S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

7:1 2021

Virtual Theatre

Edited by Sidia Fiorato

Contents

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The Virtual

Abstract

"Virtue" is the crux of this essay. What is the virtue of describing a two-dimensional representation of reality as "virtual?" Isn't a screen a screen? Large or small, made of glass or bed sheets, the screen holds an image, a representation, of something that is not present. Whether the image is generated by a 16mm movie projector or a television broadcast studio or a computer, there is no escaping the fact of the screen; all these forms of transmission are two-dimensional, existing on a flat plane. To be sure, there are qualitative differences among all these media, but the images are all animations on screens. Why the term "virtual performance" when the medium has none of the virtues of live performance?

KEYWORDS: live performance; virtual; performance *Breathing at the Boundaries*

Let me start by admitting that I am troubled by the use of the word 'virtual' to describe two-dimensional representations of actual events. My reasons have to do with a respect for language, an appreciation of the particular virtues of language. Look. If I say to a friend that I prefer the cappuccino made by my local barista to that made by hers, she may argue that they are virtually the same, that they are almost identical in size and shape, in taste, in aroma. She is right about their taste and aroma, size and shape, but she is wrong about their being virtually the same. They are, in fact, *practically* the same, not virtually the same. A cappuccino not made by my barista lacks many crucial virtues: my barista's cappuccino has the virtue of my having watched it being made by him, someone I have grown fond of. It's a cappuccino I watched being made while remembering the hundreds or thousands of cappuccinos my barista has made for me over the years, the pleasantries we've shared during the making of those cappuccinos, and the comforting ambiance of the café in which those cappuccinos have been made. So, I tend to be more careful with the word 'virtual' than most people are. It has significant work to do semantically. I think it's important not to say 'virtual' when one means 'analogous'; there are no virtual worlds on television, film,

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or computer. In fact, there are no worlds there at all, only representations of worlds.

Here is a true story – ah, you see, I already have a problem. The word 'true' bothers me in this context. Like 'virtual', 'true' is problematic. This story will be analogous to the event as all 'true' stories are, but it is not a true record of the event. The event is being remembered and related to the listener, filtered, edited, and changed in the recollection. It is not true. Yet it contains truths. But here's the story as I remember it.

In 2006 I was invited to tour a robotics laboratory at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My guide was an engineering genius who had already earned several postgraduate degrees from that institution. He brought me into a room in the middle of which was what appeared to be a large plush toy – a stuffed animal with big eyes, short legs and arms, and hands with fingers.

My guide told me that the engineers were teaching the toy to identify when "he" was being lied to. Various actors would enter the room and identify themselves, then leave the room, change clothes, and return. Some would then identify themselves by using the names of people whose clothing they had borrowed. "He" (the engineers had given this toy a name I don't recall) was supposed to identify who was lying. I asked my guide (I'm not going to name him either, because names are confusing; I prefer 'guide' in this instance, because, as you will see, this story is about what names do to how we see things) whether the cameras in the eyes of the toy were sufficient to identify the faces of the actors in the experiment. He said no; cameras needed to be placed in the room at steeper angles in order to "recognize" (you see the difficulty already) a face. "So the toy is just for your amusement", I said. "You are building a room that can correctly identify the faces of those who enter it", I said. "So you're building facial-recognition software", I said. "So 'lying' has nothing to do with this", I said. "So, you are lying to yourselves about the scope and character of your project".

I just lied to you. Could you tell? That's not how it went. I didn't make any of those statements at the time. I just thought them. I was worried that bringing up the complications of the use of 'teaching' and 'lying' to describe this programming would start us down a road that might lead to questions that might slow the process of discovery there at MIT. If I had pointed up the anthropomorphic fallacy of the camera 'eyes', those talented engineers might have had to stop and think about the consequences of nomenclature – of using the word 'intelligence' to aggrandize complex, but relatively unsophisticated programming (at least in comparison to that of the human brain), for instance.

We do this all the time, we human beings. We need metaphors that help us reduce complexity to manageable dimensions. We say we are telling a true story, when we are really just remembering something to the best of

our ability, or embellishing it, editing it, polishing it, exaggerating elements of it, valorizing our roles, making ourselves out to have been wiser, more perceptive, more virtuous.

