BST Body, Space & Technology

Cochrane, Bernadette, and Frances Bonner 2022 "'Adjacent to the Live: Paratextual Augmentation of Performance During the Pandemic'." *Body, Space & Technology*, 22(1), pp. 1–15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.8005

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'Adjacent to the Live: Paratextual Augmentation of Performance During the Pandemic'

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The plethora of paratextual materials such as digital programs, recorded interviews with artists and creative teams, behind-the-scenes videos, and curated playlists have been pressed into service to extend the reach of the core business of performance companies. Behind the scenes and ancillary activities have come to the fore, potentially altering the way Genette considered paratexts to work as thresholds to the core. Until the last year or so, paratextual elements such as the aforementioned existed primarily in the service of marketing and promotion. They were not themselves seen as separate or independently monetised ventures. They were tasters of the real thing or treats for loyal followers. Comparatively little attention in this field has been paid to live performances, although these too have similar panoplies of paratexts used to promote the core texts: advertisements, advance publicity, and reviews for instance. Our concern here is with the way paratexts were used during the extended COVID lockdowns when live performance venues were closed, particularly instances where the usual relationship between core text and paratext, whereby the latter are shorter pieces supporting or promoting the former, is upset. There was a considerable range of sophistication in the paratexts operating as core texts during the pandemic. Most sophisticated ones, like those from the NT or Pinchgut's *The Loves of Dafne and Apollo* did not call on audience members to produce the experience of liveness, even if the NT's branding persisted. We have concentrated here on *Dream* because it was such a sophisticated piece with liveness at its very heart.

The concept of the paratext was developed by Gerard Genette in 1987 to refer to 'thresholds' that mediated a reader's experience of a piece of literature, like a book cover or a review. In the period since, as well as in literary analysis, much attention has been paid to screen paratexts, especially in the wake of Jonathan Gray's 2010 *Show Sold Separately*. Gray disagreed with Genette over the relationship between text and paratext, seeing texts as the larger socially and cultural existing combinations of paratexts and the initial entity, which he termed the work. In a 2017 interview/discussion with Robert Brookey, he acknowledged that his distinction had not been taken up in subsequent scholarship where Genette's two-part distinction persisted (2017, 102). Here we acknowledge the problem by referring to the 'core text' (Gray's 'work') and its paratexts.

Comparatively little attention in this field has been paid to live performances, whether in a recognizably theatrical environment or online, although these too have similar panoplies of paratexts used to promote the core texts: advertisements, advance publicity and reviews for instance. Our concern here is with the way paratexts were used during the extended COVID lockdowns when live performance venues were closed. For many companies, unable to generate revenue or keep their contracted or regular freelance artists working, paratexts were moved from supporting roles into being the main event, the core text themselves. They varied in sophistication from the RSC's *Dream*, which we will examine in detail below to quite primitive ones like orchestral musicians' solos and duets from home studios/wardrobes disseminated by email to subscribers. Almost all of them were digital, since unlike the hazards associated with liveness, this blocked the virus.

It is worth noting here that digital performances in themselves are not inherently paratextual, and an online work may well be core. For example, Zoom Theatre's productions of *Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan and *Reunion* and *Dark Pony* by David Mamet were conceived for the Zoom medium. Experimental Belgian theatre company Ontroerend Goed's production of *TM*, in collaboration with Almeida Theatre, was designed as a one-on-one digital interactive experience.

Paratexts are medium agnostic, in fact the more diverse the range of promotional paratexts the more potential audience members are likely to be exposed to them. Films are promoted in cinemas, but also on television, radio, print and social media, not to mention all the places posters can be affixed. Live performances are possibly least likely to have paratexts in the same medium as the core. A theatre production is unlikely to have a theatrical paratext, for example. Platform discussions do occur, and upcoming concerts may be mentioned in announcements before a performance, but these are the slightest of paratexts in term of audience reach. A principal paratext promoting a live

event is the interview with performers and while these continued during the pandemic across the whole range of media, they could not be used to promote non-existent live events.

