

## Live to your living room

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## **Live to your living room: Streamed theatre, audience experience, and the Globe's *A Midsummer Night's Dream***

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### **Abstract:**

Over the past decade we have seen the rise of live-to-cinema performing arts broadcasts, as well as detailed research into the kinds of experiences they create for their audiences. Less well-studied, however, is the parallel but much quieter upsurge in online livestreaming of the performing arts, which audiences typically watch from their homes, very often alone. This article presents the findings of an audience survey conducted after the London Globe's livestream of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in September 2016, analysing that data alongside two other surveys of online and cinema broadcast audiences: the Arts Council's 2016 'From Live-to-Digital' report and Nesta's 2010 'Beyond Live' briefing. Focusing on questions concerning liveness, togetherness, attention, and aesthetic experience within the context of theatre streaming, the article concludes that (1) temporal liveness does continue to matter to online audiences, although there are other forms of 'aliveness', in particular social connectedness, that can supplement or even replace it; (2) online audiences tend to divide their attention between the performance and other tasks, which can both intensify feelings of community (for instance, through shared use of social media) and lessen feelings of absorption; and (3) online audiences recognise the difference that broadcasting as a medium makes, but their perception of the artistic quality of a transmission still correlates strongly with their appreciation of the stage production upon which it is based. Overall, the article argues that livestreams have the power to create their own sense of eventful connectedness among audience members, even when they are physically distant from one another.

**Keywords:** livestreaming; live broadcasts; liveness; togetherness; attention; aesthetic experience.

It is now more than a decade since the arrival of high-profile, live-to-cinema performing arts broadcasting and the subsequent rise of event cinema.<sup>1</sup> Developments in this field have been well-documented in both the popular press and academic scholarship, with journalists, arts practitioners, and researchers debating the significance of live broadcasting to the health of the cinema industry and the wider performing arts landscape (Bakhshi and Throsby 2014; Barker 2013; Billington 2014; Freestone 2014; Tuck and Abrahams 2015). While disagreements still persist about the cultural politics, aesthetics, and kinds of audience experiences generated by these broadcasts, it is undeniable that they have become an increasingly familiar and accepted part of the UK's arts culture, and to an extent the global one too. Indeed, several recent publications on the subject have focused less on theoretical questions about their legitimacy as an art form and more on the specifics of their production and reception: that is, they have treated them as instances of meaningful, individuated performance in their own right, rather than as a generalised category to be defended or dismissed (Aebischer, Greenhalgh, and Osborne 2018; Friedman 2016; Sullivan 2017).

What still remains relatively understudied, however, is the parallel – but rather quieter – rise of online streaming in the performing arts.<sup>2</sup> Instead of broadcasting to cinemas or other public spaces, these livestreams involve the relaying of performances to websites that viewers access from their laptops, tablets, phones, and smart televisions, typically from the comfort of their own homes. Online broadcasts of this kind offer an alternative route to live distribution at a fraction of the cost. Whereas the budget needed for high-end cinema relays can run anywhere from £150,000-£500,000, the cost of live streaming falls into the much more modest range of £15,000-£100,000 ('From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 40 n. 37). This lower economic barrier to entry applies to audiences, too: typically funded by third parties, most performing arts livestreams are free to the public at the point of reception. As a result, livestreams tend to reach more economically and socially diverse viewers than event cinema broadcasts, which typically attract older, more affluent audiences (ibid.: 30-2; Barker 2013: 28).

This article explores audiences' experiences of online streaming through a study of Shakespeare's Globe's live relay of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in September 2016. Part of the BBC and the British Council's year-long 'Shakespeare Lives' festival, which celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the playwright's death, this production was broadcast live from the Globe's stage in London to the festival's website. Directly after the broadcast, I invited online viewers to complete a short survey that included questions about the production itself and streaming as a medium. This article examines the 120 responses gathered and considers them alongside other data on streaming and event cinema audiences produced by two larger studies: the Arts Council England's 2016 'From Live-to-Digital' report and the innovation charity Nesta's 2010 'Beyond Live' briefing.

Through a comparative analysis of the data collected in all three studies, this article explores the meaning and value of liveness and togetherness in the context of

livestreaming, the forms of attention that audiences give (or don't give) to online broadcasts, and the criteria by which they judge the artistic quality of what they watch. Regarding questions of liveness and togetherness, the article argues that what matters most to streaming audiences is the feeling of being meaningfully connected to others, though who those others are, and the shape that connection takes, can vary. Perceptions of artistic quality, in contrast, remain somewhat less flexible: perhaps unsurprisingly, the extent to which online audiences feel engaged by streaming as a medium corresponds strongly with whether or not they like the production being broadcast.

While it appears that, in general, streaming audiences feel somewhat less engrossed by the broadcasts they watch than their event cinema counterparts, this article suggests that this is due more to the varied forms of reception and attention involved in online viewing and less to intrinsic differences in artistic quality. Findings from my survey suggest that streaming audiences do many other things while they watch, resulting in a mode of spectatorship that is more diffuse and distracted but potentially more inclusive. What is lost in terms of concentrated absorption – a quality long prized as the ideal and most enriching response to the performing arts – may in some ways be gained through the creation of a more accessible, flexible, and interrogative form of theatre-going.

## **I. The survey: rationale and methodology**

My survey was born out of a desire to learn more about audiences for online performing arts broadcasts and to understand how their experiences might compare with those of event cinema and in-person spectators. Given that my own research focuses primarily on the works of Shakespeare, and that the Globe was collaborating with the BBC to produce a livestream of the final performance of its sell-out *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this event was of clear interest to me. At the same time, it possessed several qualities that positioned it as high-impact within the wide and varied landscape of live broadcasting, at least in terms of the parameters established thus far by event cinema. It came from the UK, a 'global leader' in the field; it was theatrical in nature, 'the dominant genre in terms of revenue'; it focused on a play by Shakespeare, a quantifiably 'central figure in the rise of live broadcasting'; and it came from a major cultural institution and attraction, the reconstructed Globe in London (Tuck and Abrahams 2015: 1-2; Sullivan 2017: 629). My hope, then, was that the broadcast might attract a sizeable audience to survey, as well as generate insights applicable to performing arts streams more generally.

In developing the questions for my survey, I kept four objectives in mind: to focus specifically on audiences' experiences and enjoyment of online broadcasts, even if that meant finding out less about demographics or cultural economics; to produce information that could be directly compared to Nesta's 2010 findings on this topic (the Arts Council's report, which looked at both cinema broadcasts and online streams of theatre, had not yet been published); to invite audiences to respond to the performance without foregrounding the fact that my own research focused on broadcasting, so as not to lead their answers in a

particular direction; and to keep the survey brief enough that it could be completed within a few minutes, with the hope of increasing participation.

I therefore began the survey with a very swift and accessible question about the number of stars the respondent would give it, and then followed with two open-text questions about what s/he liked and disliked most about the performance (see the Appendix for the full survey and a summary of the quantitative data collected). After that I moved onto a question specifically modelled on Nesta's study, in which participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about their experience of the performance. From Nesta's fourteen statements, I chose six that related to either the value audiences place on liveness – arguably the most discussed issue in relation to performing arts broadcasting – or the broadcast's capacity to command its audiences' attention and engage them emotionally – something that particularly interested me, as a scholar of emotion and affect. As we will see later in this article, this not-uncommon focus on the emotional and interior dimensions of theatrical experience would prove somewhat limiting in terms of understanding the full potential of livestreams.

With the survey's fifth question I moved into an explicit discussion of streaming, asking participants how much of a difference they thought it made that they were watching the performance via a broadcast. I then asked if they did anything else while they watched, such as using social media or cooking, and invited them in an open-text field to reflect on whether they thought attending in person would have been better or worse. I concluded with a series of short, factual questions, including where in the world they were based, what sort of device they were watching on, and how old they were.

The survey was conducted entirely online and I advertised it through the social media platform Twitter. Having watched several theatre livestreams before the Globe's *Dream*, I knew that many audience members used social media, and in particular Twitter, to share links for upcoming broadcasts, troubleshoot technical problems, and discuss performances before, after, and sometimes while they occurred. Early in the Globe's stream it became clear that this would also be the case for this broadcast, and in fact that this *Dream* was generating a particularly large and visible social media presence. With this in mind, I posted a message to Twitter shortly after the performance finished, at about 9.30pm BST, inviting viewers to complete my questionnaire. In order to maximise the post's reach, I included two hashtags connected with the broadcast, #DreamLive and #MidsummerNightsDream. In the end I received 130 responses between then and 12noon the following day (when I closed the survey), with participants spending an average of 4 minutes and 36 seconds completing it. Ten of these responses were largely or entirely incomplete, leaving 120 available for analysis (though some participants skipped a few questions).