There it is. 'Virtue'. The crux of this essay. What is the virtue of describing a two-dimensional representation of reality as 'virtual'? Isn't a screen a screen? Large or small, made of glass or bed sheets, the screen holds an image, a representation, of something that is not present. Whether the image is generated by a 16mm movie projector or a television broadcast studio or a computer, there is no escaping the fact of the screen; all these forms of transmission are two-dimensional, existing on a flat plane. To be sure, there are qualitative differences among all these media, but the images are all animations on screens.

Masaccio (among others) may have figured out how to create the illusion of depth in a painting, but he didn't call his paintings 'virtual paintings'. They were just another kind of painting. He was comfortable leaving it at that. And painting benefited by this innovation.

Now, of course, we have computer technology that can animate the flat plane in remarkable ways, creating extraordinary depth of field, albeit within the limitations of those electronic screens. Yet, what can be done on those screens is what film has done for well over a century: take us different places in no time at all, enlarge a thing to the point where we can see features we couldn't previously see, switch viewpoints instantly, superimpose images, multiply images, stretch images, cascade images, and on and on. All this is the film- and video-maker's art. It's a long and hallowed tradition taking us from the Lumière brothers, through Jean Cocteau, Jean Renoir, Luis Buñuel, Akira Kurosawa, Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, to Lina Wertmüller, Steven Soderbergh, Wes Anderson, Spike Lee, Ang Lee, Jane Campion, and such visual artists as Bill Viola, Bruce Nauman, Andy Warhol, and all the rest of the animators of one kind of screen or another.

But now, we are told, we can do 'virtual performance'.

Why the term 'virtual performance' when the medium has none of the virtues of live performance: changes in air currents as performers move, emission and inhalation of chemicals released by performers, the feel of the crowd (audience) – the collective experience, the feel of the volume of space within the performance room or hall, the vibrancy and nuance of color in the real world, the feeling of actual distance among performers, actual distance travelled in actual space? None of these virtues belongs to the animated screen of a 'virtual' performance.

What I object to in the term 'virtual' applied to computer animations (and I'm using this word as applicable to any moving image on a flat plane) is that it implies that it's unlike all the other animations of surfaces – that it is categorically different than, say, the cave paintings at Lascaux. I worry

that if we let this slide, if we allow this delusion, we will stop caring what we are holding in our hands and what we are not, that we will lose our sense of proportion, our appreciation of the subtlety of the sensual world, substituting for it a desiccated surface of fascinations and spectacle without depth and breadth of sensation. We will lose our ability to feel the weight of the particular object, distinguish its patina, appreciate its richness of character. We might begin to believe (as some video gamers do) that the paltry array of choices we are given within a computer program is 'virtually' the same as the staggering array of choices available to us in the actual world, and that an animation of a dancer is virtually the same as an actual dancer. Worse, we might begin not to care that our array of choices is minuscule. We might get comfortable in these limited 'virtual' worlds. We might start finding the windowless basement preferable to the chaotic and wild world outside.

But here we are, stuck with this term 'virtual', no doubt chosen by the denizens of Silicon Valley to romanticize their work, as the MIT robotics engineers did in my 'true' story above.

I think the word is expressive of a longing for a real world that feels increasingly remote as civilized life shields us more and more from contact with nature, from its dangers and virtues. We don't want to admit we're in a kind of prison, that modern life has made us fear the dark and blunted our senses, that we move from one room to another room via a mobile room (a vehicle) to another room where we sit and stare into yet another room (the computer or phone) and subordinate our imaginations to those of the programmers who decide how many choices we have and what buttons we need to push in what sequence in order to get our reward (as Pavlov's dogs did).

Performance has always been, for me, a way to revive nature in the room. Bodies dealing with other bodies, breath mingling with breath, eyes flashing, volumes of air disturbed with every gesture, every move, sound bouncing off the ceilings and walls, the hand of the drummer shaken with each hit of the drum, the room shaken with each hit of the drum, the ground shaken with each footfall.

The French used to open every theatrical performance by pounding a staff on the stage floor three times. It was an announcement that the show was starting, but also a way of shocking the audience into life. There are Japanese theatre and dance troupes that have their performers get on their hands and knees to wash the stage before every performance, to become intimate with the floor, to feel it as something unique; not just any stage, but a stage they have crawled across, cleansed of the dross of previous performances, readied for new revelations.