'The ephemeral' a term which has some popularity in Media Studies, especially that focussing on the digital realm, might appear to be an overlapping term. The subtitle of Paul Grainge's 2011 collection *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Media from Television to YouTube* indicates its prime concern as well as its focus on screen media. Grainge narrows his term down to short-form works, like television idents, web dramas and film trailers, but also insists on its contradictory quality, which comes from the storage capacity of 'media archives like YouTube and Google' (3). The ephemeral is now retrievable, but even prior to this use many libraries had collections of ephemera. The extent to which films and television programmes themselves, in our terms core texts embedded in and surrounded by Grainge's ephemera, are themselves ephemeral has been debatable since the development of the VCR. Taking account of some more recent development in the online world, Sara Pesce and Paolo Noto's 2017 collection maintains an interest in the contradiction between ephemerality and persistence, but adds a greater concern with fan production, which can add to the short form focus some extremely long texts such as some of those set in the Star Trek universe.

We have decided not to adopt the term 'ephemeral' for our work here because the relationship between the core texts which interest us, theatrical and musical performances, and their accompanying paratexts is very much the opposite of those that are created in the first place for screens. With few exceptions, core screen texts originate in recorded forms; they have a set form which can be returned to, even if it is subsequently modified by paratextual devices like live cinema events, tweeting along while live watching television programmes, or fan videos. What we consider live theatrical and musical performances though are themselves ephemeral, co-presence of audience and performers at the moment of performance is the norm as is repeated performance of the same piece. We do not deny the frequency of recordings of the live, indeed it is central to our argument, but initial liveness is key.

So what happened when this kind of liveness was forbidden, since performance sites had been closed down? In short, liveness, if and when it was asserted, was mediated and theatrical and musical performances were received domestically through television screens or similar monitors. Analysis of mediated liveness has been a persistent thread in studies of theatre and of television (Auslander 2008, 2012; Marriott 2007; Crisell 2012; Scannell l 2014; Atkinson and Kennedy 2018). Karin van Es, wanting to extend this work to account particularly for liveness on social media, distinguished initially between ontological, phenomenological and rhetorical themes, before opting

for what she called a constellation of liveness, reflecting "the formative influence of institutions, technologies and users on the live" (2017, 15). Social media, live and otherwise, played a significant part in disseminating information about the paratexts and reactions to them.

The relationship changes

Our concern here is with instances where the usual relationship between core text and paratext, whereby the latter are shorter pieces supporting or promoting the former, is upset. While the pandemic has provided the impetus for our examples, there are precursors. A few big-name reviewers have published book length collections of their reviews and those books can be considered themselves core texts (they are themselves reviewed and advertised). Christopher Ricks's *Reviewry* and *Kenneth Tynan's: Theatre Writings*[1] are examples, but the latter is rare in being concerned with only one medium. Does it matter that most of Ricks's reviews are of books and the core text of his journalism is also a book, while Tynan's theatre writings are in a different medium? As we noted above, paratexts are medium agnostic, but not, to continue the metaphor, atheist. Reading Tynan on theatre is not itself a theatrical experience, it is a literary one; watching a film trailer in a cinema is cinematic. The paratexts of live performance that moved centre stage during the pandemic were of necessity mediated.

Mia Consalvo examines videogaming examples where the relationship becomes unfixed and the core shifts. Her prime example is of the medieval strategy game *Crusader Kings* 2 for which, as is common, there are many paratextual mods designed to enrich the playing experience by providing such things as more information or additional buildings. She argues that the *Game of Thrones* based mod which turns 'the original software into an engine for a new experience – that of living and plotting in the kingdom of Westeros' (179) results in the mod shifting into the central role due to the overwhelming familiarity gamers may have with the new world. She acknowledges the possibility of this then becoming itself a paratext of the massive media franchise developed from George R R Martin's novels, but does not see this as denying the shift within the world of gaming (180). It is a reminder of the significance of where formal boundaries are set. Guilio Lughi notes a relevant distinction between older media and natively digital texts where the boundaries between text and paratext, as with the gaming mods, are less obvious (46).

