

Introduction

Live Cinema is a contemporary performance practice built around audio-visual media. This essay questions the 'live' in Live Cinema, asking what Live Cinema events can tell us about liveness, and what liveness can tell us about the practice. Here's why:

I'm at a Live Cinema event, but I'm troubled. This is an important moment: my collective has been invited to The School of Cinematic Arts, University of South California; the event is explicitly labelled a Live Cinema one. To my mind, Hollywood might just as well have said 'hello Live Cinema!' Watching the opening performances, I see an audience rapt. Coming off stage after our performance, big cheers. But this audience... this audience appreciated the content, the staging, but what here was really live? The fact that I was behind a laptop screen pressing buttons? Moreover, I can't help but feel the audience would have got a better show if we'd played out a recording of our rehearsal, and checked our email instead. Something is wrong here, and having taken on this label of Live Cinema, we owe ourselves and our audience an investigation.

This personal account of the author highlights that Live Cinema is gaining acceptance, is appreciated, but answering what that appreciation is for may not be straightforward. One thing is for sure: as a performance form whose 'product' is media and whose 'draw' is liveness, it should be an instructive study given an opposition of these two terms has shaped much of the literature on liveness.

What is Live Cinema

To focus on the 'live' in Live Cinema, we first need to set out the practice we're investigating. In the emerging literature on Live Cinema¹²³, two broad approaches to defining the term can be traced. One starts with cinema itself, positing Live Cinema as a contemporary, experimental relation where improvisation and performance become inevitably intertwined. The other is less directed, using Live Cinema as a common denominator for a wide array of audio-visual experimentation rooted in the performative moment. Whether the term *cinema* is used as a cultural reference upon which the works in part rest, or a format sufficiently anachronistic to allow the precise contemporary mediums to coexist without conflict, there seems broad agreement that the desire for liveness grounds them all. In concrete terms, what seems common to the practice is a theatrical presentation of audio-visual material, a claim to authorship, and a claim to performance of this material.

To ground this essay, we shall now review some actual practice⁴.

Rafaël

In our view Rafael is one of the European stars of narrative performance, always witty, challenging, sensitive and engaging in a way unlike anyone else we've ever come across. What more can we say apart make sure you see this.

— Narrative Lab, Programme Notes, Late at Tate, April 2008

Rafaël exemplifies the view of Live Cinema as a contemporary, experimental relation of cinema where improvisation and performance become inevitably intertwined. He labels his works "dramas", malleable projects founded on some kind of photo or video shoot that have adaptations as short film / video art and live performance. The act of live performance seems central to both his identity and process as an artist: quoted as saying "i want to be free, like a musician, with the image", this contextualisation of a musician *playing* is best expressed in the tools of his realtime production / performance and environment where "depending on the space, my mood of course, and the people, I change: I change

my story, I change my things. I can do that because its all little pieces. Sometimes its more funny, sometimes its more sad, sometimes its violet, sometimes its very soft”⁵.

Video documentation can be found through the artist’s website at: <http://leafar.be>

Otolab

Last week was a good week for live cinema [...]. One very striking performance was "Op7", a three-screen piece by Italian audiovisual collective Otolab. A long sequence of forms and structures move slowly but inexorably towards the viewer, giving the sense of a forward motion into an abstract landscape. But if this is a landscape, it is barren and alien, devoid of color. If anything, Op7 is reminiscent of early computer graphics, but in a good way. Stripped of gimmicks, the spaces it presents are monumental, architectural in scope. The 3-screen setup reinforces this sensation, creating a sense of immersion and demanding the viewer’s attention. Op7 sounds as monumental as it looks, with rich bass textures and needling stabs of high frequency noise. The same restraint taken with the graphics is here applied to sound, with only a sparse selection of tones and waveforms that gradually shift back and forth across the spectrum. A steady rhythm is never established, but there is a strong sense of narrative within the soundscape that more than matches the visuals.

— Marius Watz, Review, Generator.X, 2007

Through the members and oeuvre of the Otolab ‘cultural association’, we can encapsulate much of the diversity and interest held in the view of Live Cinema as audio-visual experimentation rooted in the performative moment. They describe themselves as a multidisciplinary group engaging in ‘a common path of’ electronic music and audiovisual research. Their association is committed to ‘live media’ and installation, and live performance is one of their main means of developing their work, as well as an output⁶.

Video documentation can be found through the association’s website at: <http://www.otolab.net/>

Performance through audio-visual media?

