Spectators' Experiences of Online Theatre Performance

From Necessity to "Digital-Site-Specific" Audiences

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| abstract

During the pandemic, the Internet and social media became the sole interfaces between the theatre sector and its audiences. This period brought the mediatization of the performing arts into mainstream visibility for a broad, non-specialist audience, as screen-based digital performances shifted from niche to widespread consumption. Yet after the pandemic, most theatre companies, organisations, and festivals that had explored innovative digital formats abandoned these experiments. This article examines how audiences experienced live, screen-based theatre during – and especially after – the pandemic through a multi-year qualitative study of *Residenze Digitali* (2021-2024). Drawing on interviews and focus groups, we observe the practices and attitudes audiences adopted to interpret and engage with screen-based performances. In terms of spectatorial practices, material constraints, degrees of interaction with performers, and relations with other spectators, they constitute an artistic form that requires spectators to imagine and enact their role anew each time. This effort can entail fatigue, experienced as a limit, but it also underpins a distinctive pleasure in exploration. In this sense, digital space does not function as a simple "transmitter" of the performing arts. Instead, we propose understanding these works as digital site-specific performances: unfamiliar yet stimulating environments that demand special efforts from both organisers and spectators.

1. Introduction

For several months during the pandemic, Internet and social media served as the only interfaces between the theatre sector and its audiences. As a result, the mediatization of performing arts became visible to a broad, non-specialist public (Gemini et al., 2020), as screen-based digital performances shifted from niche consumption into the mainstream. Scholars and artists began to debate whether this would spark a shift in the role of digital technologies in performing arts or remain merely a "temporary disruption" (Hylland, 2022).

These experiments enabled new forms of knowledge and relationships to emerge among artists (Brilli et al., 2022) and stimulated the development of best practices and guidelines for integrating digital tools into theatre (Aebischer & Nicholas, 2020).

Artist residencies, which serve as key sites for artistic research (Lehman, 2017), also found themselves affected by this shift. Some initiatives sought to reframe the "art-

ist-in-residence" concept beyond physical space, imagining it as a distinctive mode of exchange among artists, organisers, scholars, and spectators – one that could also take place online. In this regard, digital artist residencies have represented a threefold state of liminality: the work-in-progress nature inherent to residencies, the suspended time of the pandemic, and the (for many) exceptional space of digital performance.

Nevertheless, most theatre companies, organisations, and festivals that experimented with innovative digital approaches discontinued these efforts after the pandemic. Although audiences' interest in digital artistic performances appears to have waned, it has not entirely disappeared. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate under what conditions this interest might persist or even re-emerge.

Our study examines the difficulties and pleasures spectators encounter when engaging with screen-based live performances, particularly after their widespread peak during the lockdowns. Accordingly, we ask: Which spectatorial practices and roles did audiences adopt when participating in digital performances during and after the pandemic?

To answer this research question, we analysed the case of *Residenze Digitali* (RD). Launched in April 2020, RD has now reached its fifth edition and is a rare example (in the Italian context) of a digital performance programme that came into being during Covid and is continuing today. It thus makes it possible to study the transformation of digital theatre audiences. RD selects and funds each year about six online performance projects by artists or companies from the contemporary theatre scene. The winning projects are monitored by the organisers, through meetings between partners, artists and academic tutors. During the five years in which this experimental residency programme was developed, the initial strong interest waned in the most recent editions, especially in terms of audience participation. While in the first year, RD received 398 applications and reached about 600 individual spectators, in 2022, it received 110 applications and the number of estimated spectators dropped to around 100; in subsequent years, the number of proposals stabilized between 50 and 60.

Through a qualitative analysis based on interviews and focus groups with spectators, this research seeks to understand how people engage with this performative practice and the differences they perceive in experiencing a live performance on screen. The study also aims to deepen our understanding of the dynamics of mediatization and the transformation of liveness. While it is widely acknowledged that we live in an era where "live" performative forms are no longer confined to traditional physical theatre or concert spaces, much remains to be explored about how audiences navigate and make sense of their role in relation to mediatized live events. To this end, it is first essential to clarify the mediatization framework, which provides many of the conceptual tools underpinning this research.