Conventional scholarly consideration of paratexts concentrates on audience-facing ones, designed to get people to engage with the core texts, i.e., buy tickets, or to frame their experience, as in the examples we have given so far. There is however another body of paratexts concerned with the production of the work, which may slip

out into public view when for instance a costume designer talks about her inspiration in an emailed newsletter to subscribers or provides sketches for a printed programme. Mostly though these paratexts are held in company archives, assuming the company is sufficiently resourced to have them. These paratexts may certainly be seen as adding to the experience of the performance but do so before the fact and away from the audience. They are accessible only to those working on the production, or on a subsequent version of the work, or to (some) scholars. Among the documentation is one special piece – the archival recording. Now this may be a live recording to be released as a CD or even a live-to-digital cinema broadcast/DCP for theatrical distribution, but these are comparative rarities. Dependent on the resources of the company, they may be audio only, of varying quality, or a video taken from a single camera at the back of the auditorium, or it may be a more sophisticated affair. The development of livecasting to cinemas of various art forms has driven significant 'improvement' at the higher reaches of performance houses.

During the first year of the pandemic with much of the world locked down and stages and concert halls dark, the National Theatre of Great Britain ran an NT at Home season. Most of the works made available had previously been seen in cinemas, usually, despite the many encore screenings, under the rubric of being live and not available for DVD purchase (although many such from the Met at least did subsequently get released). Two of the works however had never had such screenings: Inua Ellams's *Barbershop Chronicles* (billed as a 'never before seen archival recording') and Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*, which was not identified as an archive recording though had never been screened publicly. There was little if anything in terms of quality to distinguish them from the others, indeed given that they had not been filmed to be seen in darkened cinemas and were being viewed in lighted domestic spaces, the less contrasting lighting made them look better. Nevertheless, they do provide our first example of pandemic-driven paratexts becoming core. The cinema audience for NTLive, even when watching a delayed or encore performance did have aspects of the live experience, there being a co-present audience viewing together at a set time.

NTLive encouraged its live audiences to be active on its social pages both pre, during, and post-performance. For example, and apropos *Fleabag*:

> @NTLive #Fleabag: by a country mile, the most interactive broadcast I have been to. Raucous laughter, gasps, and more communal emotive responses than any of the (many) broadcast I have seen. Interested to think how far the show operated as a paratext, at least in my own experience. [...] Truly refreshing to have an audience experience comparable to stand-up at a broadcast.' (Anonymous.)

Here, the tweeter was able not only to project themselves into the theatre in their imagination but also to understand themselves as part of the core text's audience.

This much liveness fractured further for NT at Home, a co-presence was only available if watching in a shared household; a temporally shared experience could be staged by friends co-ordinating their viewing which could further resemble the television phenomenon of live watching if they tweeted along.[2]

A somewhat similar instance is provided by the Australian company Pinchgut Opera. Established in 2002 to perform baroque opera rarities, the Sydney-based company have moved from initially staging a single opera annually to two operas and two concerts each year. Almost all the operas have been recorded for radio broadcast and CD release. Additional paratexual accompaniments have included the usual interviews with performers, and reviews. Subscribers receive monthly email updates on progress towards the next performance which often include rehearsal snippets or film of newly purchased historical instruments and their sounds (both housed on YouTube), short podcast discussions and other types of the paratextual material companies regularly distribute to encourage loyalty, interest and the production of an informed audience – not to mention donations.

With performances cancelled for 2020 and uncertainties about the future, Pinchgut moved online in 2021 with a specially filmed, carefully edited performance of a sequence of Barbara Strozzi's madrigals entitled *A Delicate Fire* and described in publicity as an 'opera film'. This was very much a standalone production available by subscription for a limited time. The mid-2021 opera was able to be performed before an audience, but with Sydney entering an extended lockdown soon after, an email to subscribers announced a globally available digital season of Pinchgut at Home comprising a re-release of *A Delicate Fire* and, with the para-textual becoming core, video performances of the midyear opera, Cavalli's *The Loves of Dafne and Apollo* and two concerts that had been able to be staged the year before. Although it seems likely that archival video copies of performances had been made for some years, with the exception of one of the 2019 concerts being available on YouTube, they had never previously been referred to, let alone released. In October 2021 subscribers were alerted to the continuation of Pinchgut at Home into 2022 where it would include a recording of Rameau's *Platée*, the projected December 2021 production.

The *Dream*

The Royal Shakespeare Company engaged in a far more complex manoeuvre with its experimental production, *Dream*. The COVID-19 caused closure of theatres laid waste to the theatrical industry in the UK, as indeed it did in many countries around the

world. These closures notwithstanding, the pandemic also created an environment that accelerated technological examinations of theatrical liveness and engagement. COVID-19 generated the conditions whereby *Dream*, an experimental RSC paratext, became a core text for the company.