One of my main interests in conducting this survey was to explore the extent to which Nesta's 2010 findings concerning event cinema might remain true for other kinds of broadcasts, particularly as digital distribution has become an increasingly familiar feature of the performing arts. Nesta's headline-grabbing survey made some exciting claims, including

the suggestion that cinema audiences were even more emotionally absorbed by what they watched than theatre-goers, that the 'live and collective' elements of the experience remained 'essential' for their enjoyment, that event cinema reached new and more diverse audiences, and that these audiences were more likely to go to the theatre in person as a result of seeing a broadcast ('Beyond Live' 2010: 4-6). However, the fact that these findings were primarily based on the National Theatre (NT) Live's first ever transmission, a production of Racine's *Phèdre* starring Helen Mirren and directed by Nicholas Hytner, naturally raised questions about the role novelty might have played in shaping audiences' experiences and the answers they provided. One motivation for conducting my own survey six years on, then, was to see how the responses offered by online audiences in 2016 compared with those of event cinema spectators in 2010.

The discussion that follows looks in detail at how my survey's findings relate to both Nesta's and those of the Arts Council's 'From Live-to-Digital' report, which came out a month after the Globe stream. The Arts Council's investigation constituted a much broader study of the impact of digital technology on the production, distribution, and reception of theatre in England, particularly in terms of broadcasting. In addition to surveying audience members about a wide variety of theatre broadcasts, the authors of the report also worked with theatres, cinemas, and other industry partners to explore what they called the 'supply' side of this evolving form ('From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 23). This report was – and at present remains – the only major investigation of both event cinema and online streaming, with some of its key conclusions including the assertion that digital offerings do not significantly erode in-person attendance, that online audiences are genuinely more diverse than those for event cinema, and that the perceived value of temporal liveness among these audiences is waning (ibid.: 10-15). Unbeknownst to me as I was developing my own survey, the authors of the Arts Council report included some of Nesta's questions in their study of audiences' experiences, meaning that in two cases the same question can be considered across all three of our surveys. Before moving into this comparative analysis, however, I will offer a brief summary of my own findings.

On the whole, my participants were enthusiastic about the Globe's *Dream*, giving it both a mean and median rating of four stars out of five. In response to my early questions about what they liked and disliked most, few highlighted anything that specifically related to the broadcast, with the vast majority focusing on the stage production itself. This production proved more divisive than most stagings of Shakespeare: directed by Emma Rice, newly minted as the artistic director of the Globe in 2016, it included the liberal use of artificial lighting, vocal amplification, extra-textual ad-libbing, and pop music. While such features might not sound that radical at first, most directors at the Globe – a historically reconstructed space opened in 1997 – had previously tried to abide by the performance conditions of Shakespeare's time and create work that was largely analogue. The majority of my respondents praised Rice's production, but it was also clear that a few took strong exception to her directorial approach, an issue that surfaced most palpably in the open-text sections (Rice would in fact end her tenure prematurely the following year as a result of

disagreements among the Globe's board about the theatre's artistic mission [Cornford 2017]).

As with the Nesta survey, my respondents reported high levels of engagement, enthusiasm, and creative inspiration in connection with the broadcast, although as we will see the data I gathered differed in some important ways from that collected in 2010 and subsequently by the Arts Council in 2016. When it came to questions focusing explicitly on the stream, my respondents were very clear that the format did make a difference to them and that they would have preferred to attend in person, had that been possible. Open-text comments emphasised the festive atmosphere at the Globe, where up to 700 audience members stand in the theatre's open yard, as well as the value of live, in-person theatre in general. Perhaps unsurprisingly, while most of my respondents celebrated the experience of watching the performance online, they still longed to be at the theatre in person. Given that they were at home, however, the vast majority of these spectators reported that they carried out other activities while they watched. Close to half of them were based abroad, most watched on either a laptop or tablet, and their ages were fairly evenly spread out across the five decades between 18 and 65.

Considered on its own, the information collected in my survey begins to suggest some interesting things about how audiences respond to online broadcasts, whether in terms of emotional engagement, critical appraisal, or approaches to watching. But based as they are on just one transmission, and just 120 people's experiences of it, such findings are necessarily limited in their scope. What is perhaps most interesting, then, is to put them into conversation with data collected in the Nesta and Arts Council's surveys, and to consider what a comparative analysis of these three studies might indicate about audiences' experiences of broadcast theatre more widely. In the sections that follow, I offer a detailed discussion of four key issues that arise from a close reading of my survey results, both qualitative and quantitative, when examined alongside Nesta and the Arts Council's findings: the continued value of 'liveness', but also the increasing flexibility of what that term means; the forms of sociability and what we might call 'eventful connectedness' that can be created by online audiences, even at a distance; the fact that most at-home viewers watch in a more distributed and arguably distracted fashion, and what theatres might do about that; and the impact that all of these issues, as well as the broadcast medium itself, has on the artistic experience enjoyed (or suffered) by online viewers.

## **II. Liveness and aliveness**

Discussions of cinema broadcasts, both in popular journalism and academic scholarship, have often focused on the way they remap understandings of what constitutes live performance. Whereas attending a theatrical production may have previously implied sharing the same space as the actors, broadcasts to cinemas have made it possible to experience theatre, at the same time that it is performed, from a number of venues. To those who question whether such an experience can really be considered theatre, advocates of broadcasting have highlighted the ways in which it preserves both real-time

exchange and co-present togetherness, albeit across hundreds of cinemas rather than in a single theatre.

Such issues were highlighted in Nesta's report, which surveyed 1,316 cinema spectators at the *Phèdre* broadcast and concluded that 'The live and collective aspects of the theatrical experience remain essential for audiences' (2010: 2, 6). A few years later, John Wyver, producer of the Royal Shakespeare Company's broadcast programme, likewise indicated that 'both the live-ness of the broadcasts and the social context in which they are watched appear to be central to their success', while Martin Barker, in his study of event cinema's early years, suggested the importance of simultaneity in particular (Wyver 2015: 298; Barker 2013: 40). Drawing on audience feedback collected by the Picturehouse cinema chain in 2009, Barker reported that 'In every case, for every kind of presentation, levels of interest fell by almost 50 per cent for ... delayed transmissions' (ibid.). As the form has matured, however, he has posited a more flexible and multifaceted understanding of liveness – a matter to which we will return (Barker 2016).

Online streaming, however, has strained traditional understandings of theatrical performance even further, frequently disrupting spectators' experience of both temporal liveness and co-present togetherness. Although streams are typically 'born live' – hence the common term, 'livestreams' – they often extend far beyond the original moment of performance. The Globe's *Midsummer Night's Dream* provides a useful illustration: streamed live from 6.30pm BST on Sunday 11 September, the broadcast was then archived on the 'Shakespeare Lives' website for six months, where it was available to viewers around the world. Those in the UK could also access a slightly edited version on their televisions and other devices through the BBC's iPlayer (again for six months), and two years later this recording was made available for purchase as a DVD and through the Globe's on-demand viewing platform, Globe Player. Such a journey reflects Pascale Aebischer's argument that digital media allow productions to keep 'living' even if they are no longer 'live': 'remediated' theatre 'carr[ies] on performing in the present of the online environment', she writes, 'even as the live event to which it is related has receded into the past.' (2013: 146)