2. The Mediatization Approach

Adopting the mediatization perspective (Boccia Artieri, 2015; Couldry & Hepp, 2017) in examining socio-technological transformations, including those within performing arts (Gemini & Brilli, 2023), invites to analyse the impact of media on contemporary society without resorting to technological determinism. This approach conceptualizes media as processes emerging from the interplay between technological materiality and social practices, where individuals, groups, and institutions

actively shape meanings, communication models, usage expectations, and imaginaries. Mediatization, therefore, does not imply an external and deterministic influence of media logics on social processes; rather, it explores how individual and collective agency can be enacted through these logics.

In the field of artistic and cultural performances, however, the mediatization perspective remains relatively marginal. Despite significant theoretical and practical interest from theatre artists, scholars, and organisers regarding media, there is often a lack of clarity about their broader influence on the performing arts as a social domain. Although theoretical reflections on theatrical intermediality have accompanied these practices since their origins more than one century ago (Giesekam, 2007), such analyses have typically concentrated on media logics of staging or documenting performances. Less attention has been given to how mediatization shapes the *common-sense* underlying production, distribution, promotion, and audience reception practices.

The term "mediatization" has been employed in Theatre and Performance Studies since the late 1980s (Georgi, 2014), but its usage primarily denotes technological mediation of theatre, or – drawing from Debord and Baudrillard – the penetration of mass media spectacle ideology into artistic and political spheres. Although insightful, this view proves insufficient for fully grasping the contemporary societal role of live performance and how the concept of "live" sheds light on shifts in communicative patterns and relational expectations.

Here, the starting point is to integrate a sociological approach to mediatization with an analysis of the media-specific traits and intermedial ecologies of performance. This framework calls for a few clarifications beyond the more common ways media are conceptualized in the performing arts.

Firstly, mediatization highlights that media influence extends beyond their physical use to include formats, practices, and protocols developed in other media contexts.

Secondly, it allows overcoming the notion of a singular "media logic" (Altheide & Snow, 1979), traditionally understood as a strategy for gaining media visibility, favouring instead an analysis of multiple media logics not necessarily tied to circulation potential.

Thirdly, it necessitates observing media logics not only within staged performances but also across the interconnected, yet distinct routines of production, distribution, archiving, and promotion practiced by artists.

Fourthly, it moves beyond perspectives focused primarily on hybridization and boundary-crossing, emphasizing instead how media contribute to establishing new categorical distinctions (Boccia Artieri, Gemini, 2019).

Three core trajectories of the mediatization process can be singled out (Gemini, Brilli, 2020): the mediatization of *presence*, of the *performative text*, and of *communicative roles*. These dynamics illustrate how media technologies, formats, imaginaries, and expectations shape both the design and reception of live performance, modifying the sense-making distinctions that define a performative event and its boundaries.

The mediatization of presence concerns the boundary between presence and absence of the performance's agents, manifested by technologies that extend the performance across space and time or introduce new performing agents (avatars, robots, algorithms, holograms), thereby altering how spectators perceive presence.

The mediatization of the performative text transforms the relationship between text and para-texts (Gray, 2010; Conner, 2013), redefining the boundaries of when a performance begins or ends. Notable examples include the transmedia expansion of perfor-

mances and the growing importance of promotional materials in shaping an event's meaning.
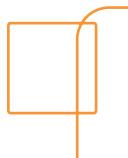
The mediatization of communicative roles affects the boundary between performer and audience, transforming the channels and relational expectations between these poles.

3. The Audiences of Digital Performance

The relationship between theatre and digital media has a history that long predates the pandemic crisis. The dialogue between theatre and digital technologies is at the core of a vast literature that we can broadly categorise around three axes:

- *Digital performance*: the use of digital technologies for the performance construction and how they enrich the theatrical aesthetic repertoire in the creation of inter-medial- (Masura, 2020), mixed-reality- (Benford & Giannachi, 2011), or cyber-performances (Papagiannouli, 2016).
- *Digitisation of theatre*: the use of digital channels for theatre dissemination, for example, in event cinema and livecasting (AEA Consulting, 2016; Sullivan, 2020).
- *Digital communication of theatre*: the impact of digital media on the communication of the performing arts (Hadley, 2017), which involves innovative dynamics of interaction with spectators helpful in audience development (Walmsley, 2019), fosters spectators' expectations of complicity, co-creation and prosumerism (Australia Council for the Arts, 2021) but it also imply a new significant amount of relational labour (Baym, 2018).