Even with this minimum of representation of the practice, we can perhaps be a little more bold in our description, transforming ‘theatrical presentation of audio-visual material’ and ‘a claim to performance’ into ‘Live Cinema as a theatrical presentation of performance *through* rather than *with* audio-visual media’.

The liveness debate

Having repeatedly brought together the terms performance and media, we now need to review what is thought by these terms. Contrary to the impression given through the practitioner examples, their collision generates much controversy, with ‘liveness’ at the heart of it. To illustrate, we introduce the field with a definition of each.

Performance’s 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. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction, it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.

— Peggy Phelan, The ontology of performance: representation without reproduction⁷

In defining an ontology of performance, Peggy Phelan makes an essentialist declaration that privileges the live body and denies media any comparable performative quality. In taking this further by contrasting with the economy of reproduction,

she implicitly bestows a sense of authenticity and subversiveness on live performance. Contrast this with the equally essentialist views on documentary photography by Roland Barthes, who comes to a very different conclusion on the performative quality of media.

The Photograph is an extended, loaded evidence — as if it caricatured not the figure of what it represents (quite the converse) but its very existence... The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest shared hallucination (on the one hand 'it is not there', on the other 'but it has indeed been'): a mad image, chafed by reality.

— Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*⁸

These definitions are irreconcilable. The question is, what work can such views perform for Live Cinema? Indeed, Phelan seems to have closed down Live Cinema's potential as performance before we have even begun. Roland Barthes refuting a reductive depiction of media as reproduction or representation speaks to audio-visual experimentalism, and a further view of his that "photograph's immobility is somehow the result of perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live"⁹ could form a launching point to Live Cinema, if his treatise wasn't firmly rooted in fact of documentary photography where, at some point, there always was something "real" in front of the camera's lens. This excludes much wonder seen in the Live Cinema genre — Otolab obviously, but also Rafaël who incorporates many synthetic elements into his primarily lens-based sources. Taken as a whole our first learning is to find an approach to liveness that expounds the coexistence of performance and media. Phelan gives us the direction for this in her scrutiny of cultural economy, which we attend to now through the work of somebody who takes her position firmly to task.

Mediatisation

Addressing the status of live performance in a culture dominated by mass-media, 'Liveness: performance in a mediated culture' by Philip Auslander is such a defining work in the literature on Liveness that one has to be careful which edition is being referred to. Deploying wit, intelligence and a certain sense of cultural pessimism, the first edition's launch in 1999 reviewed the twentieth century forming both an account of the assimilation of performance by mass-market media and an exposition of its consequence back to 'live' performance. The 'live' here gains inverted-commas in a double-punch of account and consequence. The account evidences that the use of the term 'live' started as an early twentieth-century response to new kinds of media, a label of differentiation¹⁰, but the consequence from this point on was performance increasingly aping and incorporating media itself: becoming less live by those same terms¹¹.

We can criticise both Auslander and Phelan by interjecting that the ancient Greek theatre was 'live' in any practical sense we may care about, yet performance is clearly not the same now, whether that is directly consequence of technology or some cultural effect. Auslander manages to be perfectly correct and equally besides the point in denying that epoch liveness, while Phelan's ontology becomes hard to sustain existing both then and in a changed now. This flags two characteristics of the liveness debate: first, 'the live' — its qualities, phenomena or however you wish to approach it — proves remarkably resistant to any rational reconstruction; second, while all words are a product of the culture using them, 'live' is more volatile than most.

We will shortly turn our attention to this cultural aspect, but first have to conclude this discussion of the first edition by emphasising the work done by it in comprehensively challenging tradition notions of liveness that view the live event as 'real' and mediated events as 'secondary'. Its affect is clear to see in the literature since, challenging positions that present a binary opposition of the live and the mediated as reductive at best, simply wrong at worst. Regardless of

one's position, it would be hard to deny that a real shift in performance has happened, and that Live Cinema in its practice and audience appreciation presents an all-out manifestation of that.

The cultural aspect of the liveness debate has great relevance for Live Cinema. Auslander devotes much effort to expounding how in popular music live performance and studio production have become radically refigured in terms of the 'authentic' artist¹². Whereas once performance simply was accessing the act of musiking, now studio production has become the culturally dominant instrument of creating music, resulting in recordings disseminated as the artist's primary work and sound likely to be impossible to recreate by the act of that original view of (live) performance. For Auslander, the work done by the live aspect here is primarily a cultural act to confer authenticity on that artist's studio recording. If our present culture is indeed configured this way, then this argument would equally apply to our representatives of Live Cinema, Rafaël and Otolab, fulfilling the criteria of being heavily studio production based and having adaptations of their work that are linear films as well as live performance. With this argument, any production practicalities of Live Cinema are irrelevant, the role of the live in Live Cinema is one of presentation to authenticate the practitioners as artists.