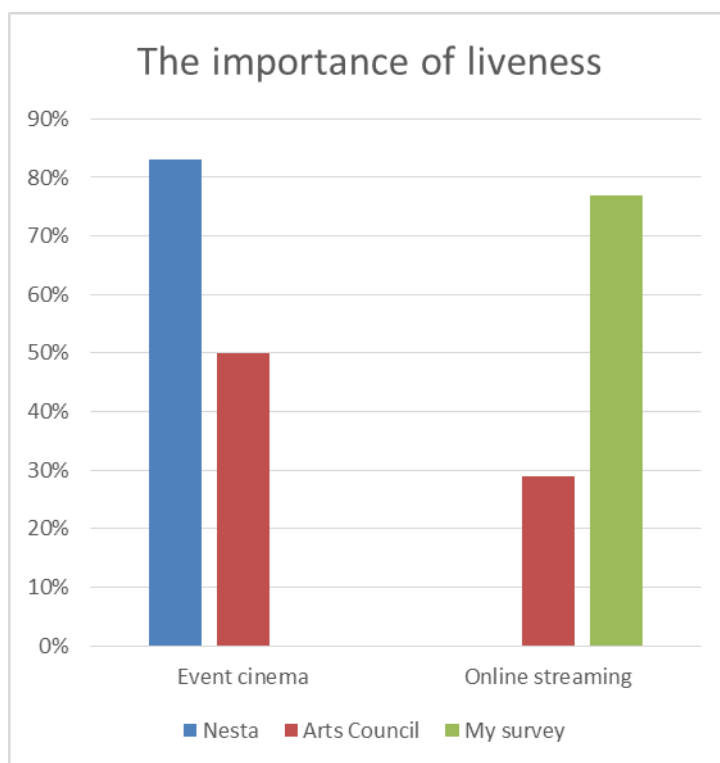
Perhaps this is why audiences of streamed theatre appear to be less concerned about temporal liveness than their counterparts at cinema broadcasts. According to the Arts Council's report, which surveyed 1,263 people about their experiences of screened theatre, only 29% of those who had watched an online stream indicated that it was important to them that the performance they were watching was happening in real-time, versus 50% of those who had attended a cinema broadcast (59). Such numbers suggest not only that viewers of streams care less about simultaneous experience, but also that audience investment in temporal liveness is decreasing all around: six years earlier, Nesta's study had found that a full 83.3% of the event cinema audience members surveyed 'felt real excitement because [they] knew that the performance was live' ('Beyond Live' 2010: 9).

Such a change in audience response would seem to indicate that as digital broadcasts have become more familiar, and as opportunities for seeing them have extended beyond the originating performance moment, the draw of temporal liveness has gradually



lessened. “[L]iveness” does not drive demand for Live-to-Digital, nor affect the quality of audience experience’, the authors of the Arts Council report concluded, noting later that this was ‘especially true for those who streamed’ (‘From Live-to-Digital’ 2016: 13, 59). More significant, they suggested, were matters of cost and convenience: if a non-live transmission proved more accessible to an individual, matters of practicality would typically win out over desires for simultaneity (ibid.: 13).

Given such findings, it perhaps comes as a surprise that respondents to my survey remained very enthusiastic about the ability to watch the Globe’s *Dream* in real-time. 77.1% agreed that they ‘felt real excitement’ about the fact that it was live, and in the free-text comments many further emphasised the pleasure they took in watching the show as it happened in London. ‘It gave me a thrill to know that the whole globe was watching the London Globe’, one person wrote, while another noted that the stream ‘was an “event” just like seeing it in person due to it being streamed at a specific time, not just simply made available through DVD’. A further respondent talked about how s/he longed to be ‘in the crowd, experiencing the atmosphere in the venue’, but also how livestreams were ‘still so much better than watching a DVD or on other media’. For these spectators, the opportunity to watch the performance in real-time appears to have instilled their experience with a sense of specialness and enhanced participation. They were not just viewing a recording that could be watched at any time; rather, they were taking part in a unique, communal, and time-limited event.

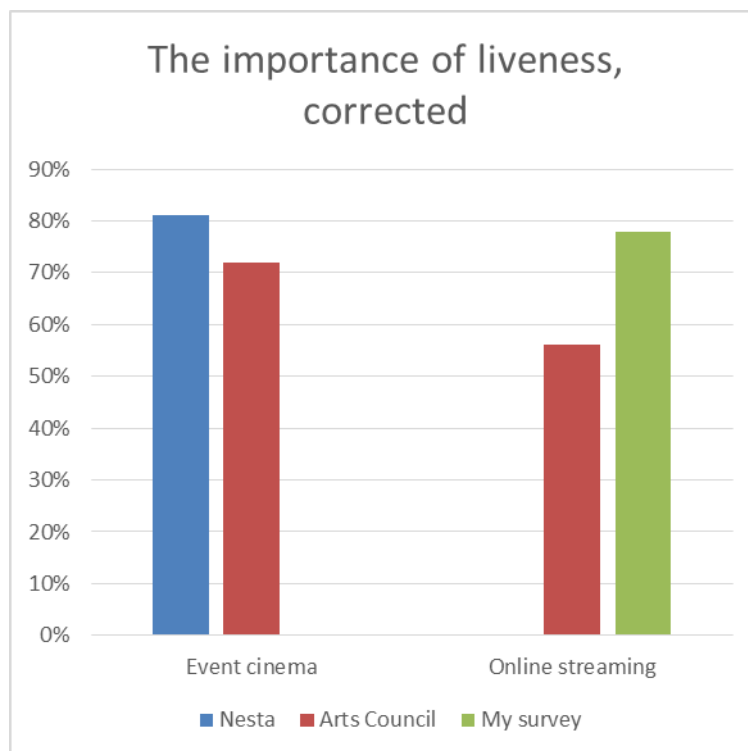


**Figure 1:** The importance of liveness

We might ask why my respondents' feedback was more in line with the findings of Nesta's 2010 study than the Arts Council's nearly contemporaneous one. One possibility is that the results of these studies are not as disparate as they initially seem. While my survey and Nesta's invited respondents to rate how strongly they agreed with a particular statement about liveness ('I felt real excitement...'), the Arts Council's study focused on the more evaluative question, 'How important is it to you that the event is live?' While we might reasonably expect responses to these prompts to correlate with one another, it's also worth noting how the prompts themselves differ. While mine and Nesta's asked audiences about their affective response to the idea of liveness, the Arts Council's focused on the significance of such feelings in the overall experience of broadcast theatre. It is possible that someone might strongly agree that s/he feels excited about watching broadcasts live, and yet still decide that this feeling is not the most influential factor when it comes to why s/he attends these transmissions. Accessibility in terms of time, place, and cost may very well surpass excitement about liveness in terms of significance.

Although the Arts Council report emphasised this question about the importance of liveness in its commentary, the survey it was based on did in fact also ask participants to respond to the statement, 'I felt real excitement because I knew that the performance was captured as a live event'. The authors' method of presenting the data collected in response to this prompt, however, makes it difficult to immediately compare this information with that of the other studies. Rather than indicating the different percentages of people who answered 'strongly agree', 'agree', and so on, the authors of the Arts Council report amalgamated the feedback into a single percentage that functioned as an overall score. In order to arrive at this number, the authors weighed all votes for 'strongly agree' at 100%, 'agree' at 75%, 'neither agree nor disagree' at 50%, 'disagree' at 25%, and strongly disagree at 0%, and then took an average of the results ('From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 58).

While it is not possible to work back from the final score to the proportion of people selecting each response, we can calculate in the other direction: that is, take the data from both my survey and Nesta's and convert it into the format used in the Arts Council report. After we do so, we can see that while findings across the three studies do vary, they are not entirely divergent. Whereas participants in Nesta's survey collectively rated the statement about liveness at 80.8% and those in mine at 78.0%, event cinema audiences in the Arts Council's survey arrived at a somewhat lower, but still solidly positive, 72%. The major difference, however, is in the Arts Council's data for streaming: here respondents valued the emotional pull of liveness much more ambivalently, at 56%. Though the report does not delve too deeply into why streaming audiences might feel less excitement about temporal liveness, an obvious answer is that they might be less likely to experience it. With online streams more regularly available than cinema broadcasts after the live moment has passed, viewers of these recordings are more likely to have not seen it live, and therefore to have not had the chance to feel 'real excitement' in response to such an opportunity.



**Table 2:** The importance of liveness corrected

Why, then, did my streamers respond so differently, reporting a level of enthusiasm that rivalled that of Nesta’s cinema broadcast audiences? The most likely explanation is the different ways in which my survey and the Arts Council’s were distributed and pitched. The majority of my participants submitted their responses within the first three hours of my survey being open, suggesting that they did in fact watch the stream live (or very nearly so, pausing only briefly at certain points). Had my survey (or Nesta’s) included more people who viewed the broadcast days, weeks, or even months later, it seems likely that it would have captured a more diverse range of views about the allure and impact of temporal liveness.