Inspired by the setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Dream* is one of the landmark outcomes of the Audience of the Future Consortium.[3] A collaboration between the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Manchester International Festival, Philharmonia Orchestra and Marshmallow Laser Feast, a London-based virtual reality creator, *Dream* incorporated an interactive score, motion capture and game engines, and is considered 'the culmination of a major piece of cutting-edge research and development' (Audience of the Future).[4] *The RSC* intended *Dream* to be a public-facing live and online performance. COVID and the closure of theatres across the UK interrupted this intention. *Dream* was, instead, reconceived solely for online performances.

As a piece of research consisting of a twenty-five-minute performance exploring 'how audiences could experience live performance in the future' (Audience of the Future), including audience interaction with the performance diegesis, *Dream* should have been a paratext and thus adjunct to the core business of the RSC. Instead, due to COVID, *Dream* became a major audience-facing event for the RSC, nationally and internationally. The Melbourne edition of *Time Out*, for example, made much of the audience being able to '**directly influence** the story' (Dowse, emphasis original).

The ten performances were scheduled at various times, including viewing-friendly times in the southern hemisphere. Over ten days, some 65,000 people across 92 countries watched at least one of the ten performances live via desktop, laptop or tablet.

The performances themselves were comprised of paratexts and a core text. On the landing page or Dream Audience Lobby, viewers were greeted by a recording of EM Williams (Puck), who introduces the characters of *Dream* and announces that there are two audiences: the Audience Plus group, who having paid £10.00 to access the interactive version of the production, was able to interact with the actors and mise-en-scène via manoeuvring of fireflies and seeds; and the livestream audience who could watch the performance for free but who had no live interactions with the performers and mise-en-scène. Puck assures the Plus audience that they will learn how to use their fireflies to light the forest once they have re-entered the 'Dream Lobby' and before the performance begins. From there, Williams provides practical information such as turning phones and tablets to landscape to watch the performance. They finish by asking audiences to enter the Dream Lobby, suggesting that people might like to 'follow the forest trail to prepare for the show' (RSC). In the Lobby, viewers following the two-dimensional trail could click on icons to find out more about *Dream* including, for Plus

audiences, how to manipulate and deploy their fireflies and seeds at predesignated moments in the performance.

The performance proper began with cameras following Williams, dressed in full body mocap suit, live at the venue in Portsmouth. When *Dream* proper began, the camera shifted from Williams and the studio to a virtual camera in the game engine, enabling the audience, as a single unity, to view the 'virtual world and motion capture from the live actors that animated the virtual characters' (McKinnon). At different points in the performance, Plus audience screens split into two. On the right was a topographical map of the forest, and on the left, the performance continued. On the map screen, audience members were encouraged to drag the firefly icon to somewhere on the map. A corresponding light appeared on the performance screen on the left, notionally to light Puck's way through the forest. This manoeuvre was repeated when it came to reseeding the forest after the tumultuous storm. At the end of the performance, the cameras switched back to the studio. Those who wished to do so could remain online for a Q&A session. In effect, the *Dream* experience comprised of performative paratextual elements being the lobby, the pre-recorded video instructions, the Q&A, and suchlike and the core text, being the actual performance of *Dream*. Given the integration of all of the elements into the audience experience, interactive or not, the entirety of the experience became the core text for the duration of the performance. For many, Dream, as a core text, was flawed. For example, Francesca Peschier from *Exeunt Magazine* claimed it felt like an 'outdated stepping stone on the route to somewhere more magical', whereas Susannah Clapp from *The Guardian* noted that Dream was 'not a replacement for a full-blown play' and that her firefly attempts were 'more glow-worm than floodlight, with no discernible effect on the action'. Unlike many other reviewers, however, Clapp recognised *Dream* as an R&D project repurposed as a core text. In its exploration of the interactive possibilities by performers and audience alike, or "testing commercial models for this type of experience at scale" (Ellis quoted in MacKinnon), *Dream* remains a paratext. In a pandemic, *Dream* enabled the RSC to present an audience-facing core text consisting of several parts.

