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# Digital Liveness
## A Historico-Philosophical Perspective

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When revising my book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* for the second edition that appeared in 2008 (the book was originally published in 1999) one of the things I wanted to emphasize was the historicity of the concept of liveness, the way that the idea of what counts culturally as live experience changes over time in relation to technological change.[1] When I was invited to consider the specific question of digital liveness for a presentation at Transmediale 2010 in Berlin, however, I found I was no longer satisfied with one conclusion I had reached, partly because of my own shifting intellectual commitments. My review of the history of liveness from the early days of analog sound recording up to the advent of the digital initially led me to the conclusion that our experiencing digital technologies as live is a function of the technologies' ability to respond to us in real time. I now wish to interrogate my own position in an effort to outline a phenomenological perspective on digital liveness, defined very broadly.

My premise in *Liveness* is that liveness is not an ontologically defined condition but a historically variable effect of mediatization. It was the development of recording technologies that made it both possible and necessary to perceive existing representations as "live." Prior to the advent of these technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no need for a category of "live" performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility. The history of live performance is thus bound up with the history of recording media, and extends over no more than the past 100 to 150 years. To declare retroactively that all performance before the mid-nineteenth century was "live" would be to interpret the phenomenon from the perspective of our present horizon rather than those of earlier periods.

However, the idea of liveness was not brought into being simply by the arrival of recording technologies. Brian Winston, a historian of media technologies, suggests that several factors have to be in place for a new medium to develop. These include "ideation" (the imagination of a new technology to serve a specific purpose) and the maturation of the science needed to produce it. However, a new medium will not be developed until a "supervening social necessity" for it is perceived, and it is selected for investment.[2] Winston's analysis can be extended from media technologies

themselves to the discourses surrounding them. New ways of thinking and talking about a new medium will not arise until there is a social need for them.

In the case of sound recording, which developed from the mid-nineteenth century on, this need did not arise until the institutionalization of radio broadcasting, which began around 1920. It did not happen earlier because the prior uses to which the technology was put did not call for it. With cylindrical recordings and phonograph records, the distinction between live performances and recordings remained experientially unproblematic. If you put a record on your gramophone and listened to it, you knew exactly what you were doing and there was no possibility of mistaking the activity of listening to a record for that of attending a live performance. As Jacques Attali points out, the earliest forms of sound recording, such as Edison's cylinder, were intended to serve as secondary adjuncts to live performance by preserving it.[3] The ways early sound recording technology was used respected and reinforced the primacy of existing modes of performance. Live and recorded performances thus coexisted clearly as discrete, complementary experiences, necessitating no particular effort to distinguish them.

Radio broadcasting presented a new problem, however. Radio was institutionalized primarily as a live medium:

> In the U.S., the Department of Commerce [the government agency that first oversaw radio] granted preferential licenses to stations that didn't use recorded music, since there was a feeling that playing records was a rather inferior style of broadcasting—mainly because live music gave far superior sound reproduction. In 1927 the industry's new governing body, the Federal Radio Commission, reemphasized that phonograph performances were "unnecessary."[4]

Listeners therefore had good reason to assume that the music and other programming they heard on the air were being performed live.

Unlike the gramophone, however, radio does not allow you to see the sources of the sounds you are hearing. Radio's characteristic form of sensory deprivation crucially undermined the clear-cut distinction between live and recorded sound, and listeners could not be certain the sounds they were hearing were being produced live as they were supposed to be. Since some stations, especially smaller ones, did sometimes broadcast recorded music, there needed to be a way of telling the audience what it was hearing. For example, during his early morning show on Washington D.C.'s WJSV in 1939, Arthur Godfrey can be heard to say repeatedly that the music he is playing is recorded.[5]

It comes as no surprise in this context that the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s earliest example of the use of the word "live" in reference to performance comes from the *BBC Yearbook* for 1934 and iterates the consumer complaint "that recorded material was too liberally used" on the radio. It appears, then, that the concept of the live was

brought into being not just when it became possible to think in those terms—that is, when recording technologies such as the gramophone were in place to serve as a ground against which the figure of the live could be perceived—but only when there was a social necessity to do so.