This was certainly the case with the Arts Council’s questionnaire, which not only went out to audiences after more time had passed following the live moment, but also asked them about their experiences of broadcast and streamed theatre in general, rather than about a particular production. This means that, in contrast to both my survey and Nesta’s, which invited participants to reflect on a specific broadcast that had only recently concluded, the Arts Council’s study focused on audiences’ generalised and retrospective thoughts on screened theatre as a whole. It is possible that by the time participants took that survey, memories of the emotional intensity produced by liveness had faded, or that the value of such simultaneity seemed less significant when considered across multiple, and no doubt various, digital transmissions. Researchers interested in conducting further investigations into liveness might bear such factors in mind: it seems that surveys tied to specific broadcasts, and in particular those conducted directly after the live transmission has

taken place, are much more likely to generate responses celebrating simultaneity than those asking about a series of events that occurred in the past.

Distribution methods played perhaps the biggest role in shaping the differing findings about liveness in my survey, the Arts Council's, and Nesta's, but they were not the only influential factors at work. In my study, as in Nesta's, it seems likely that the novelty of the broadcast examined had some impact on audience response. While the Globe's 2016 stream was by no means the first online theatre broadcast – several UK companies, including Forced Entertainment, Complicité, and Cheek by Jowl, had streamed work the preceding year – the format was still relatively new, particularly for Globe. In fact, this venture was the theatre's first high-profile experiment in live broadcasting of any kind since 2003/4, when it had collaborated with BBC4 to relay two of its productions to television (while the Globe does have its own cinema programme, it did not start broadcasting live until 2017). The fact that the specific production being streamed had also generated discussion about Rice's vision for the Globe very likely attracted additional attention from people interested in participating in this debate as it developed, as opposed to looking back at it after the fact.

Another factor that may have contributed to the difference between my findings and those of the Arts Council's report is the fact my survey was completed internationally, while the Arts Council's focused exclusively on UK audiences (as did Nesta's). Of the 116 people who answered my question about where they were based, 51 reported that they were outside of the UK (44%). Most of these overseas participants were located in the United States (26), followed by EU/EEA countries, including Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Spain (13 in total); the rest watched from Canada (4), Russia (4), Brazil (2), South Africa (1), and the Ukraine (1). For many of these international audience members (and particularly those outside of Europe), streamed theatre is the only way to see UK performances in real-time. Although cinema broadcasts are transmitted globally, they are typically shown at a delay due to differences in time zone (these screenings are sometimes called 'as live').

This means that simultaneity is an even rarer quality for these viewers than for those in the UK, potentially resulting in a greater valuation of it when it does occur. One of my US-based respondents, writing from Memphis, Tennessee, noted how 'grateful' s/he was 'for this chance to see a live performance', while another, based on the other side of the country in Washington state, commented on how 'incredible' it was to watch the performance 'over live stream'. 'I cried at the start as I realized I was watching a Globe Theater production!', s/he added, illustrating just how intense the feelings of belonging and presence created by online broadcasts can be.

Indeed, it seems that ultimately the value of liveness may be more about such forms of emotionality – and the kinds of connection that emerge from them – than about specific conditions of time and place. Reflecting on the impact of digital technology on the experience of liveness in the twenty-first century, Philip Auslander has suggested that the 'emerging definition' of this concept is 'built primarily around the audience's affective

experience’ – and many of those involved in the surveys discussed appear to agree (2008: 60). ‘It always *feels* live whether it is or not’, one respondent in the Arts Council report commented, highlighting in more personal terms the role emotion plays in animating artistic experiences and giving them meaning (‘From Live-to-Digital’ 2016: 62, my emphasis).

With such dynamics in mind, Martin Barker has called for more scholarship on ‘the topic of what is going on when culture most matters to people – when it *comes alive* for them’ (2016: 22), and I have in turn suggested that we pay more attention to liveness as a ‘kind of phenomenological experience’ that is not defined solely by ‘technical requirements about time and place’ (Sullivan 2018: 61). In both cases we have arrived at the idea of ‘aliveness’ as something related to but ultimately distinct from ‘liveness’, dependent less on temporal and geographical positioning and more on affectivity and immersion. For while it is clear that simultaneous experience frequently contributes to a sense of enthusiastic aliveness during an event, it does not seem that it is an absolute prerequisite for such feeling. As broadcast formats diversify, the nature of (a)liveness does too, stretching our sense of what it means to be united through co-presence both in theory and in practice.

## **II. Together, alone (but distracted)**

Given this emphasis on emotional experience, we might wonder about the impact and significance of physical togetherness – ‘the social context’, as Wyver put it – which so many people have celebrated in terms of live, in-person theatre experience as well as cinema broadcasts. While audiences at the cinema are geographically cut off from the performers, they are still physically proximate to one another, an arrangement that can produce its own feeling of togetherness. As one interviewee in the Arts Council report commented, ‘Cinemas see as their USP the communal experience, the social experience’, and the producers of NT Live have long pointed to this a reason for not producing DVD versions of their broadcasts (though contractual issues concerning performers’ rights and royalties no doubt play a further role) (‘From Live-to-Digital’ 2016: 84). ‘We are passionate about preserving the live, communal experience and the sense of event’, they note on their website, emphasising the social dimension that persists even if other forms of co-presence are disrupted (‘FAQs’ 2019).

Streamed theatre largely removes audiences’ experience of physical togetherness, at least in public spaces. While in some cases viewers might gather at one another’s homes to watch a stream together, or even meet at a school or community centre to view it as a larger group, there is no question that the method of distribution makes watching at home, physically alone, much more likely. The Arts Council’s survey found that ‘only 15% of live theatre goers attend solo, compared with 20% of Event Cinema attendees.’ Streaming, in contrast, is much ‘more often a solitary act’, with 65% of the survey’s participants reporting that they had watched online productions alone (‘From Live-to-Digital’ 2016: 62). Although I did not ask my respondents whether they watched the Globe’s *Dream* by themselves or with others – a missed opportunity – it is likely that many of them were spectating on their own. In response to a question about what kind of device they used to watch the

performance, 26.7% indicated that they did so on either a phone or a tablet, the size of which suggests (but does not necessarily mandate) a more individual viewing experience.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this, very few mentioned the physical presence of others in their narrative comments, whereas several explicitly noted that they were watching alone.

This more isolated form of viewing is a major reason why some theatre enthusiasts see streaming as a second or even third-rate option: as one participant in the Arts Council survey commented, 'I feel that it's a very compromised way of watching it. Part of going is the social side' (ibid.: 55). But it's worth noting that even if streamers are far more likely to watch a performance physically alone, not all of them view such an experience as a solitary one. According to another respondent quoted in the Arts Council report, online broadcasts allow viewers to 'watch ... with other people in other cities and other countries. I've sent a link to family to watch together. It's important. It becomes an event.' (ibid.) Shared experience creates a sense of shared presence, especially when it happens in shared time (which may or may not be simultaneous with the in-person performance). As Nick Couldry has suggested, co-presence in a digital age is not limited to being physically in the same place as others: what he calls 'online liveness' and 'group liveness' allow people to be in a state of 'continuous connectedness' even when they are geographically dispersed (2004: 356-7).

The socially 'live' – or, indeed, 'alive' – dimension of online streaming was emphasised by many of my survey's respondents, with one going so far as to say that s/he 'felt bad for the people actually in attendance at the Globe because of the fact that it was streaming that felt like the "event."' With so many people gathering around the world on the virtual stage of the internet, there was a sense, at least for some, that the online side was where the greatest communal experience was taking place. For those who used social media to interact with other streamers, the feeling was even stronger: 'Being able to tweet and interact with other "audience" members was extremely enriching', one person wrote; 'It helped me watch the production with a critical eye.' Another celebrated the fact that s/he 'was able to live tweet and discuss the performance with friends as it was happening', while a third, who longed to be part of the audience at the Globe, noted that 'it was fun in a different way to be tuned into the social media audience.' For these participants, social media offered a place to gather and become a collective audience, rather than a dispersed and disconnected group of solitary viewers.

Altogether, 40.5% of my respondents reported using social media while they watched the performance, and not just before or after it.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the fact that I advertised my survey through Twitter very likely means that I ended up with an overrepresentation of social media users, since it would have been difficult to find my invitation otherwise (though you do not have to have a Twitter account in order to read posts there). Still, it was clear from monitoring activity online that these social media-using respondents were not alone: nearly 2,000 tweets about the stream were posted to Twitter during the performance (and many more before and after), producing a lively, wide-ranging conversation that ran in parallel with the show (Sullivan 2018: 68-73).