A fourth theme that cuts across these three areas is how digitisation affects theatre audiences' experiences and attitudes. The "participatory condition" (Barney, et al., 2016), stimulated by social media platforms, seems to foster expectations of complicity, co-creation and prosumerism on the part of spectators (Australia Council for the Arts, 2021), which opens new potentials and drawbacks, such as the penetration of work responsibilities into leisure time (Harvie, 2013).

However, compared to research centred on the artistic and technical innovations of digital performance, studies addressing the audience experience remain relatively scarce. In fact, during the pandemic years, various cultural organisations and non-academic groups launched extensive inquiries into how people were following performing arts online. Yet these inquiries showed several shortcomings: (1) they were carried out without comparative frameworks and in a fragmented manner; (2) they often relied on self-selected samples drawn from the promoters' own networks; (3) they were motivated by short-term, tactical aims to evaluate audiences' willingness to return to physical venues; (4) they were based on self-reported consumption frequency; and (5) they devoted limited attention to the nuances of spectatorship or to qualitative investigation.

Among the large-scale studies employing appropriate methodologies, one point on which many analyses concur is that online performing arts have enabled multiple sectors to maintain their relationships with audiences. Instead of causing a substitution effect, this phenomenon seems to function in a complementary way: following theatre and performance online is seen as a form of engagement in its own right, potentially

promoting more frequent in-person participation (Creative Australia 2023; Leguina et al., 2025). At the same time, it has not produced a meaningful expansion of the overall spectator base. One of the most extensive studies on how the pandemic affected cultural life in the UK (Walmsley et al., 2022) notes that digital performance content has improved accessibility and, in some cases, even boosted theatre consumption when compared to pre-pandemic levels, but only among those already interested in the performing arts. The same study also highlights that the most effective audience engagement has been achieved by connecting digital offerings to local contexts, for example by involving schools and community networks in viewing and discussing performances online.

While age might initially seem to be a barrier, it does not appear to have been decisive. Aebischer and Nicholas (2020) observe that the age profile of those who attended theatrical performances in person before the pandemic, and then via Zoom in 2020, shows no sharp divisions: in and of itself, digital viewing does not seem to deter dedicated theatregoers of different age groups. Instead, what varies is the type of benefit sought. As indicated by *Audience Development… In a Hybrid World* (The Audience Agency 2021), the tendency to watch performances online is not strongly influenced by age, whereas the inclination to engage in participatory activities is notably higher for those under 35.

It is still essential to recognize that the pleasures and behaviours tied to digital engagement also depend on the performance type. One of the few studies on online audiences conducted after 2022 (Creative Australia 2023) draws a noteworthy distinction between "online theatre" – theatrical plays streamed online – and "digital theatre", defined as a live theatre performance that incorporates digital technology as an essential part of the show (the format our case study deals with). Regarding online theatre, respondents often feel that the experience cannot rival the quality of a live event, particularly in emotional and social terms. With digital theatre, that perception is less pronounced, but participants express concerns about devices distracting from onstage action, as well as uncertainty about preparing for a more interactive, technology-driven experience.

4. Methods

n order to address the research questions previously outlined, this study spans four years: 2021 (when some restrictions on theatres were still in place), 2022, 2023, and 2024. Throughout these years, we followed every stage of the project by attending organisational meetings, tutoring sessions with the artists, and events involving the audience, all in the role of observers.

We conducted 52 interviews with spectators, using different sampling strategies in the early and later editions. In 2021 we ran 15 semi-structured interviews, followed by 9 in 2022. The sample was mostly female (19 women, 5 men), and many participants were closely connected to the project (11 were friends, relatives, or sector professionals). Although this may suggest a sampling bias, the organisers confirmed that it mirrors the actual RD audience. To widen profiles in later years, we sought participants less close to the project. In 2023 we held two focus groups with 16 students from a dance-focused high school who attended RD as part of a school initiative. In 2024 we organised three focus groups with 12 participants in ad hoc "viewing groups", mainly young adults aged 20–30 with higher education. The interview guide was consistent across all phases and focused on three areas: (1) the viewing experience; (2) the role of digital tools and spaces in the performing arts; and (3) each interviewee's spectator profile.

