

Disruptive Presence: Twenty-First-Century Shifts in Spectatorship and Audience Research

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Our call for this special issue on twenty-first-century shifts in spectatorship considered how viewing, listening, and receiving are uniquely experienced in modern-day performance, writ large. With the rapid emergence and persistence of new media and technologies, how do we conceive of and learn about spectatorship? Although many modes of performance have a long history of cultivating spectator participation, we are interested in how the context of *being* a spectator has changed in the twenty-first century.

In response to our call, we received a wide array of pieces, concerning both digital and embodied audiences, from traditional theatre performances to applied drama, participatory theatre, dance, guided tours, and social media groups. Despite the diversity of responses, however, persistent themes pervade and connect the pieces found in this special issue.

Perhaps most prominently, considerations of ethics and ethical spectatorship weave their way through several contributions. What might an ethics of spectatorship in the twenty-first century look like, amidst increasing awareness of and fights for gender equity, disability rights, anti-racism, and so on? Further, given that our current media climate allows for an almost omnipresent spectating of ourselves and others with twenty-four-hour news cycles and social networks like Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube offering never-ending entertainment, the ways in which we “the people” source, share, understand, and indeed *spectate* the world around us complicate ethical spectatorship (Shirky 2011; Smelik 2010; McGregor and Mourão 2016). How might the persistently understudied area of spectator research (Reinelt 2014; Freshwater 2009; Park-Fuller 2003) help us grapple with the pragmatics and ethics of watching?

Relevant to this question of ethics are notions of participation. Caroline Heim contends that the ubiquity of interconnected media technologies is producing audiences who are “more demonstrative” (2016, 172), while in this techno-human age of what Jack Bratich calls “audience power” (2005), world leaders respond to tweets, a charitable donation is only a text message away, and readers hungry for quality journalism can crowdfund the creation of a new publication. What constitutes participation? How do we conceive of and value audience labour? Or, does the category of “prosumer” supersede any clear delineation between spectator and creator? Following Maaïke Bleeker and Isis Germano, we ask whether the theatrical event might offer a model for understanding the roles and responsibilities of spectators in a broader, always performing, staged world.

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Finally, many contributions touch on live/mediatized divides, responding to the proliferation of live broadcasts, digital theatre, and social media sites. What, we might ask, is the relationship between the professionally produced live broadcasts of the National Theatre and a fan curated YouTube video of Rufus Wainwright? How does a digital audience differently engage with live performance? How is space or site of performance conceived of for a live broadcast (or re-broadcast) for both in-person and digitally absented audiences?

What is notable in looking at these three emergent themes is that these topics are well-tread territory in theatre and performance studies; ethics, participation, and liveness have all been thoroughly treated in scholarship and performance. What is distinct here is the deliberate and distinct addition of the spectatorial perspective. Adding audiences to these familiar debates *is*, perhaps, the twenty-first-century turn. To consider the spectator's role amidst the proliferation of new media complicates, extends, and productively revisits these arguably fundamental questions of performance. As we move forward with notions of multiplicity, perspective, and inclusion—all central to audience studies—"old" debates may be reinvigorated with new understandings and new methods. We might, for instance, in relation to the themes of this issue, ask: Whose ethics? Whose participation? Whose liveness?

Opening this special issue is Heidi Liedke's thoughtful piece "Emancipating the Spectator? Livecasting, Liveness, and the Feeling I" in which she maps several elements that conjure sensations of liveness. In doing this, she notes a spectatorial turn away from the protected anonymity within communal spaces toward self-identifying individuals valuing singular emotional experiences. Weaving together Read's "immunisatory paradigm" and Lavender's emphasis on audiences' agency within *not* participating, Liedke welcomes the manifestation and verbalization of each spectator's "Feeling I." Continuing this confluence of liveness and online spaces, Stephanie Salerno's in-depth analysis "Saw You in the Dark?: Exploring Rufus Wainwright's Emotional Vulnerability in Fan-Captured Live Performance Videos," demonstrates how layers of simultaneous mediation, or "convergence culture," can sever temporality from liveness. In bringing her readers into the online archive of Wainwright's song cycle *Lulu*, we are invited to consider how digital spaces generate the necessary time to empathize and interpret after a live event. Finally, Susanne Shawyer proposes "Emancipated Spect-actors: Boal, Rancière, and the Twenty-First-Century Spectator." By placing Rancière's radically democratic "emancipated spectator" into Boal's "rehearsal for the revolution," Shawyer presents a neoliberal subject able to offer alternatives to violent individualism, inviting communal, public acts of resistance. Shawyer constructs this emancipated spect-actor through an analysis of Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)*. Taken together, we begin to see the twenty-first-century spectator as a political agent, actively carving out temporal spaces for resisting, re-memorizing, and questioning given narratives.

