind only in the spectator's memory of it. She writes: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance."[9] Objecting to Phelan's ontology of performance in *Liveness* (1999), Philip Auslander sees ever-more permeable boundaries between the live and the mediated (as witnessed in such phenomena as lip-synching, for instance): "The progressive diminution of previous distinctions between the live and the mediatized, in which live events are becoming more and more like mediatized ones, raises for me the question of whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones."[10] For Auslander, the opposite of the live is not the dead, but the mediatized; yet

Phelan's insistence on the ontological security of the opposition represents for him a kind of nostalgic revisionism: before the introduction of prerecorded radio broadcasts, there was no need for a separate conceptual category of "live performance." Unable to resist commodification, Auslander concludes, performance succumbs to mediatization or vice-versa; it hardly matters which comes first, the culture or the industry. Reviewing the debate between Phelan and Auslander over liveness, Matthew Causey sees both positions as problematic: "Phelan disregards any effect of technology on performance and draws a nonnegotiable, essentialist border between the two media. Auslander's material theory and legalistic argument overlook the most material aspect of the live, namely death."[11] Yet even in the apparently neutral diction of Causey's intervention, "performance" has become a medium rather than an event or a behavior.

Philip Auslander leads off this section with "Live from Cyberspace; or, I Was Sitting at My Computer This Guy Appeared He Thought I Was a Bot." His title foregrounds what he sees as an ontological shift. Tracing the earliest uses of the word *live* in reference to performance, he is led to the *BBC Yearbook* of 1934, which distinguishes between live and prerecorded broadcasts. Because the origin of the sound heard on radio cannot be seen by those listening to it, Auslander reasons, identifying the status of the source became necessary for the first time in the history of performance. This question, which emerged as a question only after advances in analog recording, gains a new and different urgency with the advent of digital technologies. These are exemplified in Auslander's thinking by "chatterbots," speaking machines "programmed to recognize words and word patterns and to respond with statements that make sense in the context of what is said to them, though some are capable of initiating conversations." Chatterbots put into play, not the ontological status of the performance (live or recorded?), but rather that of the performer (human or bot?). Auslander provocatively claims that such speaking (and thinking?) machines "perform live" even though they are not "alive," at least not yet, if only because they still cannot properly be said to die.

Toward the end of his essay, Auslander quotes one of most frequently cited aphorisms of Herbert Blau, which hails death as the ontological guarantor of the liveness of performance: "[The actor] is right there dying in front of your eyes."[12] Responding explicitly to Auslander here in "Virtually Yours: Presence, Liveness, Lessness," Blau elaborates on his earlier, hauntingly Beckettian evocation of the peculiar kind of human presence that mortality best affirms. He begins with the uncanny phenomenon of stage lights "ghosting" unbidden in the early versions of computerized lighting controls. This image becomes a metaphor or even an allegory of mediatization, but the fundamental terms of the comparison are reversed, for Blau identifies the stubbornly residual ghost light with the human body itself. The staged body's "lessness," accentuated by the increasing marginality of the "carnal theater" in comparison with more overtly mediatized spectacles, backhandedly confirms the body's presence by dramatizing the inexorability of its disappearance. The theater mediatizes the body too, and it

has always done so, making visible to the public eye those otherwise invisible figures, "improbable but plausible," which "continually appear to represent us." They remind Blau, as they reminded Williams, that even in the leading edges of mediatization, "the dematerialized figures are unthinkable without the bodily presence presumably vanished, nothing occurring in cyberspace that isn't contingent on that which, seemingly, it made obsolete." As in *Waiting for Godot*, something always has to remain behind to remind us of what's gone missing.

Finally, in nearly the same spectral place where Herbert Blau locates corporeal "lessness," Sue-Ellen Case finds something more. Pushing off from Kate Bornstein's performance piece *Virtually Yours*, which demonstrates the equivocal but beguiling space for play opened up by virtual identities, and moving on to *waitingforgodot.com*, a cyber performance space, she probes a new medium for the staging of identities. She begins her quest among the undead: "vampires" suggest but do not exhaust the possibilities she discovers and predicts, and she finds the most vivacious conditions of new electronic life flourishing among the recently drained bodies of cybernetic "avatars." An avatar is traditionally defined as the embodiment of an idea in a person. In cyber-usage, an avatar is an image on the screen that seems to represent the user. Case explains that "users may imagine their own participation within cybersocieties in the form of these avatars" because through them they can enter "a theatre of masks without actors." Unlike actors in the carnal theater, their bodies are no longer their medium, and no one yet knows for sure who or what can reliably slip through the cracks in corporate cyberspace. Wary of the vested interests slithering through the same fissures, however, Case closes with a haunting echo of Donna Haraway's as yet unanswered but still urgent question: "What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be . . . effective?"[13] Whatever politics they might yet prove to be, they cannot be effective if users sit passively while unbidden "figures" gather to represent them in the public eye or on the public stage.

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NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, "Drama in a Dramatised Society," in *Raymond Williams on Television*, ed. Alan O'Connor (New York: Routledge, 1989), 4.

2. Williams, "Drama in a Dramatised Society," 9.

3. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997), 154.

4. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 87–93.

5. Williams, "Drama in a Dramatised Society," 4.

6. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (1975; New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 1–4.

7. Donna H
cialist Feminism
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8. Jon McK
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9. Peggy Ph
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10. Philip Au
Routledge, 1999)
11. Matthew
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12. Herbert B
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13. Haraway,

7. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1985), in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191.

8. Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 42.

9. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

10. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

11. Matthew Causey, "Media and Performance," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 2:825.

12. Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 134.

13. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 199.