Additionally, we conducted 8 interviews with the project's organisers and 16 with the participating artists. Although the findings of these interviews lie beyond the scope of this article, they contributed to the contextualization and interpretation of the audience interviews.

5. Engaging with Digital Performance: Analysis of the Interviews

5.1. *The Viewing Context*

The first major point in examining the relationship with digital performance concerns how the audience has managed the viewing context. At RD, the digital performances are showcased to the audience during the Digital Residency Week, a seven-day period typically scheduled between October and November. This week is structured as an actual online festival, with appointments set for live viewing or time windows allowing asynchronous access to some of the works. This occurs in a generally non-holiday period, with events spread across the week rather than concentrated on weekends.

This scheduling setup has remained mostly unchanged across the various RD editions, except for a minority of projects that included a part of physical-space performance. Yet, audiences have responded to this temporal structure differently over time.

In the 2020 and 2021 editions, shaped by venue closures and lockdowns, spectators apparently invested more effort in crafting their experiential framework. Engaging with a screen-based performance demanded setting up a spatial, temporal, and relational environment to focus on the event and set it apart from overlapping digital obligations and distractions. Unable to attend a physical theatre, people's homes or classrooms (where some pieces were watched) had to acquire that "sacredness" often associated with a theatrical space.

> I used my computer at home in the evening, turned off the lights as advised, and wore headphones. I was pretty isolated, though my dad briefly distracted me by trying to see what I was watching. (RD2021)[1]

> I watched both shows alone in my room, on my bed or armchair, via laptop with earbuds. The lights were dimmed. (RD2021)

> The vibe was spot-on; we turned off the classroom lights, and the sound system was solid – breaths, whispers, water, the gate creaking, all the sound effects came through vividly. (RD2021)

Initially, spectators employed rituals and adjustments to segment the digital stream, ensuring the performance didn't blur into work or entertainment content. This ritualistic effort fades in later editions, particularly among returning RD attendees, for whom preparing a dedicated "site" becomes less critical and more casual.

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1. For each transcript, we indicate in parentheses the year of the RD edition to which it refers.

> Last year's experience struck me more than this year's. Maybe because we were locked down, I dove in deeper. This year, the "wow, let's check it out" vibe was gone, and I watched more passively. (RD2022)

A live, on-screen performance is no longer a novelty in itself and tends to be perceived as "just another piece of digital content". This is reflected not only in spectators' waning efforts to shape a "home stage" but also in their reduced openness to fully embracing the artists' suggested modes of engagement.

> I didn't prep much – watched on my computer at home with someone else, which was a slight distraction. Still, I was engaged, though with Radio Pentothal [a 2024 performance], a radio-style show, it felt natural to drift off momentarily before tuning back in. (RD2024)

> I watched alone in my room on the computer, no headphones despite the suggestion – can't recall why I skipped them. A bit of connection anxiety, but I saw it all without much setup. (RD2024)

Thus, in this case, there is no clear emergence of shared, codified audience practices specific to digital performance. Unlike artists and organisers – who experienced an increase in digital abilities and reflexivity in participating in similar projects (Brilli et al., 2023) – RD audiences do not mention any recurring patterns that have carried over across multiple online performances, nor from their pandemic experiences. The fluidity and the freedom of the reception context for live screen performances thus stands out as a hallmark of this aesthetic form.

5.2. *Experiencing Material Constraints*

A second significant issue relates to the material constraints encountered by viewers during the project: registration systems for platforms, unclear levels of interactivity, chat functions, the requirement to download software, and so on. For some spectators – especially those with a solid theatrical background – online viewing is already in itself a hurdle, and active resistance emerges in certain cases.

> I watched alone on my outdated PC, which limited my view. Not sure if it's my fault for not knowing computers – this online thing was my first and last try. (RD2022)

> I shared the invite, and some found even simple platform access less than straightforward. (RD2021)

> I tried out the video game as well, but it asked me to register, and I didn't want to. It's not that I was unwilling... Actually, I think I just wasn't prepared for that kind of format. (RD2022)

For many, these difficulties are not caused by unforeseen mishaps or exclusive niche technology but by the wide array of access and interaction modes proposed. In some situations, interactivity shifts from being perceived as an enhancement of audience agency to being seen as a binding commitment or even a form of fatigue.