And now COVID-19 has hit. And here we are, performing artists – dancers, musicians, actors – wondering how to continue, how to recapitulate the virtues of live performance under this house arrest, wondering what to

pound on, what to clean, what ground we can stand on that will support some revelation.

Which brings me to *Breathing at the Boundaries*, a dance/video collaboration among the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company under Margaret Jenkins' choreographic direction, cinematographer Alexander V. Nichols, composer Paul Dresher, poet Michael Palmer, and writer performer Rinde Eckert (me). Kelly Del Rosario served as the assistant to Jenkins and the voice of the dancers in this collaboration.

All the collaborators, except me, live in San Francisco (or its environs). I was required to quarantine myself for a week after flying in from New York.

At the beginning of this collaboration, we intended it to be a live-streamed event, with five performers, masked and socially distanced. Only the dancers who felt comfortable taking the risk were rehearsing (masked) in a large studio so everyone could be at least six feet apart. The rest would be videotaped. They would create dances in their apartments or on the rooftops of their apartments, or in open spaces. Some of these dances would become duets – in reality, solos built in response to the videotaped solos, then broadcast simultaneously during the live-streamed event. Videos of dancers from other parts of the world – Kolkata, Israel, China – would be projected as well.

Much of the music would be live, with the band (Paul and percussionist Joel Davel) playing in a loft next to the stage. Alex Nichols came up with an elegant design consisting of hanging panels on which the videos of the remote dancers could be projected, along with any other footage he supplied. A poetic text of Michael's served as an initial prompt for the development of movement, narrative and poetic content. I developed a character and context (a janitor in an abandoned office building) that would further frame the experience. So, we had frames within frames within frames. We would all be in a box (a theatre) streaming into a box (the computer screen) telling a story about the walls of a box (the office building) and the denizens, both real and projected who were boxed in (masked and distanced) by the circumstances of the times.

Then one day Margaret came in and dolefully announced that one of the dancers had been rushed to the hospital with appendicitis. Meanwhile the pandemic took an upward turn. We had to regroup and decide whether we could continue at all, and if so, how. We realized, for safety's sake we would have to suspend rehearsals for two-weeks and get re-tested before returning. Given the change in schedule, one of the live dancers had to pull out. This left us with three remaining live dancers and me on the actual stage floor. The remaining 'live' dancers no longer felt comfortable with the long hours and close proximity that a live stream event would demand. We would essentially have to create a film of a live performance.

This would put an added burden on Alex's shoulders. He would have to

replan all the camera moves, restructure and reedit the videos, and shoot some new footage in light of the new character of our work. Meanwhile, Margaret, Paul, Michael, Kelly, and I would contemplate additions to and redactions of the text, music, and movement. It was clear that I would have to take a more active role as a dancer in the piece.

We were depressed by the prospect of having to abandon our original idea, but hopeful that the ghost of the imagined livestreamed event would be evident in the work – the original intent (manifest in the choices, words, music, movement and set design), adding yet another layer (another box?) to the piece. And we would still be in that same room dancing on that same floor with actual distance between us, actual volumes of air being moved by actual dancers while the music of actual musicians bounced off actual walls and bodies.

The extra weeks of contemplation ended up making the piece stronger. My role became more interesting and the character of the piece as a whole came into clearer view. Alex was able to shoot some new footage and expand elements he'd already had in play. Paul had more time to consider musical emendations, as well.

The key for us, was to stay mindful of the actual, to stay mindful of what we had lost of the living performance, to stay mindful of our longing – mindful of what we actually held in our hands and what we didn't. We wouldn't pretend that the world was not what it was. Performers on the actual stage would be masked; they would keep their distance (with the exception of two of them who were living together).