Paratexts at One Remove

The *Dream* shift from paratext to core text brings into being its own paratexts. The usual panoply of paratextual materials associated with a theatrical core text like trailers abound. Extracts of the score are available on the dream.online website, the Philharmonia website, Soundcloud, among others. Audio-visual material on the 'making of' *Dream* is plentiful. There are, however, two paratextual examples that

are of interest here. The first relates to the Q&A sessions, and the second refers to the recording of *Dream*.

As noted above, live behind-the-scenes Q&A accompanied each of the ten performances with cast and creative team members. And each session usually included a guest speaker such as Pippa Bostock from the Centre for Creative and Immersive XR at the University of Portsmouth. The sessions occurred immediately after the performance in the live-motion capture studio space. Online audiences were able to submit questions via text.

In many regards, these Q&As were as interactively organic as one might expect of any theatrical Q&A. Questions were asked with whichever member of the cast acting as Q&A moderator referring the question on as appropriate. This seemingly free-flowing exchange was, however, a device. The questions were genuine. They came from the audience through the moderator's phone. Nonetheless, each Q&A highlighted a different aspect of the production. For example, the 12th of March Q&A emphasised the creation of the root-face manifestation of the character of Mustardseed. In contrast, the 19th of March Q&A focused on using the Gestrument technology that allowed the actors and music to interact during the performance. Gestrument allowed performers to manipulate the pre-recorded music at 'key points with their movement' to create a 'dynamic score [...] integral to the live performance' (Philharmonia). The intricacies of interactive music notwithstanding, in each Q&A instance, the chosen focus had been pre-planned and prepared. The moderator needed to guide the questions and conversations to accommodate the pre-planned production highlight. Each of these Q&As exists as individual paratexts on the dream.online website and are freely available. Taken collectively, however, these individual paratexts combine to create a larger paratext that can be housed under the genre of the 'making of'. As such, the viewers can piece together the impetuses, dramaturgies, and technologies in play for the *Dream* project.

The second paratext relates to the recording of *Dream*. As discussed previously, live audiences could experience *Dream* in two different ways, the Audience Plus or livestream viewer. The single significant difference is the previously discussed manipulation of the fireflies and seeds. There is, however, a third audience that needs consideration. Since the closure of the season, the RSC has made a recording of one of the performances freely available on the web. Here the delayed audience (remote in time and space from the original production)[5] can engage with Puck's briefing, explore the *Dream* lobby, watch a performance, and should they choose, watch with any of the post-show Q&As. Notions of communality can also be recreated. Delayed viewers can, for instance, agree on a time to watch the performance, regardless of where they are in the world. The

agential difference between livestream and delayed audience pertains primarily to the livestream audience being able to ask questions during the Q&A and delayed audience not being able to do so.[6] While the performance per se segued seamlessly into the Q&A session via a telegraphed glimpse of the motion capture mechanics incorporated in the performance, there was no necessity for the Plus and livestream audiences to attend the Q&A session. The Q&A, at the time of the performance, remained a paratext. Moreover, with the Q&A, audience differentiations become blurred as both Plus and livestream audiences could, should they wish, access any of the recorded Q&A sessions. The Q&A paratextual appurtenance rather than being an adjunct to the core text becomes an integral way of defining audiences for the core text.

With *Dream* and given that *Dream* was remediated for online performance, the online viewing experience for livestream and delayed audiences is or can be all but identical. The experiential differentiation lies in the cognitive realm: the livestream audience knowing that they are viewing live performances and the delayed audience watching a pre-recorded performance. In other instances, this distinction may be of more import. That *all* audiences – Plus, livestream, and delayed – accessed the production via a screen renders much of the distinction moot. If the Plus audience and livestream audience are to be considered cognate in sharing a core text, then given the parallel experiences of the delayed audience and the livestream audience, the delayed audience too must be considered to be viewing a core text. *Dream* at a meta level retained the status of a paratext in that it remained 'a research and development effort' complete with a lengthy questionnaire (Ellis). At the performance level, *Dream*, complete with its specific paratexts, became the core text, rendering the status of the paratext and core text respectively unstable, further demonstrating Lughi's observation about natively digital texts referred to earlier.

Conclusion

We have mentioned only a few of the many instances when paratexts became core texts during the time that performance spaces were closed due to the pandemic. At times these paratexts have been ones that would not normally be audience-facing with the result that audiences were given a greater insight into the production process than would normally be the case. This could be both enlightening and confusing. In the case of *Dream* many audience members responded as if the experimental work in progress they were offered, and that was the RSC's most significant pandemic production, was in effect a finished product.