The need to distinguish live from recorded performances discursively arose as an ethical (and quasi-legal) obligation of radio broadcasters, since their medium muddied the clear opposition of the live and the recorded in a way previous technologies of sound reproduction had not. This resulted in the development of a terminological distinction that attempted to preserve the formerly clear dichotomy between two modes of performance, the live and the recorded, a dichotomy that had been so self-evident up to that point that it did not even need to be named. The word "live" was pressed into service as part of a vocabulary designed to preserve this distinction discursively even if it could no longer be sustained experientially by the listener's relationship to the technology. Because of the negative value attached to the use of recorded music in early broadcasting, the distinction between the live and the recorded was conceived as one of binary opposition rather than complementarity. Although this way of conceptualizing the live and the distinction between the live and recorded or mediatized originated in the era of analog technologies, it persists to the present day and is the basis of our current assumptions about liveness.

It is clear from this history that the word *live* is not used to define intrinsic, ontological properties of performance that set it apart from mediatized forms, but is actually a historically contingent term. The default definition of live performance is that it is the kind of performance in which the performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another. But over time, we have come to use the word "live" to describe performance situations that do not meet these basic conditions. With the advent of broadcast technologies—first radio, then television—we began to speak of *live broadcasts*. This phrase is not considered an oxymoron, even though live broadcasts meet only one of the basic conditions: performers and audience are temporally co-present, in that the audience witnesses the performance as it happens, but they are not spatially co-present.

Another use of the term worth considering is in the phrase *recorded live*. This expression comes even closer to being an oxymoron (how can something be both recorded and live?) but is another concept we now accept without question. In the case of live recordings, the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performers, but experiences the performance later and in a different place than it first occurred. The liveness of the experience of listening to or watching the recording is primarily affective: live recordings allow the listener a sense of participating in a specific performance and a vicarious relationship to the audience for that performance not accessible through studio productions.

The phrases *live broadcast* and *live recording* suggest that the definition of what counts as live has expanded well beyond its initial scope as the concept of liveness has been articulated to emergent technologies. And the process continues, still in

relation to technological development. Along these lines, Nick Couldry proposes "two new forms of liveness," which he calls "online liveness" and "group liveness":

> *[O]nline liveness*: social co-presence on a variety of scales from very small groups in chat rooms to huge international audiences for breaking news on major Web sites, all made possible by the Internet as an underlying infrastructure. . . . *[G]roup liveness*[:] . . . the "liveness" of a mobile group of friends who are in continuous contact via their mobile phones through calls and texting.[6]

Understood in this way, the experience of liveness is not limited to specific performer-audience interactions but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown.

Although the decentered experiences of liveness Couldry describes are not easily assimilable to a performer/audience model, they nevertheless posit liveness as a technologically mediated relationship among human beings. However, the word *live* is now also used to describe connections and interactions between human and non-human agents. Margaret Morse observes that the imaginary developing around interactive computer technologies entails an ideology of liveness whose source lies in our interaction with the machine itself rather than the connections to the outside world permitted by the machine:

> Feedback in the broadest sense . . . is a capacity of a machine to signal or seem to respond to input instantaneously. A machine that thus "interacts" with the user even at this minimal level can produce a feeling of "liveness" and a sense of the machine's agency and—because it exchanges symbols—even of a subjective encounter with a persona.[7]

Liveness is also attributed to the entities we access with the machine. When a Website is first made available to users, it is said to "go live" (a phrase that originated in broadcasting). As is true of the computer, the liveness of a Website resides in the feedback loop we initiate with it: it responds to our input. It may be that we are now at a point in history at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living human beings before each other or physical and temporal relationships. The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience's affective experience. *To the extent that Websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they feel live to us, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value.*

This last sentence, which appears in the second edition of *Liveness*, represents the position I wish to reconsider here. I still believe that it points in the right direction by nominating the audience's experience rather than the properties of the thing experienced as the locus of liveness. But I now find that my emphasis on feedback and real-time operations slips into technological determinism by implying that technologies, rather than people, are the causal agents in the experience of digital liveness.

The need for another way of approaching the question is clear simply from the fact that while real-time operations and the initiation of a feedback loop may be necessary conditions for the creation of the effect of liveness in our interactions with computers and virtual entities (digital liveness, in short), they are not sufficient conditions. I do not experience all of the real-time operations my computer performs as live events. For instance, letters appear on my screen as I type, but I do not apprehend this phenomenon as a live performance by the computer anymore than I did when I used a typewriter. When I engage in conversation with a chat-bot, however, I do experience it as a live interaction. This is not because what the hardware, software, networks, etc. are doing in the former case is different from they do in the latter case—it's all 1s and 0s, after all. Nor does it have to do with the chat-bot's greater anthropomorphism. In keeping with phenomenology's premise that our experience of the things of the world begins with their disclosing themselves to us, I will suggest that different digital representations make different *claims* on us.