I'm reminded of a word in English: 'cenotaph'. It refers to a plaque, stone, or any other marker commemorating the death of a person whose corpse has been lost. (It is used primarily for deaths at sea). Perhaps Michael Palmer's prompt to the company and collaborators might be pertinent here:

> Clear day, fierce sun. By the lake, a woman dips her hand in an urn. She is fashioning a spiral. She is fashioning a spiral of human ashes in the sand.
> Again and again she dips her hand in the urn, and with care she adds to the spiral, beginning at its center, its heart, its fixed point, and drawing the form outward. The sand glistens with salt. A ritual? An act of grace?
> It is a coil, she thinks, a mortal coil. A helix she thinks, single. She distributes the ashes as if sowing seeds, but more slowly, more deliberately.
> She thinks briefly of a spiral stair, wherever it may lead. She tries to remember whose ashes these are. Perhaps once she knew – someone close to her she's quite certain.
>
> She is a thousand miles from home, at the edge of a lifeless lake. Or are the crystals growing there alive? Soon enough the tide will come in, and the spiral will be gone.

The text, Michael tells us, was occasioned by the story of a friend who made a ritual of spreading the ashes of her friend in a place that would have had meaning for both of them. We are being made aware of what is missing at the same time as we celebrate the spiral of ashes, the actuality of it, its actual ephemerality in the world of wind and water. Ashes become a spiral become part of the lake floor. (Burial at sea?).

Our piece, then, was a kind of cenotaph: a celebration of what is there (images moving on a surface before our very eyes), and what is only remembered to have been there (living dancers in actual places, places with weather, with moving volumes of actual air).

Which brings me back to the word 'virtual' and the importance I have attached in this essay to making critical distinctions between what we call a thing and what it may or may not be.

There is, in my opinion, no such thing as 'virtual performance'. There is live performance and recorded performance. The former takes place in an environment with all of that environment's attendant virtues: actual volume, actual bodies, and actual pounding, on actual floors. The latter has its own virtues: flexibility of viewpoint, allusion to diverse environments, montage, superimposition of images, special effects. But the latter possesses almost none of the virtues of the former. So, to suggest that they are 'virtually' the same is absurd and misses the point.

Missing the point is what concerns me most in the devaluation of language. So much of our lives is spent missing the point of any given moment.

A simple story: I'm driving along at a reasonable rate of speed. Suddenly a car traveling at a much higher speed swerves in front of me, scaring me. I curse the driver, I fume, I become upset. Then, I ask myself some basic questions:

> When you decided to get in the car and drive down this highway, were you under the impression that the traffic would be predictable? Did you think that this many cars each driven by a different person, with different desires, different levels of skill, different temperaments, each distracted by different life issues, would, on entering this highway suddenly become part of a coordinated, orderly, efficient procession? You are, right now, like someone who, wading into a river, complains about getting wet. Drivers like the one you are angry at are part of the nature of traffic. If you don't want to be subject to the nature of traffic, don't drive. If you don't want to get wet, don't jump in the river.

We call something by a name (a metaphor) then we become deeply attached to the metaphor. We forget what we were talking about in the first place. We start arguing over the name we give the object in question and completely ignore the object in question.

So, 'virtual' is not what it thinks it is. It isn't qualifying its object (as in 'virtual reality' or 'virtual performance'). It's qualifying a feeling, or a desire, or perhaps a longing. It expresses, for me, the longing for something real in a world increasingly full of facsimiles. It is no less a facsimile, but in wanting to be something more, it is an exceedingly human expression.

Breathing at the boundaries is what we are all doing right now. We are not in this world and we are not *not* in this world. And yet here we are, breathing, taking real steps in real rooms in real cities in a real world where a real virus lives with us and probably always will. We have real desire to be together, to dance together to sing together, to laugh together, to eat together, to understand something together, to see the same beauty together, in the same room, on a stage, on a wall, or on, yes (I nonetheless proclaim), a computer screen. So 'virtual' art might not actually have any objective meaning, but if it makes us look, we might see something that moves us. And through that experience of being moved we might be changed and, in turn, change the world.

My contention is only that if we're clear about what we are actually looking at and what we are not, what we actually hold and what we only imagine we hold, what our actual choices are as opposed to what we are told are our choices, our effect on the world will be more conscious, more fulfilling, and more compassionate. In short, we will be more virtuous.*

* *Breathing at the Boundaries*, a dance/video collaboration among the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company under Margaret Jenkins' choreographic direction, cinematographer Alexander V. Nichols, composer Paul Dresher, poet Michael Palmer, and writer performer Rinde Eckert.