> In my view, we have to acknowledge that these new forms of artistic communication require more attention and active engagement from the participating audience if they are to be effective. (RD2021)
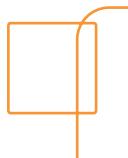
> I attended the performance at 9:00 p.m. I was home alone, finishing dinner when it started, so I was taken aback when I realized it wouldn't just be a matter of watching, but also taking part. At that point, I really tried to focus completely on the performance and the experience. (RD2022)

> I couldn't quite keep up, or follow the chat. I did write something, but it was moving so fast that I didn't have time to think of a prompt that made sense. [...] Apart from that small hitch, it was interesting – maybe not the one that left me with the biggest impression, but certainly the one that had me rushing the most. (RD2024)

This highlights a balance between experimentation and accessibility, an issue extending beyond RD to online performances at large (Creative Australia 2023; Brilli et al., 2023). Each digital project shapes its own setting with distinct affordances: on one hand, spectators can feel disoriented by the sheer variety of access modes and rules of engagement; on the other, standardizing such environments too strictly could dampen the spirit of experimentation with the medium, a core element of this artistic approach. The opacity of digital environments – the struggle to instantly grasp their affordances – isn't always a flaw; it can become a defining trait, lending digital performances allure by leaving room for discovery.

> It's a situation that allows me to get used to a not-so-obvious language, and I find this potential fusion really useful. Being a spectator of this kind of content isn't something you grasp right away. (RD2021)

Furthermore, a private screen – compared to projection in a large hall – can offer a constraint that sharpens focus in ways otherwise unattainable. Although perspectives and viewing methods vary, several spectators appreciate the specificity of a "close-up screen", which is less immersive but better at funnelling one's gaze.

> Computer viewing clarified things – if I'd been there live, I might not have focused on the projection from afar. Online, it held my attention, even if I didn't catch every detail. (RD2022)

> A dirt-covered stage would be tough to show live. Some effects only work this way – you notice things because your focus narrows. (RD2022)

> Theatre doesn't let you see from multiple angles. You can shift seats – stalls, gallery, boxes – but not stand among performers or backstage unless you're one. That's a physical-world limit. (RD2023)

One could argue that each digital performance might establish its own distinctive visual connection among viewer, screen, and performer, which would mean that the various audience accounts cannot be traced to a single "specific" digital performance quality but rather to the uniqueness of each artistic endeavour. This argument holds only to a degree. Unlike theatrical constraints, which are mostly social, digital ones impose material limits with greater arbitrariness: user freedom hinges on the creators' design. For instance, if a text chat is enabled, the audience cannot send images or sounds. They can approximate visuals through textual characters, but they remain bound to that material condition.

By comparison, while the audience's actions in physical space are certainly constrained, it is largely by social conventions rather than technical limitations. In a theatre, the audience has the material ability to distract the actors, move closer to them, praise or heckle out loud, yet social norms and expectations channel these possibilities.

5.3. *The Perceptions of Interaction Levels*

If digital performance is shaped by the arbitrary nature of material constraints, it follows that the level of interaction available to users arises from a combination of the "dramaturgy of interaction" devised by artists (Pizzo, 2017) and the affordances of the platforms used. In the piece *Teatropostaggio da un milione di dollari*, for instance, which takes place in a Telegram chat, the direction alternates moments where the audience is prompted to contribute to the chat flow – through text, images, memes, emojis, and polls – and segments in which viewers passively observe the performers' exchanges.

Figure 1. MALTE & Collettivo ØNAR – *Il teatropostaggio da un milione di dollari* (*Residenze Digitali* 2023). Screenshot from the performance on Telegram. Since 2025, *Teatropostaggio* has been a Pallaksch production.

As is also evident from the other examples mentioned by interviewees, the wide variety of performative devices in RD's projects means that each time, the audience must explore anew the extent of available actions. From an affective point of view, experiencing this condition swings between excitement and amusement on the one hand, and a sense of overload or disorientation on the other.