Such activity – be it live-tweeting or something similar on a different platform – marks a major shift in the way audiences might engage with theatre. For Rachael Nicholas, this ‘two-way interaction between the production and its audiences’ has the potential to reshape the critical discussion, facilitating ‘detailed moments of analysis’ and creating ‘a sense of community’ that can cross traditional divides between theatre-making and theatre-going (2018: 86). This is especially true, she suggests, when directors and other theatre professionals get involved in the conversation, as in her example of Forced Entertainment’s 2015 livestream of *The Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare*. Lucy Bennett, in turn, has shown how such dynamics are also at work in the realm of popular music concerts, where the digitally connected, ‘non-present audience ... becomes part of the ambiance and energy of the event.’ (2016: 54) In such cases, online platforms like Twitter help facilitate lively exchange among digital audience members, producing a sense of shared presence and eventful connectedness despite considerable geographical divides.

Engaging with social media wasn’t the only activity, however, that occupied my respondents’ attention during the broadcast: 15.5% indicated that they chatted with friends while they watched, whether they were present in the same room or connected by telephone or text. In addition to these social interactions, many viewers also reported that they carried out practical activities while they watched. Given that the stream took place over dinner hours in the UK and Europe (and lunch hours in much of the US), it is perhaps unsurprising that 31.9% of people spent time cooking, eating, or both during the performance. A further 10.3% conducted some professional work, such as emailing, reading, and lesson planning, while 3.4% took care of domestic tasks, including ironing and putting children to bed. A final 2.6% engaged in other hobbies alongside the stream, including embroidering and playing video games. Overall, 81.0% of respondents reported participating in at least one other activity while they watched, if not two, three, or more: multi-tasking was not only present among these viewers, it was by far the norm.

Not everyone would say that this more distributed – and arguably more distracted – approach to watching theatre is a good thing. Focused, undivided attention from audiences has long been the default ideal when it comes to meaningful theatrical experience, so it is not surprising that some people have objected to the idea of streamed theatre on the grounds that it is easier to get side-tracked while watching it. In the words of one interviewee quoted in the Arts Council report, ‘I’m not interested. I don’t like the idea. Event Cinema is uninterrupted. Streaming you can get interrupted.’ (‘From Live-to-Digital’ 2016: 55) The non-multi-taskers in my survey were somewhat less brusque in their responses, but they nevertheless reflected similar views concerning the value of concentrated, unbroken attention. ‘Only used Twitter during the interval. The performance had my full attention’, one wrote, while another commented that s/he ‘was totally engaged in the performance’, and so did not have any desire or capacity to do anything else. Others noted that they ‘tried to do other work’ or ‘monitor social media coverage’, but ultimately they ‘got too caught up in the production’ to engage in other activities.

What might such findings mean for theatres thinking about experimenting with online streaming? For some, the reality of a largely multi-tasking, attention-splitting audience might come as a disappointment and a disincentive. But if eliciting concentrated, unbroken focus from viewers remains a priority, then there are ways in which such behaviour might be encouraged, even in an online setting. Most simply, theatres can communicate their desires to audiences, and in doing so actively shape the kinds of etiquette developing around digital streams.

The UK theatre company Complicité did exactly this at the start of its March 2016 broadcast of *The Encounter*, a one-man show using binaural sound technology. At the start of the stream, Simon McBurney – the lead actor and the artistic director of the company – held up his own mobile phone and asked audiences, both in person and ‘at home’, to ‘turn these off’. Of course, with no one else there to monitor them, online audiences were still much freer to do as they pleased than their counterparts in the theatre. But it is notable that publicly visible social media activity related to the stream stopped almost entirely after McBurney’s request, and only recommenced after the performance had finished. In stark contrast to the Globe broadcast, spectators stayed quiet on these platforms, due at least in part to the company’s opening steer. Other companies might feel similarly emboldened to guide their streaming audiences explicitly in terms of desired behaviour: there is no way for people to follow the ‘rules’ of theatre streaming, after all, if they aren’t quite sure what they are.

At the same time, it’s also worth thinking about how streamers’ proclivity for multi-tasking might prompt us to re-evaluate long-standing assumptions about what constitutes meaningful theatrical engagement. As Christopher Balme has suggested, ‘the model of spectatorship we implicitly assume (more or less intense, corporeally immobilized concentration in a darkened auditorium) is a recent modernist invention – not much older than a century or so.’ (2014: 13) Although there may be many benefits associated with such a model, it is presumably not the only valuable way to experience theatre. Indeed, Balme has argued that this modernist model, ‘predicated on intensified absorptive attention’, has notable drawbacks when it comes to encouraging ‘social or political debate.’ (ibid.) While it is natural for theatre companies to worry about what might be lost if spectators do not attend to performances in the way that has traditionally been desired, it is also worth considering what might be gained.

Increased scope for critical discussion is certainly one possibility: as we saw in the quotations above from some of my respondents, being able to talk with others about the performance as it occurred helped create not only an enhanced sense of togetherness, but also thoughtful, detailed engagement. Kirsty Sedgman, in her study of twenty-first-century theatre etiquette, has posited that ‘The key question’ concerning audiences today ‘is which kinds of attention afford more democratic experiences by promoting productive collaborative engagements both with others in the audience, as well as with the wider world’ (2018: 36). Encouraging streaming audiences to talk about a performance with one another, while it occurs, is arguably one step towards more inclusive and enriching



encounters. Such a mode of viewing resonates with the case Lynne Conner makes for 'Arts Talk', or the opportunity for 'the citizen-audience' to discuss artistic experiences together and in doing so enhance 'the pleasure [that] is deeply tied with the opportunity to interpret the meaning and value of an arts event' (2013: 1, 138). Talking about performances, she suggests, increases both the enjoyment and the critical understanding audiences gain from them.

The benefits of such conversations are presumably why Tim Etchells, the artistic director of Forced Entertainment, not only tolerates same-time discussion of his productions but in fact promotes it. Nicholas notes how he tweeted during the company's stream of *The Complete Works* (which he also directed), interacting with audience members and responding to the ideas and questions they put forward. Reflecting on his theatrical work, which often has running times that stretch far beyond more conventional shows, Etchells has emphasised how he wants both his productions and his audiences to 'take their time' in relation to one another, creating an environment in which performances can 'flow, morph and stretch' and spectators can produce a 'parallel social track' in which they are able to discuss what they're watching (2015). Etchells has put such ideas into practice since the early 1990s, but more recently he has suggested that they 'have only found their true and proper moment now, in the layering of Twitter conversation and screen grabbing', and in the navigation of 'the dynamics of split attention and the conversational chorus of social media.' (ibid.) The reality of multimedial, multi-tasking audiences has enhanced his sense of what theatre can do, rather than diminished it.

At the Globe, productions usually take a more traditional shape than Forced Entertainment's experimental work, but that did not stop organisers of the *Dream* stream from recognising and embracing the possibilities of social media interaction among its audiences. Operators of the official Twitter account for the 2016 'Shakespeare Lives' Festival – @BBCShakespeare – actively encouraged live-tweeting by participating in it themselves. Just a couple of moments into the production's unusual preshow, the account tweeted, 'This is like no safety briefing we've seen before! #DreamLive', and then continued to post every few minutes throughout the rest of the performance (2016). Such activity tacitly authorised social media use among streamers and nurtured the 'parallel social track' that might develop through it.

While such an approach might not suit every arts broadcast, it is worth considering how it could help create a sense of event for online audiences and encourage them to identify as a community, even if they are physically distant from one another. In 2011, the sociologist Sherry Turkle suggested in her influential book, *Alone Together*, that technology was making people feel increasingly isolated, despite its promise of expanded connectivity. Turkle makes a number of important points about how we (mis)use technology in our daily lives, but there are also many ways in which its potential for community can be more positively realised. Looking at the feedback from some of the audience members at the Globe stream, it is clear that social media helped create a feeling of togetherness for many viewers, even if, in more traditional terms, they were technically alone. Although their

attention was to at least some degree split, their engagement with the production was by no means diluted.