However, there's more to this line of argument, so we'll go on. In a 2009 conversation with Jan Rohlf, Holly Willis draws the following quote¹³:

From a general perspective one might argue that with the digital revolution of the 1990s, questions concerning the function of our sensorial organs and the way our psychic apparatus processes and interprets the signals received by our senses gained a new urgency and relevance. This happened mainly because the new digital technologies provide radically enhanced possibilities to construct, manipulate and alter what we consider as our reality.

This might have once seemed somewhat extreme and bound to cybertheory, but the daily experience of most western commuters is plainly one of having 'constructed, manipulated and altered' their reality by attending to a world of networked media through their navigations of their smartphone more closely than the material reality around them. Willis goes on to suggest that this in turn 'invites us to seek some semblance of stability and groundedness, often in the body and in events that enact a kind of hybridity, being at once constructed and yet entirely "real" and unique', and that Live Cinema is an apt fit^{14,15}.

There is a further sense of liveness to consider here too: writing on the cultural effects of mediatisation and communication, Couldry expounds the social character of liveness by noting that the sense of immediacy and intimacy associated with co-present liveness is now increasingly felt by geographically dispersed groups such as friends or news-followers' through the embrace of the always-on connectivity of their mobile phones¹⁶. We will return to this later.

In short, we are dealing not just with a volatile term, but a sense of something that we as a culture are finding is doing new work in new situations. While Auslander stresses "that the idea of liveness is a moving target, a historically contingent concept whose meaning changes over time and is keyed to technological development"¹⁷, we reject any technological determinism and say instead that contemporary performance forms such as Live Cinema are ripe sites to explore what liveness is and can be.

Interaction and intersubjectivity

We have got beyond the irony of what became live through media is now barely live by the same terms, to see how Live Cinema is a legitimate performance form for our times, responding to and being part of our current cultural situation. This contextualisation is welcome, but there is more work theory should be able to do for us. Where are the game

instructions, the staging strategies to experiment with liveness: how can the theory guide the practice? To find out, we turn to a line of critique that does a different kind of work in its embrace of the audience, or rather, the act of *audiencing*.

In 'The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics', Erika Fischer-Lichte implicitly places liveness in the pragmatics of performer↔audience and audience↔audience interaction when discussing bodily co-presence and feedback loops where 'you cannot not react to each other.'¹⁸ In many ways this is Phelan's cause — rejecting mediatisation for a liveness that can only come from embodied, human presence — but manifest in a much more interesting and productive argument.

Fischer-Lichte introduces the concept of *autopoiesis* to characterise a condition of feedback she sees as essential to performance. Drawing from Biology, she is declaring processes, interactions and transformations exist within some form of bubble that is the event, that regenerate and further realise themselves. The crux of it is that something interactional happens when we are together as performer and audience — liveness — which facilitates successful performance to perform various operations in which 'the spectators do not merely witness these situations; as participants in the performance they are made to physically experience them'¹⁹.

Note we have finally touched upon the in-situ experience of the spectator. Consideration of the experiential impact of liveness on actual audiences is surprisingly absent in the literature of Liveness. The notable exception is Matthew Reason's empirical study in which he uses audiences' pleasure-talk as an opportunity to explore cultural perceptions and constructions of the live experience. His analysis of these post-event discussions suggests a framing of Liveness where the audience, interaction and intersubjectivity are central²⁰. While this in no way validates Fischer-Lichte's theoretical argument, it is nonetheless promising to see empirical work consistent with it. With this reinforcement of direction, we can conclude this review of the liveness debate by delivering on our motivations with two applications of such research to practice.

First, Fischer-Lichte, who we summarised as proposing that liveness facilitates successful performance to perform various operations, identifies three operations consistently deployed: first, the *role reversal* of actors and spectators; second, the *creation of a community* between them; and third, the creation of various modes of mutual, physical *contact* that help explore the interplay between proximity and distance, public and private, or visual and tactile contact²¹. We now take these not as details to be digested by this review, but as challenges that practitioners of Live Cinema need to take on and interpret as their own, however they can.