> I posted in the chat, throwing off what the performers were attempting to do, which meant maybe I enjoyed the performance itself a bit less. Sometimes I paid less attention, busy thinking about what to say. So that got me pondering the two sides of audience interaction – spectators must participate somewhat yet also be guided. No real exchange happened among participants, maybe because we didn't know exactly what was going on, or what was happening with the chats. (RD2021)

> One thing that came to mind during *Them* is that once I started choosing songs, it distracted me from watching the ballet, because it was fun – I wanted to test all the songs that were available. Going back and forth between Spotify and the video eventually pulled me away from the performance. (RD2022)

As many interviewees point out, this relationship with interactivity tends to be fluid. Two broad spectator stances, in particular, tend to take shape: one oriented toward *accountability* for the performance, in which interactive behaviour aims to ensure the success of the performance:

> I recall Nicola Galli's (RD2020), a dance piece where the outcome was influenced by your choices. That part was stimulating because you got pulled into the work, you were there with him, and there was this mutual exchange. That, in a way, is an intriguing element that lends a certain rationale to a digital piece. (RD2021)

> Having to decide on behalf of this new human really shook me; it was an enormous responsibility, and I definitely felt it. (RD2024)

Then there is a more *playful* stance, which happens when exploring or even challenging the boundaries of what is possible within that environment. Both stances may even manifest in the same viewer at different points in a performance; hence, they do not directly align with the spectator's identity but rather with the role they assume at various moments.

> I found *Non Player Human* fun because you can interact and decide what to do, and it even amused me to watch myself doing it, in the sense that I found it funny how sometimes I tried to be logical – like, "He has a headache, so let's have him put on a sweater to keep warm". Those were the kinds of thoughts I had. But sometimes I'd say, "No, let's give him something crazy to do". I don't remember all the specific options, but sometimes I kept it somewhat realistic, and at other times I just said, "Oh well, let's play around more" (RD2024).

One particularly noteworthy example is the live Twitch performance of *Non Player Human* (2024). Drawing on the "NPC" format, the audience can vote on what the performer does next. During one of the performances, the choices included making the protagonist change outfits, leading to the artists' Twitch channel being banned and forcing
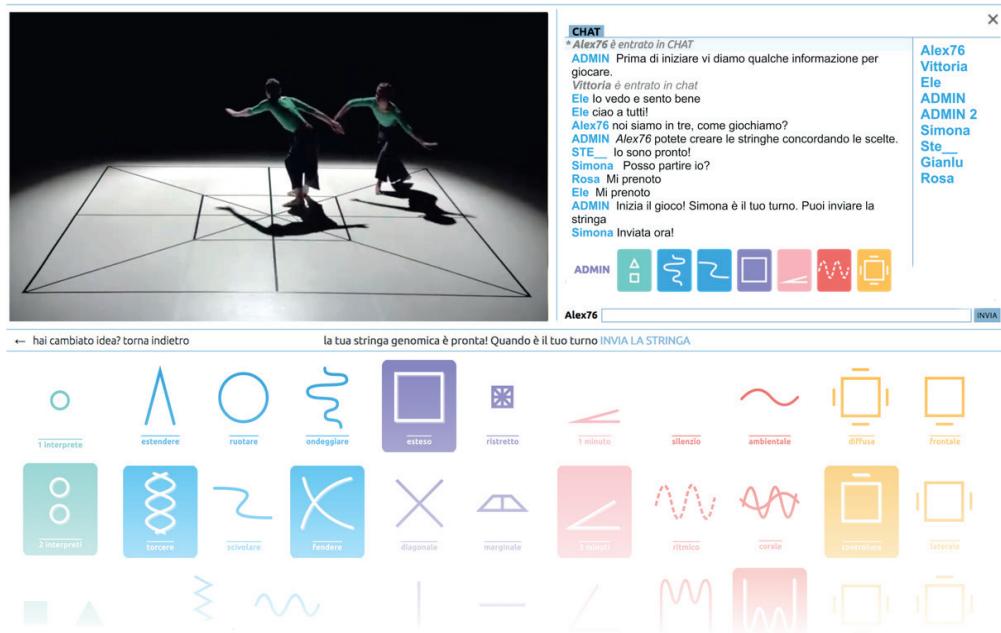
Figure 2. Nicola Galli – Genoma scenico | dispositivo digitale (*Residenze Digitali* 2020). Screenshot from the online performance.