Even if we accept the potential value of social media as a tool for discussing a performance as it happens, however, we might still wonder about all those other activities, unrelated to the *Dream* broadcast, that some people carried out while they watched. Things like cooking, emailing, and doing other chores are difficult if not impossible to justify in terms of deepening spectators' understanding and appreciation of a show. At the same time, they are practical realities of life, and accepting them within the culture of theatre-going (albeit at a distance) may go some way towards widening the art form's reach. Sedgman has argued that 'today's theatre etiquette campaigns are still to some extent bound up with historical efforts to exclude the "wrong kind" of theatregoer', a project that often consolidates audience homogeneity in terms of age, class, and ethnicity (2018: 27).

One of the most important findings of the Arts Council's report was that, in contrast to most event cinema, streaming does appear to attract younger, less wealthy, and more ethnically diverse members of the population ('From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 30-2). It is not only the financial expense of tickets and travel that makes in-person theatre-going prohibitive: for some it is also the scarcity and literal cost of time. As we have seen, several of my respondents mentioned caring for children in their comments, and this is just one of many responsibilities that might make watching a production, distraction-free, an unrealisable goal. Rethinking the value we have long placed on deep, unbroken attention in the theatre opens up new possibilities as to who can be a part of this art form. In accepting a wider range of audience behaviours that might occur alongside a performance, we implicitly accept a wider range of audience members.

### **III. Aesthetic experience**

So far this article has focused on the ways in which experiences of liveness and togetherness continue to shape audiences' engagement with theatre, even as it moves online. At the same time, it has suggested that spectators' understanding of what constitutes such liveness and togetherness is shifting in an increasingly digital environment, with the feeling of eventful connectedness proving as fundamental – and potentially even more so – than the specifics of where and when a person is watching. Such matters are clearly very important to how audiences experience streamed theatre, but they are also, to a certain extent, separate from the contents of the production itself: that is, its story, characters, and artistic vision. How do online broadcasts shape the ways in which spectators engage with and take pleasure in a production's 'inner frame', to borrow Susan Bennett and Karen Gaylord's term, which encompasses 'the dramatic production' and its 'particular playing space' (Bennett 1997: 228; Gaylord 1983: 136)?

Detailed investigation into how remote audiences experience and interpret the artistic components of broadcast theatre remains somewhat scarce. This is most likely due, at least in part, to an assumption among many spectators – scholars and critics included – that these transmissions are more or less transparent presentations of stage performance.

According to John Wyver, 'Adaptations from a theatre stage' are frequently seen 'as straightforward documentation', largely free from technological interference or creative reinterpretation by the filming team (2014). The result, he suggests, is a persistent and problematic 'myth of non-mediation', in which 'the image sequences' of a broadcast, 'which are considered and scripted and rehearsed responses to a host of factors', are taken as natural, inevitable, and essentially unmediated forms of video capture (ibid.).

While such a situation risks undervaluing the skilled work performed by the broadcast team, from a different point of view it might also be understood as something of an achievement. Martin Barker has observed how the camerawork involved in transmissions such as NT Live's 2010 *King Lear* invites audiences to treat the filmic medium as 'transparent, unobtrusive, and invisible', and elsewhere I have highlighted how directors and producers of theatre broadcasts repeatedly voice a desire for their filming to be as inconspicuous as possible (Barker 2013: 16, original emphasis; Sullivan 2017: 631). Such practices seem to reflect a hope that remote viewers will, on the whole, experience the broadcast as the performance itself, rather than as a filmed version that is palpably distinct from the stage production. The fact that audiences themselves often adopt such a view suggests that broadcasting teams are achieving their goal.

It is possible, however, that this situation is changing. The authors of the Arts Council report indicated that remote audiences are starting to see broadcasts as their own 'distinct' art form, and 62.4% of my participants noted that their experience of the performance was affected at least significantly – and in some cases hugely – by the fact that they were watching via a broadcast ('From Live-to-Digital' 2016: 12-13, 58). Even so, when it came to talking about what they liked about the performance they had seen, few of my respondents noted anything to do with the broadcast medium, choosing to focus instead on elements of the stage production itself. Out of 120 responses, just five (4.2%) referenced matters related to the broadcast, mostly in terms of the camerawork. One person praised the 'Close up angles of the actors that you can't always see in the theatre', while another, who had attended the production in person earlier in the summer, celebrated the fact that s/he was now 'able to see all the action' and enjoy views that had not been available to her/him as a 'groundling' in the Globe's standing yard.

When it came to reporting things that they did *not* like about the performance, my respondents were more likely to mention that they had experienced it through a broadcast, though most still focused on issues relating to the stage production proper. Of the twenty-three comments referencing the broadcast medium (19.2%), nearly half highlighted problems with sound levels or lighting, particularly towards the end of the evening as night set in across the Globe's open-air auditorium. A further six emphasised the limitations of camera coverage, which 'missed some wonderful moments' when the chosen shot 'focus[ed] in on one person' or 'the wrong actor/part of the stage.' The fact that these references to filming techniques were more frequent in participants' negative feedback suggests that watching a performance via a broadcast continues to be seen more as a handicap than an advantage, and consequently that the medium most often becomes

visible for audiences when it is felt to go wrong. Still, the parallel fact that the majority of respondents did not bring up the broadcast at all seems to reflect its relative unobtrusiveness for most viewers, as well as a continued alignment of the broadcast experience with that of in-person spectatorship.

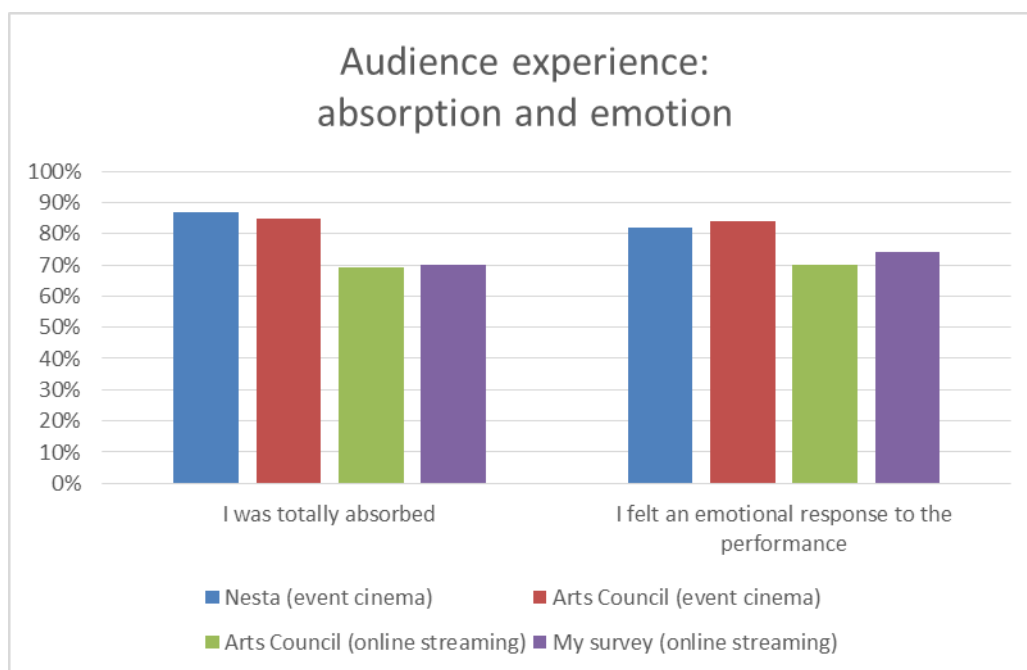
We might wonder what this means in terms of audiences' experience and enjoyment of broadcast theatre, whether it is relayed to a cinema or into their homes. While the Nesta and Arts Council studies focused primarily on the material conditions and contexts of broadcasts, such as whether they were temporally live and how much people would be willing to pay for them, they did go some way towards exploring spectators' aesthetic engagement with them in both intellectual and emotional terms. In addition to asking participants about the 'excitement' they felt because they 'knew the performance was live', the Nesta survey also invited its respondents to rate how much they agreed with statements like 'I was totally absorbed', 'I felt an emotional response to the play', 'After leaving ... I wanted to talk to people about what I'd seen', and 'I was transported to another world and lost track of time' ('Beyond Live' 2010: 9).