Second, in having actual transcripts to offer as evidence, we find a great deal more of interest in Reason's analysis. He highlights many ways in which the audience—audience interaction shaped each audience member's experience. Taken as a whole, it suggests that many of the qualities of liveness could be a consequence of the heterogeneous construction of audiences, with ever-shifting perceptions of sameness and difference accounting for the pleasures and intensity associated with live events²². This, again, is an opportunity for practitioners of Live Cinema: as provocation, note it is increasingly likely a networked screen is in each audience member's pocket, and as double provocation consider Couldry's sense of liveness being increasingly social and displaced.

Problems of Liveness raised by Live Cinema

What does it mean for a practitioner to think 'I can't help but feel the audience would have got a better show if we'd played out a recording of our rehearsal, and checked our email instead'? Can we relate this our exposition of the

liveness debate and its relation to Live Cinema so far, or does this pose questions afresh? To find out, we first need to unpack this statement.

The suggestion is that the audio-visual content is independent from the acceptance of its liveness, leading to a conclusion that the best 'show' would be the best possible audio-visual content — perhaps the recorded feed of a previous rehearsal, or indeed a studio production — authenticated by the presence of the artists — where performing any act of digital work would be a sufficiently performative act if the exact nature of it was sufficiently obscured.

We have further evidence of such a problem in Live Cinema. Elsewhere in the review of the performance used to introduce the practice of Otolab, Marius Watz writes —

Judging from the way it was performed, it seems likely that the visuals were in fact pre-rendered for the performance in Brussels. But with such a sumptuous presentation, it hardly seems appropriate to niggle about its non-realtime status. ²³

A member of the Otolab collective, Orgone, responded —

[The work's previous setup] was too much. Our goal for this performance was not liveness, but to obtain an immersive audiovisual-scape; we were mainly interested in picking up the audience and letting their brains explode. So we started to reduce the number of performer and to organise an easier set-up. ²⁴

For these practitioners, there is clearly a tension between preproduction and live-production of the audio-visual content, and a foregrounding of the audience's experience as arbiter of the work. Taken to the extreme, the entire audio-visual sequence 'played out' through the show's staging could indeed be just that — something pre-made, the show starts in the act of hitting the play button. At this point we have a film screening where the 'projectionist' and the medium's apparatus have been materialised. Yet even at this extreme, we can claim that the work is still rooted in some notion of a performative moment, whether that is displaced to a previous performance or adopted in innovative studio production techniques. These are still 'Live Cinema artists', then, following our setting-out of the practice. To this we can also make the claim that cinema, as in "the movies", has always been live: there is an audience gathered to watch a show. Matthew Reason's study of audience's construction of live experience backs this view, explicitly including cinema as a live form as he moves articulations of a sense of 'liveness' from the mediatisation analysis of performance to ones experienced in heightened social-spatial environments, the heightened awareness that comes from being amongst others mutually identifying as audience.

This leads to a view where it is perfectly legitimate to talk of a 'live' Live Cinema. This theoretical position does not pass the 'sniff test' however, in the experience of this author Live Cinema events are not just experimental films rooted in liveness but played at the movies, rather the staging of the event does a sufficient amount of work for the audience to experience the practitioner's content in a productively different way than the other means at their disposal, i.e. dvd, on-line video sharing, film screenings. This leads to the following summation, a satisfactory if pessimistic reading of the status-quo. The use of the qualifier 'live' in Live Cinema rests on qualities of liveness already present in cinema events and performs work as one part of a staging strategy used by these artists to cue attention and engender a certain kind of reception by the audience.

Settling on such a view would be to miss the productive richness of our consideration of audience and interaction, and so we build instead to a much more forward looking conclusion. For this, we develop the work of Fischer-Lichte. Concluding her liveness section, she writes:

*The audience was granted an epiphany and realised that no matter whether and how a performance told a story, it is the bodily presence of the actors that effects them and sets the autopoietic feedback loop in motion. Therein lies the constitutive moment of performance.*²⁵

Fischer-Lichte rejects any performativity of media as there can be no autopoietic feedback loop with it, hence her insistence on the bodily presence of the actors. But is this necessarily the case?

