

## Afterword

### So Close and Yet So Far Away

#### The Proxemics of Liveness

*Philip Auslander*

In the 1920s and 1930s, the federal government of the United States included in its body of regulations concerning radio broadcasting an order that limited the amount of mechanically reproduced material that could be sent out over the airwaves. The Federal Radio Commission's *Annual Report* for 1928 states,

By its General Order No. 16, issued on August 9, 1927, the commission, while not condemning the use of mechanical reproductions such as phonograph records or perforated rolls, required that all broadcasting of this nature be clearly described in the announcement of each number. The commission has felt, and still feels, that to permit such broadcasting without appropriate announcement is, in effect, a fraud upon the public. . . . The commission is inclined to believe that the use of ordinary commercial records . . . is an unnecessary duplication of service otherwise available to the public. . . .

(19)

Between 1927 and 1929 the commission would reiterate the demand that recorded materials be identified verbally as such over the air in four distinct General Orders.

The Radio Commission's policy is interesting for any number of reasons, beginning with the way it defines the cultural function of broadcasting in terms of its potential for liveness, since playing records is dismissed as 'an unnecessary duplication of service.' It also protected the interests of members of the American Federation of Musicians, who considered the use of recorded music on the radio to be a labour issue (Butsch 2000, 222), and the announcement requirement forced announcers for those stations that did use recorded music to morph into disc jockeys, thus paving the way for the emergence of that remarkable kind of performer. But my interest in this bit of broadcasting history here derives from the light it sheds on the concept of liveness. For one thing, even though a classical definition of live performance might propose that it is an event in which two sets of people (performers and spectators) are co-present in the same place at the same time, the Federal Radio Commission's ruling suggests that as long as we can believe that the music we are listening to

is being performed somewhere at the time we are hearing it, we will accept the performance as live. We do not actually have to be there.

I have argued frequently that liveness is not a stable ontological condition but a historically contingent concept, a moving target that is continuously redefined in relation to the possibilities offered by emergent technologies of reproduction. Broadcasting clearly effected a significant shift in our understanding of liveness and the experiences we are willing to count as live by suggesting that temporal co-presence, which it could produce, is essential to the experience of liveness, whereas spatial co-presence, which it could not produce, is non-essential. A further implication of the FRC's ruling is that liveness is something that exists primarily in the mind of the audience. The FRC's premise is that since I cannot tell just by listening to music on the radio whether or not it is being performed live I need to be told and the announcement is enough for me to understand what follows as live. Presumably, I listen to and value performance I believe to be live differently from performance I believe to be recorded. Our sense that something is occurring live is therefore a premise, not a conclusion, something we believe to be true of a performance rather than a characteristic revealed through the experience of the performance. In this sense, liveness is first and foremost a frame in Erving Goffman's (1974) sense of the term, an understanding of what is going on that allows me to define my relationship to it and to participate appropriately with it.

The idea that we can appreciate a performance as live without being in the place where it is occurring is fundamental, for I believe that the power of liveness is in fact a function not of proximity but of distance, or more precisely, the power of the live resides in the tension between having the sense of being connected experientially to something while it is happening while also remaining at a distance from it. The nature and degree of distance varies, but this tension is what all the experiences we call live have in common, whether live broadcasts or the experiences Nick Couldry (2004) describes as 'two new forms of liveness,' '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.

(356–7)

Whether we're watching a match on television or texting a friend from a mobile phone, it is our sense of the live connection that matters because it holds out the promise of compensating for our not being in the physical presence of the people to whom we feel connected, of bridging the gap. We would cry fraud, to use the FRC's language, if we were to discover that the thing with which we feel that connection was not live after all, if, for example,

we found out that that the supposed live Internet feed of Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was actually a streamed video. We do not need to be there to experience it as live, but we do need to be able to believe that it is occurring at the same time we experience it.

It might seem that the sorts of theater and performance art events we habitually think of when we consider live performance are different from broadcasting or live feeds because the performers and audience typically are physically present to one another. This is true, but physical co-presence does not obviate distance, and even when we are physically there the potential for fraud does not disappear. We might discover, for instance, that Milli Vanilli are not really singing even though they're right there, before us, or that the people we think are the flesh-and-blood Black Eyed Peas are in fact holographic projections, or that Vito Acconci was not actually under the ramp voicing his sexual fantasies during his performance of *Seedbed* (1972) but had placed a tape recorder there that played back his voice. Two of these examples are real; the third presumably is not, though how could we know for sure? I return to this question of fraud not so much to make an ethical argument as to suggest that the liveness even of events in which performers and spectators are physically present to one another is to some extent an article of faith, just as it is in broadcasting.

As the late Herbert Blau put it, 'Theater . . . posits itself in distance. [P]eriodically in the theater to reduce this distance, if not abolish it, modulate it for intimacy. . . . But something inviolable is required, an empty space—stage edge, pit, the space of consciousness itself . . .' (1990, 86–7). As Blau suggested repeatedly in his voluminous writings, there can be no theater (and I would say, no performance) without distance, without at least the minimal mutual distancing of performers and spectators that distinguishes them and is the inviolable precondition for performance, whether this distancing is enacted physically in the arrangement of the performance space or only in 'the space of consciousness itself'. (I have been suggesting here that liveness is primarily a matter of consciousness, of the spectators' belief concerning what is going on rather than physical arrangements).

As Blau implies, those performances that seek to collapse this distance inevitably reinforce it, if only by treating it as the fundamental question to be addressed. Live performance always holds out the promise of bridging this necessary distance, whether through technological mediation (for example, the use of Jumbotron screens at concerts and sporting events) or by other means (such as placing performers and spectators in very close proximity to one another, as in environmental theater), but never succeeds in completely fulfilling the promise partly because it depends on distance for its very existence: 'Theater posits itself in distance'. Even in live performances, classically understood, where we are physically co-present with the performers, they remain at a distance simply by virtue of their being performers, our being spectators and the understanding of everyone involved concerning how these differential roles are to be performed. Our connection to the performers, our experience of their presence

and theirs of ours, is still a bridging over a distance that it never eliminates altogether.

This is what I mean when I say that the power of the live resides in the tension between our sense of being connected experientially to something while it is happening while also remaining at a distance from it. The distance can be physical, as in cases where musicians are performing at a radio station somewhere else, or a performance artist is sitting in a museum in a different city, or it can be a matter of consciousness, as in cases where my distance from the performers is a function of our relationship's having been framed as an interaction between two distinct groups—performers and spectators—with different roles to play. In all cases, liveness is the experience of having an active connection to an event taking place now, but somewhere else, whether that somewhere else is miles away or only inches away but distinguished from the space I'm in by virtue of its belonging to the realm of the performer rather than that of the spectator, the inviolable distinction on which all performance depends. In all cases, the live connection feels as if it could abolish distance but never actually does, and indeed cannot, since liveness, like theater, 'posits itself in distance'.

## References

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