Melanie Wilmink takes us into the Materials section vis-à-vis Rimini Protokoll's *Situation Rooms* to posit the de-structuring of time as a central condition of twenty-first-century spectating, a notion that extends into the other four pieces found in this section. Each example centres on the possibilities of disruption, erosion, collision, and transformation at the site of spectatorship, all within the material experience of public witnessing. The eroding borders between artist, spectator, participant, and dancer are brought together in Lucinda Coleman's reflection on *Meeting Places*, a contemporary dance project between Australia's Remnant Dance and young people from Myanmar. Ethical spectatorship and precarious borders between social roles find useful ground in Angela Sweigart-Gallagher and Melissa C. Thompson's "All Night Check: Beautiful Young Ladies to Perform for You." These themes are taken up and transformed in Cynthia Ing's reflective essay

“Rules of Engagement: Navigating the Realm of Online Mommy Groups” in which Ing challenges her readers to consider parenthood as an intense, exhausting, and emotional public performance in online spaces. Finally, Christine Gwillim, Samantha Provenzano, and Lauren Smith invite us on a rainy walk through the University of Texas, during a site-specific museum theatre piece, *Bored with Strangers*. This final material account, designed to enliven ignored and overlooked spaces, hopes to inspire a kind of spect-actorship in its readers, such as that Shawyer might call for, through material, aesthetic interventions within a mediatized, destabilized world.

Our aim with this special issue has not only been to begin the work of chronicling the convergence of traditional critical-theoretical analysis and practice with twenty-first-century modes of spectatorship, but also to invite a vision of what reception research might be if we were indeed to make a turn toward those individuals and collectives we call audiences. To ignite this conversation, in our final Forum section we invited five experienced, multi-generational researchers—including long-time torchbearer Willmar Sauter—to offer their sense of the most pressing needs in the field of audience research.

First, as nearly all our contributors contend, there must be a deeper investment in the kind of empirical work that addresses the significant epistemological imbalance between our theoretical and direct knowledge of audiences. Critical analysis, as you will find throughout this issue, has an important role in framing the conversations we have about audience reception, but they are not a substitute for direct accounts of spectators making sense of the live and virtual performances they attend. Observation and—even better—direct and indirect conversations with spectators illuminate previously opaque forms of sense-making, generate appreciable communication between more of theatre’s stakeholders (academics, artists, educators, patrons, and audiences), and disrupt the truisms and exclusions that continue to persist in critical and folk theories. Even if the epistemological possibilities do not inspire us, the present-day ethical ramifications should arrest us. By way of example, both Dani Snyder-Young and Matt Omasta illustrate how the problematic erasure of marginalized voices can take place when the ethically dubious practice of substituting a single, expert voice for a collection of audience experiences is allowed to stand unchallenged.

At the heart of our empirical challenge to researchers is a call to the better listening highlighted by Kirsty Sedgman. Important channels might include, as she suggests, more research that emphasizes longitudinal work, or *long-listening*. Applications of this approach might consider spectators’ evolving relationships with performances and performers (for example, fan sites/boards), the ongoing reconfiguration of performance memories (Reinelt et al. 2014), or the adjustments made by artists in response to audience feedback (as noted by Snyder-Young). Sauter challenges us to engage in research that depends on *community-centric listening*, which considers how spectators attempt to create sense in coordination with their fellow audience members. Jenn Stephenson offers a deliberately designed, openly democratic model, and future researchers might also track the semiconscious gathering of verbal and body responses between seatmates. Finally, Sedgman and Omasta argue for serious *relistening* of long-standing theatre conversations. Seemingly settled matters, such as the impact of the *gerfrumseffekt*, can only become more expansive or even reconfigured with the addition of the voices of real, heterogeneous spectators. The more archivally minded might utilize diary accounts of historical theatre-goers, while the more experimental might consider the audience response to restagings of Brechtian and Boalian techniques monitored through more empirical practices.

We wish to close with a piece of advocacy, offering a “re-tweet” of Sauter’s appreciation that the kind of work we are calling for will require meaningful collaboration: “The surveying of the many requires many hands and heads. . . . Nobody can do this on their own.” This may be a barrier for some. Collaboration with spectators, artists, patrons, and researchers from other fields certainly requires more work: more investment in listening, more tolerance for dissensus (as explored by Stephenson), and more willingness to engage new languages and techniques. There is, however, an upside. Tools already exist that are just waiting for rediscovery, and others are in the process of being built (for example, consider reading through the articles in *New Directions in Audience Research*). There are individuals and networks now in place, like our own Centre for Spectatorship and Audience Research, and the UK’s international Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts that are looking for partners. There are emerging mentors who are making plans to better equip incoming and future audience researchers. If indeed we are in the process of seeing a turn toward spectatorial perspectives, perhaps it is also a harbinger of new, more relational modes of research: not just the addition of performance questions that require greater collaboration, but a greater collaboration in the ways we ask our questions. As you will read, Snyder-Young’s discovery that her body could not be everywhere was an opening for a more expansive way of seeing and being. Wilmink’s incomplete memory and the inconsistencies with her fellow audience member prompted a deeper reflection of her spectatorial models. We hope that, in addition to being inspired, you are slightly undone by the realization that you too are finite and cannot do this work well on your own. We also hope that you will find joy in the discovery that you would never want to return to the impoverishment of isolation, even if you could.

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