One of the biggest surprises of that study was that, in almost all cases, audience members who saw the performance via a cinema broadcast were *more* enthusiastic about their experience than those who watched in person at the theatre. 'It is striking how in the event, when describing their feelings about the performance, cinemagoers felt significantly more emotionally engaged than they had expected', the authors of the Nesta study wrote, adding that this emotional investment was even more intense than that of in-person theatregoers (ibid.: 5). Far from offering an affectively thinned-out experience, NT Live's maiden broadcast seemed to suggest that watching theatre through a screen could at times be even more engrossing than attending in person.

Such findings have proven both exciting and controversial among theatre-makers, theatre-goers, and scholars, not least because they were based on just one theatre broadcast to cinemas, and the very first one at that. As we have seen, the Arts Council's 2016 study asked participants to consider a wider range of theatrical transmissions, watched at both the cinema and at home. Though the authors of that study did not collect parallel data from in-person theatre-goers, they did find that enthusiasm for event cinema broadcasts remained high. Using a selection of statements in part borrowed from the Nesta survey, they once again invited respondents to rate how strongly they agreed and then presented the results as an aggregated score, following the method described in the discussion above about liveness.

Reflecting on the statement 'I was totally absorbed', their event cinema audiences returned a collective rating of 85% – firmly within the agree-to-strongly-agree range – while the phrase 'I felt an emotional response to the performance' achieved a similar 84%. Such scores are comparable to their Nesta equivalents (87.4% and 82.3%, respectively), suggesting that, at least as far as emotional absorption goes, the impact of event cinema offerings on their audiences remains strong. A much bigger difference, however, emerged when participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of streaming. The strength of

responses dipped considerably, with the same statement about absorption receiving a score of 69% and the one about emotional response likewise falling to 70%. In my survey, I also presented participants with these prompts and found that although responses were marginally higher (70.3% and 74.4%, respectively), they were still in the low-to-mid-seventies, or just shy of ‘agree’. In contrast to my streamers’ feelings about liveness, which deviated from the Arts Council’s findings, their experiences of absorption and emotion echoed the data collected there.



**Table 3:** Audience experience: absorption and emotion

Such figures suggest that, on the whole, audiences are somewhat less captivated and moved by online broadcasts than they are by event cinema transmissions. In some cases, it is possible that the lower budgets typically involved in streaming result in less impressive filming techniques, whether in the form of equipment, time for rehearsals, or the experience of the production team. Certainly when it comes to semi-professional companies trying their hand at livestreams, the use of a single camera is not unusual (high-profile event cinema broadcasts, in contrast, regularly involve 6 or 7). Though fewer cameras do not necessarily equate to a less engaging experience – Forced Entertainment’s deliberate use of a single, fixed shot is case in point – such a set-up does result in a less visually dynamic broadcast. The fact that these online streams are then received on a variety of screens, most of which are far smaller than a typical cinema display, is perhaps also a factor. The aesthetic impact of watching something on a mobile phone, often with a tinny speaker projecting the audio, is rather different than witnessing the same offering in HD on a twenty-foot-high cinema screen, accompanied by surround sound.

In the case of the Globe’s *Dream*, however, the production values and to a large extent the broadcasting team were the same for the stream as they would have been for

the cinema. Multiple cameras were used to capture the action, and the director for screen, Ian Russell, had previously overseen a number of filming projects at the Globe that were intended first for cinema and eventually DVD and download. Such parity in terms of production process suggests that differences in aesthetic impact arose, at least in this case, from patterns of reception rather than creation. This could be due to less satisfying modes of display, as suggested above, as well as the more dispersed approaches to spectatorship common to streaming audiences, as discussed in the previous section.

Indeed, if viewers are splitting their attention between the broadcast and other things, then it is perhaps not surprising that they are also reporting lower levels of absorption in what they are watching. The fact that emotional response also drops off suggests that affective engagement depends at least in part on extended immersion in an artwork, an idea that might give some theatres pause as they contemplate the advantages and drawbacks of online streaming and the more distributed forms of spectatorship it attracts. While an online broadcast might reach more people – and a more diverse group of people at that – one significant sacrifice might be that it does not, on average, engross them as fully as either an in-person or in-the-cinema experience of the same production would.

That said, one additional insight that emerges from the responses provided by my survey participants is that there is a strong correlation between a person's sense of affective engagement in a livestream and her/his appraisal of the production it is transmitting. The 91 respondents who rated the Globe's *Dream* at either 4 or 5 stars returned a collective score of 86.2% in response to the prompt about being 'totally absorbed in the performance' and 84.3% to the one about feeling 'an emotional response' to it – numbers that rival the event cinema data presented above. In contrast, the 17 people rating the production at either 1 or 2 stars produced far lower aggregated scores: 11.7% and 33.3%, respectively.

Such patterns suggest, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the more someone likes the artistic vision of a production, the more s/he will feel engrossed in a broadcast of it – a formulation that once again conflates the production and the broadcast, at least from an audience point-of-view. While it is possible that in some cases it might be the quality of the broadcast that shapes a spectator's response to the production, the weighting of my respondents' free-text comments towards matters concerned specifically with the concept and realisation of the stage show seems to indicate that, in this instance at least, it was that performance at the Globe that came first in their minds.

Such data, taken together, begin to suggest that streaming – like all forms of distribution – works best when it is transmitting something that audiences are excited about and appreciative of. At the same time, it also seems to indicate that streaming will always be at a disadvantage when it comes to captivating spectators, since it must contend with the demands and distractions of domestic life. In contrast to attending theatre in person or at the cinema, where other tasks must be put out of sight and ideally out of mind, watching at home is a less bounded and more layered experience that is at once more open to new opportunities for engagement and more vulnerable to cursory forms of spectatorship. Streaming a production will almost always mean that more people see it and experience it

in ways that at times expand and evolve traditional forms of engagement, but it will also typically mean that these new spectators' sense of absorption will fall short of what might be expected at the theatre or the cinema.

It seems that this is, to a certain extent, a price theatres must pay in order to open their work up to new audiences. But they might also work to minimise this cost by thinking about how to match streams with target audiences, bearing in mind the correlation in my survey's data between enthusiasm for the production itself and captivation in the broadcast. This might involve teaming up with large fan communities – in the case of Shakespeare, for instance, @HollowCrownFans and the 19,300 Shakespeare enthusiasts who follow this account on Twitter – in order to advertise streams to audience members who are eager for them and to encourage further engagement online during the transmission itself. In instances in which star actors are involved in a broadcast, then connecting with their fan communities could bring in other eager spectators, while targeting educational institutions might be appropriate for more niche and/or frequently taught texts. In addition to making these links with audience communities, scheduling broadcasts in a way that heightens their sense of occasion, and accordingly their potential for further emotional connection, may help create greater scope and space for absorptive viewing. This might involve linking a stream to a festival, as in the case of the Globe's *Dream* and 'Shakespeare Lives!', or organising it around a special date, as in one online fan group's 'watch-along' of a live recording of David Tennant and Catherine Tate's *Much Ado about Nothing* on Valentine's Day.

At the same time, we might again pause to reflect on whether our existing assumptions about the goals of theatre are necessarily the right or only ones. While sustained, emotionally charged absorption in a work of art is a powerful and valuable thing, watching theatre involves other capacities that livestreams might prove more adept at stimulating. The 2010 Nesta survey, for instance, included several questions about the intellectual, critical, and creative dimensions of watching a performance, such as 'The play ... engage[d] me on an intellectual level', 'After leaving the theatre I wanted to talk to people about what I'd seen', and 'I feel my creativity has been stimulated by the experience' ('Beyond Live' 2010: 9). None of these questions were carried through to the Arts Council study, and in my survey I only included the final one. Such decisions are of course largely practical: audiences cannot be expected to answer every single question that might interest researchers. But the fact that both the Arts Council's survey and my own favoured the questions set out by Nesta that focused on emotion and absorption is telling. To quote Balme once again, if we primarily ask audiences questions that prioritise 'intensified absorptive attention' and the emotional effects that may come from it, then we presumably limit what we can discover about audiences' experiences of theatre as an art form and the value they derive from it.

What's more, we potentially handicap our understanding and appreciation of kinds of theatre that do not cater, first and foremost, to immersive concentration. This includes online streams – a mode of theatrical distribution – but perhaps also theatrical forms that

are not presented in dark auditoriums (the early critical reception of productions at the Globe is case in point [Prescott 2005]). Questions focusing more on the social, intellectual, ethical, and/or political dimensions of theatrical experience might highlight ways in which shorter bursts of engagement with performance can be as valuable as – and in some cases perhaps even more so than – longer stretches in more traditional settings. For while the quantitative data collected in my survey and the Arts Council's indicates that livestream audiences on the whole do not attend as intensively to what they watch, the more qualitative comments suggest that they are nevertheless stimulated, moved, and challenged by what they see.