I am using the word "claim" in the way that Hans-Georg Gadamer uses it in his discussion of aesthetics in *Truth and Method*, a text that will serve as my guide here. I must emphasize, however, that I am not *applying* Gadamer's ideas to the question of digital liveness. For one thing, I have no interest in arguing that the interactions I am discussing are necessarily aesthetic in nature (though some are). Rather, I aim to construct an argument concerning our engaging with machines and virtual entities as live that is *analogous* to Gadamer's argument that we engage with works of art as contemporaneous.

Gadamer argues that the way a work of art presents itself to its audience constitutes a claim, "concretized in a demand" that is fulfilled only when the audience accepts it.[8] Broadly speaking, I am suggesting that some real-time operations of digital technology make a claim upon us to engage with them as live events and others do not (I repeat that this does not mean that the former are necessarily aesthetic in nature). It is crucially important to note that it is up to the audience whether or not to respect the claim and respond to it.

In the case of interactive technologies, the claim to liveness can be concretized in a variety of demands. Clifford Nass, a communications scholar at Stanford University, spearheads a group of researchers who advocate what they call the "Computer as Social Actor Paradigm." Their basic claim is that we interact with our computers in ways that parallel social interactions with other human beings. Nass and Youngme Moon point to three cues that may "encourage social responses" to the computer: "1) words for output; 2) interactivity, that is responses based on multiple prior inputs; 3) the filling of roles traditionally filled by humans."[9] Nass and his colleagues do not argue that computers *are* social actors; rather, they argue that we behave toward them as if they were. In the terms I am using here, these three cues can be construed as demands (e.g., the demand to be perceived as verbal, the demand to be perceived as filling a human role) that concretize a claim to liveness. The work of this group also suggests a straightforward reason why we might respond to such a demand: in order to engage in an activity we can interpret as a social interaction or performance, kinds of activity to which we attach great value.

Gadamer argues not only that the work of art makes a claim upon us but also that in order for a work to be meaningful, we must experience it as *contemporaneous*, a term borrowed from Kierkegaard that Gadamer construes as meaning "that this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be."[10] Contemporaneity in this sense is not a characteristic of the work itself; it is a description of how we choose to engage with it. The work of art must be "experienced and taken seriously as present (and not as something in a distant past)."[11] Gadamer is speaking here of "the temporality of the aesthetic," the way that works of art from historical contexts very distant from ours may still make claims upon us.[12] I appeal to Gadamer not to frame an argument about digital liveness in relation to historical time. Rather, I am focusing on the aspect of Gadamer's schema that has to do with bridging a gap between self and other by rendering the other familiar. A work of art from a past of which we have no direct experience becomes fully present to us when we grasp it as contemporaneous. I suggest that in order to experience interactive technologies as live, we similarly must be willing to experience and take seriously their claims to liveness and presence: an entity we know to be technological that makes a claim to being live becomes fully present to us when we grasp it as live. In both cases, we must respect the claim made by the object for the effect to take place.

The crucial point is that the effect of full presence that Gadamer describes does not simply happen and is not caused by the artwork or, in my analogy, the technology. "[C]ontemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it."[13] In other words, liveness does not inhere in a technological artifact or its operations—it results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves. We do not perceive interactive technologies as live *because* they respond to us in real time, as my earlier statement suggested. Rather, we perceive real-time response in some cases as a demand that concretizes a claim to liveness, a claim that we, the audience, must accept as binding upon us in order for it to be fulfilled. Just as artworks from the past do not simply disclose themselves to us as contemporaneous but become so only as a conscious achievement on our part, interactive technologies do not disclose themselves to us as live but become so only as a conscious achievement on our part. In Gadamer's terms, this achievement in the case of an artwork "consists in holding on to the thing in such a way that it becomes 'contemporaneous'. . . ."[14] The expression "holding on" is important here for the way it suggests both conscious activity and precariousness. It is through a willed and fragile act of consciousness that we construe works of art from the past as contemporaneous or interactive technologies as live, an act that must be actively sustained to maintain the engagement on those terms.