Taking a phenomenological point of view it cannot be the simple fact of bodily presence that 'effected them', rather it is each member of the audience's individual, subjective *perceptual* experience. How does this subjective, perceptual experience work itself out? We are not just there passively receiving, we are actively making sense of our world through all the modalities of interaction at our disposal. Fischer-Lichte's foregrounding of the 'feedback loop' says as much. Her 'constitutive moment of performance' rests on sufficient interaction between actor and audience, and modalities of interaction can be mediated — typically coarsely and often unsuccessfully, but this is a matter of practice not possibility. We propose that together the Live Cinema artist and their media output are analogous to the actor. Expressed coarsely an actor represents the work and the product in one unit, whereas in Live Cinema the act of work and its product are displaced, much akin to puppetry. Therefore, the 'constitutive moment of performance' is not unobtainable, it will just take a different topology of interaction, keyed to a much more nuanced understanding and ability in the artist and her tools in the live-production of media. We could say that the performers need to play their audience, not their computers.

Conclusion

*In [sporting events, Broadway shows, and rock concerts] live performance survives as television.*²⁶

Live Cinema has the opportunity to turn this statement around. Auslander is making point that the live productions are increasingly televisual in produced form, and are received by their audience in a manner increasingly undifferentiated from television. Live Cinema *does* take the material fact of the former, yet "blows people's minds" — ref. Otolab — with an art of staging media, an unconventional approach to content, and perhaps a nod to authenticity and a grounding of our digital media culture. Live Cinema *needs* to address the passivity of its reception, and this is where the 'live' in Live Cinema needs to play its part. Through Fischer-Lichte and Reason we see the direction for this. The staging strategies of the performance need to play with role reversals of artist and spectator, the creation of a community, and modes of contact that explore intersubjective encounter.

For these staging strategies to work, Live Cinema artists need to be able to produce their media performatively, which is to say not with a flourish as a knob is turned, but at a level of in-the-moment awareness, responsiveness and expression of, say, an oral storyteller or poet in recital. Only then can the audience be with them, and they with the audience. And with that, live.

¹ Holly Willis, "Real time live: cinema as performance", *Afterimage* July/Aug 2009, Vol 37, No 1, 11

² Mia Makela, "The Practice of Live Cinema", *Media Space Journal*, Issue 1, 2008
<http://media-space.org.au/journal/issue1.html>

³ Michael Lew, "Live Cinema: Designing and Instrument for Cinema Editing as a Live Performance," *Proceedings of the 2004 Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME04)*, Hamamatsu, Japan

⁴ This essay is written in part as companion to "Live Cinema Documentary", a short film produced by the author in 2010 that would serve well here as a review of the practice of Live Cinema.
<http://tobyz.net/projects/livecinemadoc>

⁵ Quotes taken from "Live Cinema" video produced by Festival Rec de Tarragona, 2010
<http://vimeo.com/10980480>

⁶ Quotes taken from the Otolab manifesto
<http://www.otolab.net/data/downloads/pdf/otolab.pdf>

⁷ Phelan, Peggy. Chapter title used. From "Unmarked: The Politics of Performance", 1993. London, New York: Routledge. 146

⁸ Barthes, Roland. "Camera Lucida", 2000 [1980]. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Vintage. 88

⁹ Ibid. 79

¹⁰ There is a historical comparison that could be made here. Note that this labelling was not a knee-jerk opposition to recording and playing back of performance, but was a device to clarify the nature of an obscured source. The qualification of Cinema with the term 'live' could well have started in a similar manner, as a device to clarify the nature of the source for twenty-first century audiences looking upon the act of media production and finding the process opaque.

¹¹ Auslander, Philip. "Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture", 1999. London: Routledge. Chapter 2

¹² Auslander, Philip. "Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture", Second Edition, 2008. London: Routledge. Chapter 3, 73-127.

¹³ Quote taken from Holly Willis, "Real time live: cinema as performance", as above.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ To decide for yourself, perhaps start here: <http://www.lightsurgeons.com/performance/live-project/>

¹⁶ Couldry, Nick. "Liveness, 'Reality' and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone". *The Communication Review*, 2004 vol. 7 (4) 353-361

¹⁷ Auslander, Philip. "Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture", Second Edition, 2008. London: Routledge. xii

¹⁸ Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics", 2008 [2004]. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. London, New York: Routledge. 40

¹⁹ Ibid. 39

²⁰ Reason, Matthew. "Theatre Audiences and Perceptions of 'Liveness' in Performance". *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 1(2), May 2004.

²¹ Fischer-Lichte, 2008. 39

²² Reason, 2004. 17-18

²³ <http://www.generatorx.no/20071202/video-otolab-at-cimatics-2007/>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Fischer-Lichte, 2008. 74

²⁶ Auslander, 1999. 32