## **Conclusion**

With this in mind, theatres thinking about streaming work in the future might consider ways in which they can make the most of a more scattered, diverse, and ambient kind of digital stage, in which performance finds itself mixed into – and contending with – the rhythms of daily life. Ideally, as more livestreamed theatre emerges, more research into its audiences will too. As far as I am aware, Nesta's 2010 survey remains the only published study exploring in-the-theatre and at-the-cinema audience responses to the same production (and in that case the same performance as well), and no study has, as of yet, added at-home streaming to this picture. Continuing to look at audiences' appraisals of the same production, experienced in theatres, cinemas, and homes, will help us further understand the effectiveness of broadcasting as a medium for stage performance, as well as the fundamental principles upon which our ideas of 'effectiveness' are based.

Until then, I would suggest that the results of my survey, considered in tandem with those of Nesta and the Arts Council's studies, indicate that online streaming is a valuable way of distributing and experiencing theatre. The diversification of audiences alone is a powerful enough reason to continue pursuing it, despite its potential costs (both literally in terms of finance and more broadly in terms of audience absorption). But the potential to cultivate new ways of engaging with performance through same-time, online discussion is also a genuine opportunity. While such activity necessarily involves an adjustment to the long-held ideal of unbroken absorption in a work of art, it is also possible that the stimulation of audiences' critical faculties, and above all their sense of community, can in fact be enhanced through exchange of this kind. Though this online 'parallel social track' is not something that emerges automatically with every stream, it is something that can be encouraged; if done so successfully, it is arguably the most paradigm-shifting form of aliveness made possible by online broadcasting.

Beyond such interaction and the new possibilities for engagement that it holds, it is also clear that online streams, like event cinema before them, are testing and stretching our understanding of what it means to experience a performance live and as a collective audience. While online spectators still seem to value the opportunity to watch a performance in real-time – especially if they are asked specifically about that production, shortly after they view it – it seems that the greatest value that emerges from such a



formulation is the sense of togetherness it brings. Theatres interested in broadcasting online might find some reassurance in the possibility that an ‘as live’ or ‘encore’ stream has the potential to be seen by remote audiences as just as experientially rich as one distributed in real-time, provided that it cultivates a sense of eventful togetherness in some other way. Of course, the quality of the production itself is a huge factor in such considerations, with audiences understandably most enthusiastic about broadcasts that relay work they are eager to see. Selecting for streaming productions that have already garnered some critical or popular acclaim, and working to make connections with audience groups interested in the actors, texts, or forms of artistry involved in them, will go some way towards boosting both viewing figures and the more interactive, interrogative forms of engagement that online performance can cultivate.

### **Biographical note:**

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## **Appendix – survey questions and quantitative responses:**

(1) How many stars (out of five) would you give the performance that you saw this evening?  
(120 responses)

- a. 1 – 5.83% (7)
- b. 2 – 7.50% (9)
- c. 3 – 11.67% (14)
- d. 4 – 31.67% (38)
- e. 5 – 43.33% (52)

(2) What did you like most about it? (120 responses, open-text)

(3) What did you like least? (120 responses, open-text)

(4) Based on your experience of watching the performance, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (118 responses)

- a. 'I was totally absorbed in the performance'
  - i. Strongly agree – 45.76% (54)
  - ii. Agree – 24.58% (29)
  - iii. Neither – 5.08% (6)
  - iv. Disagree – 14.41% (17)
  - v. Strongly disagree – 10.17% (12)
- b. 'I felt an emotional response to the performance'
  - i. Strongly agree – 39.83% (47)
  - ii. Agree – 38.14% (45)
  - iii. Neither – 9.32% (11)
  - iv. Disagree – 5.08% (6)
  - v. Strongly disagree – 7.63% (9)
- c. 'I was transported to another world and lost track of time'
  - i. Strongly agree – 29.66% (35)
  - ii. Agree – 23.73% (28)
  - iii. Neither – 16.95% (20)
  - iv. Disagree – 15.25% (18)
  - v. Strongly disagree – 14.41% (17)
- d. 'I could relate to, or feel a bond with the performers'
  - i. Strongly agree – 32.20% (38)
  - ii. Agree – 38.98% (46)
  - iii. Neither – 12.71% (15)
  - iv. Disagree – 4.24% (5)
  - v. Strongly disagree – 11.02% (13)
  - vi. I don't know – 0.85% (1)

- e. 'I feel my creativity has been stimulated by the experience'
    - i. Strongly agree – 40.68% (48)
    - ii. Agree – 29.66% (35)
    - iii. Neither – 11.86% (14)
    - iv. Disagree – 7.63% (9)
    - v. Strongly disagree – 7.63% (9)
    - vi. I don't know – 2.54% (3)
  - f. 'I felt real excitement because I knew that the performance was live'
    - i. Strongly agree – 49.15% (58)
    - ii. Agree – 27.97% (33)
    - iii. Neither – 12.71% (15)
    - iv. Disagree – 5.93% (7)
    - v. Strongly disagree – 4.24% (5)
- (5) How much of a difference do you think it made that you were watching the performance through a stream, rather than in person? (117 responses)
- a. No difference – 5.13% (6)
  - b. A little difference – 29.06% (34)
  - c. A significant difference – 46.15% (54)
  - d. A huge difference – 16.24% (19)
  - e. I'm not sure – 3.42% (4)
- (6) Did you do anything else while watching the production? Please select all that apply. (103 responses, 13 further assumed)
- a. Used social media – 31.90% (37)
  - b. Chatted with friends – 6.90% (8)
  - c. Did some reading or work – 3.45% (4)
  - d. Ate – 15.52% (18)
  - e. Cooked – 2.59% (3)
  - f. Other (please specify) – 2.84% (33)
  - g. (assumed) Nothing else – 11.21% (13)
- (7) Do you think watching the production in person at the Globe would have been better or worse than watching it through the stream? (116 responses, plus 86 open-text comments)
- a. Better at the Globe – 71.55% (83)
  - b. Better through the stream – 8.62% (10)
  - c. The same – 18.97% (22)
  - d. No response (but open-text comment given) – 0.86% (1)
- (8) Where did you watch the performance (what city and country)? (116 open-text responses)
- (9) What kind of device did you watch it on? (116 responses)
- a. A laptop – 40.52% (47)
  - b. A desktop – 6.90% (8)
  - c. A tablet/iPad – 20.69% (24)
  - d. A phone – 1.72% (2)
  - e. A smart TV – 13.79% (16)
  - f. Other (please specify) – 16.38% (19)
- (10) How old are you? (114 responses)

- a. 18-25 – 20.18% (23)
- b. 26-35 – 26.32% (30)
- c. 36-45 – 15.79% (18)
- d. 46-55 – 22.81% (26)
- e. 56-65 – 11.40% (13)
- f. 66-75 – 3.51% (4)
- g. 76-85 – 0%
- h. Over 85 – 0%

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Martin Barker and Helen Kennedy for their expert, encouraging, and perspicacious feedback on this article, which turned it into a much stronger piece.

<sup>2</sup> This article was researched and written before the worldwide lockdowns put in place to slow the COVID-19 pandemic, and the huge increase in online arts broadcasting that has emerged as a result. Rather than try to hastily re-write the article to reflect this new and rapidly changing landscape, I have kept it focused on the state of the field through late 2019. There is no question, however, that online arts streaming is now undergoing an enormous shift and that future research will have to respond to this; I hope that this article will help provide some of the backstory.

<sup>3</sup> This figure combines quantitative and qualitative data collected in response to question 9 in the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> This figure and those that follow combine quantitative and qualitative data collected in response to question 6 in the Appendix. The online survey only allowed respondents to choose one activity, so a number of people used the ‘other’ comment box to indicate that they had done several of these things at once. Some also used that open-text field to explain that they *had not* done anything else while watching, while others appear to have skipped the question entirely as a way of indicating that they did not do anything else (I made a mistake in not providing a box labelled ‘no’). I have assumed 13 ‘no’ responses based on the fact that there is a clear and otherwise unexplained dip in participation from question 5 (117 responses) to this question (103 responses) to questions 7, 8, and 9 (116 responses each).