Gadamer's idea that our engagement with works of art takes the form of an achievement demanded of consciousness is consistent with his characterization of the audience's position as necessarily active rather than passive; to be part of an audience means to participate rather than simply be there.[15] His insistence that it is the audience's act of consciousness that allows it to experience the work of art as contemporane-

ous, which I have extended by analogy to the act of consciousness that allows the audience to experience the virtual as live, points the way beyond the technological determinism into which discussions of these matters, including my own, often fall.

Although I am in many ways sympathetic to the Computer as Social Actor Paradigm, for example, it does not avoid the pitfall of technological determinism. Nass and Moon suggest that "mindlessness" accounts for our tendency to interact with machines in the ways we interact with human beings despite our knowing that machines are not human. In their account, mindlessness is not exactly equivalent to stupidity. Instead, they define "mindlessness" as "conscious attention to a subset of contextual cues [in a situation]" that results in "responding mindlessly, prematurely commit[ting] to overly simplistic scripts drawn in the past."[16] Since they offer no account of *why* we act mindlessly, we are thrown back into a technological determinism in which the computer's use of words as output, for instance, causes us to act mindlessly toward it as if it were a human being.

Steve Dixon, in his discussion of liveness in the book *Digital Performance*, similarly does not steer clear of technological determinism in his suggestion that different modes of presentation (e.g., live or recorded, theatre or film) trigger different modes of attention from the audience. Although he makes a gesture toward the possibility that there is a social dimension to these differences, he concludes by favoring ontological distinctions among media as causing different responses.[17] It is fortuitous that both Nass and Moon's and Dixon's respective discussions center on the matter of audience attention, for Gadamer defines spectatorship in terms of "devoting one's full attention to the matter at hand," which he further describes as "the spectator's own positive accomplishment."[18] In his account, how we direct our attention is not cued or dictated by the characteristics of the object of our spectating. Rather, it is a response to a claim advanced by the object of our attention and an accomplishment on our part. It is our side of the interaction through which liveness or presence emerges when we are engaging with technologies.

To summarize my argument: some technological artifact—a computer, Website, network, or virtual entity—makes a claim on us, its audience, to be considered as live, a claim that is concretized as a demand in some aspect of the way it presents itself to us (by providing real-time response and interaction or an ongoing connection to others, for example). In order for liveness to occur, we, the audience, must accept the claim as binding upon us, take it seriously, and hold onto the object in our consciousness of it in such a way that it becomes live for us. In this analysis, liveness is neither a characteristic of the object nor an effect caused by some aspect of the object such as its medium, ability to respond in real time, or anthropomorphism. Rather, liveness is an interaction produced through our engagement with the object and our willingness to accept its claim.

In a footnote to the passage on spectatorship I cited, which also has to do with ecstatic experience and losing oneself by giving oneself over to such experience, Gadamer argues against distinctions between the "kind of rapture in which it is

in man's power to produce" and "the experience of a superior power which simply overwhelms us" on the grounds that "these distinctions of control over oneself and of being overwhelmed are themselves conceived in terms of power and therefore do not do justice to the interpenetration of being outside oneself and being involved with something. . . ."[19] Seen in this light, an account of digital liveness that rejects technological determinism in favor of a constructivist argument that technological entities are live only inasmuch as we see them that way would miss the mark because it would simply shift the balance of power from the technology to the spectator (from technological determinism to spectatorial determinism, so to speak). The benefit of a phenomenological perspective is that it enables us to understand that digital liveness is neither caused by intrinsic properties of virtual entities nor simply constructed by their audiences. Rather, digital liveness emerges as a specific *relation* between self and other, a particular way of "being involved with something." The experience of liveness results from our conscious act of grasping virtual entities as live in response to the claims they make on us.

## NOTES

1. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

2. Brian Winston, *Media Technology and Society* (London: New York, Routledge, 1998).

3. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 90–6.

4. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 24.

5. On September 21, 1939, radio station WJSV in Washington, D.C. recorded its entire day of broadcasting. These materials are currently available from several Internet sources, including the Internet Archive (http://archive.org).

6. Nick Couldry, "Liveness, 'Reality' and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 356–7.

7. Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 15.

8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuuum, 2004), 123.

9. Clifford I. Nass and Youngme Moon, "Machines and Mindlessness," *Journal of Social Issues* 56, no. 1 (2000): 84.

10. Gadamer, 123.

11. Gadamer, 124.

12. Gadamer, 119.

13. Gadamer, 123–4.

14. Gadamer, 124.

15. Gadamer, 121–2.

16. Nass and Moon, 83.

17. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 129–30.

18. Gadamer, 122.

19. Gadamer, 167.

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