Because elements of live performance, such as the co-presence of performer and audience member were forbidden, the experience of liveness when it was offered served to problematise the concept. On the part of the performers and the production crew on the day, liveness was clear, for the *Dream* audience it was produced internally. In Reason and Lindelof's terms, they were audiencing (34). An audience member who chose to watch *Dream* live at the time of initial performance would not actually be seeing anything different from the person watching the same iteration subsequently. (This was not necessarily the case for those in the Audience Plus case.) The quality of liveness was a conceit in the first instance that was not strictly available in the second, yet the provocation was the same in both.

The need to focus on the liveness of a digital performance, to be conscious of the temporal aspect when it was separated from the spatial, applies far more broadly than the RSC example. When audience co-presence is mediated for those not in the same household, the power of liveness is either diminished especially in phenomenological accounts or located elsewhere within the performance paradigm. While this may have been evident in analysis of liveness prior to the pandemic, the enforced reliance on digital mediation brought it more to the fore. As Cochrane and Heidi Liedke have it, the cognitive load required of an audience to produce the experience of liveness is considerable.

Broadcast television makes its most persuasive claims for liveness of sport, news and current affairs. Little cognitive load is needed for the viewer to register the liveness of the programme since in the first instance the outcome is unknown until the game ends, and with news and current affairs because it deals with the immediate and unfolding. All however combine actual live material with pre-recorded or time-shifted material like the instant replay. Verbal cues – 'now' or 'we cross live to our reporter at the scene' insist on liveness in a way unavailable to actors using a script written often long before the performance or transmission. As far as institutions are concerned, theatrical and musical liveness has no alternative but to be asserted in some kind of paratext surrounding the core when co-presence with the performance is unavailable. Van Es's users can create a form of live audiencing through social media reactions to both core texts or paratexts, although this is beyond the reach of the institutions concerned.

In an earlier article on livecasting audiences' responses in terms of feelings about a performance rather than intellectualised critique of the acting or production (though without over-valorising the latter), Liedke lists questions from an RSC survey that all focus on and evince emotional reactions. Several ask about the experience of liveness. This is not Liedke's focus and the social media responses she considers do not speak

of it directly, but its presence in what the RSC wants to learn about is instructive. How is liveness conveyed through a screen? Paratexts often urge viewers and potential audience members to focus on it; NTlive insists upon it in its very name and *Dream's* provision of ten separate iterations for which audiences of both kinds could sign up brings the temporality of performances to the surface. However, audience members still have to convince themselves that the excitement they report feeling comes in part from experiencing something live. Liveness is produced, should they choose to do so, in the mind of the audience member.

There was a considerable range of sophistication in the paratexts operating as core texts during the pandemic. Most sophisticated ones, like those from the NT or Pinchgut's *The Loves of Dafne and Apollo* did not call on audience members to produce the experience of liveness, even if the NT's branding persisted. We have concentrated here on *Dream* because it was such a sophisticated piece with liveness at its very heart. The Queensland Symphony Orchestra's backyard solos or over the fence duets were so simple that experiencing their liveness (in those case where it was offered) required much less cognitive load. Their very simplicity made it both easier for an audience member and less important for the company.

Notes

[1] The practice continues; Michael Billington's *Affair of the Heart: British Theatre from 1992 to 2020* is due to be published in December 2021.

[2] The authors and two colleagues have written of this practice and Zoom discussions concerning it in Bree Hadley, Bernadette Cochrane, Joanne Tompkins and Frances Bonner 'Remote Theatre and remote audiences' (in review).

[3] Some fifteen groups make up the Consortium: the Royal Shakespeare Company, De Montfort University, Epic Games, i2 Media Research Limited, Intel, Magic Leap, Manchester International Festival, Marshmallow Laser Feast, Nesta, Phi Centre, Philharmonia Orchestra, Punchdrunk, University of Portsmouth, The Space.

[4] *Dream* was one of four Audience of the Future initiatives, supported by the government Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund which is delivered by UK Research and Innovation.

[5] See Cochrane and Bonner 'Screening from the Met, the NT, or the House: What Changes with the live relay'.

[6] The survey that accompanied the live performances is now closed.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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