them to continue the show in another Twitch channel. As one spectator recounts, the event was met with both guilt and acceptance, because pushing the platform's limits was understood not merely as personal gratification but as an integral part of the digital performance:

> I'm one of the culprits who ended up getting the channel banned. So at first there was definitely some regret, because we had no idea how things would continue. But on the other hand, I thought, "Well, we kinda asked for it". That's part of the game. Obviously, I think the guys who worked on it might have thought ahead a bit more, but I also figure that was the point – to discover the platform's limits and see what it means to be online, that there are also restrictions. So after all that, I accepted it. The show got cut off that way because of our own choice. (RD2024)

Not all projects make the terms of engagement equally transparent. In some, guidelines on how to interact are established; in others, certain behaviours are implied; still others deliberately leave the degrees of participation unclear, encouraging the audience to experiment with their own agency. Nevertheless, even for viewers who have never witnessed similar performances, stepping into an "interactive spectator" role appears relatively straightforward.

> It felt like the virtual screen generated this constant urge to "over-interact" almost as a way to compensate for not physically being there like we normally would be. It's as if everyone felt compelled to reaffirm their presence through the channels they had, so they all responded to every prompt, seized every moment for an input – stuff that obviously wouldn't happen in person. (RD2024)

This does not mean interaction can't be experienced with frustration or embarrassment; rather, screen-based performance calls for the spectator to "lean in" by carrying out visually or textually perceptible actions that compensate for the absence of shared physical space.
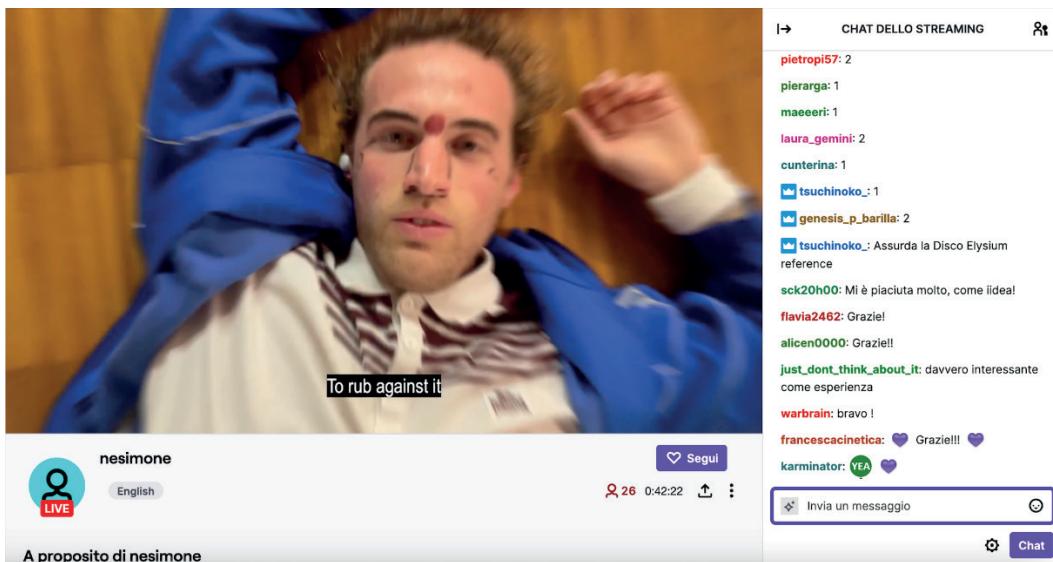
Figure 3. Simone Arganini and Rocco Punghellini – Non Player Human (*Residenze Digitali* 2024). Screenshot from the performance on Twitch.

5.4. *The Relations with Other Spectators*

Another facet of audience experience in live screen-based digital performances is interaction with fellow spectators. While acknowledging that each performance's setup yields different modes of interactivity, there are still recurring experiences and perceptions among spectators, even across multiple editions. Several accounts describe a more direct connection with the performer – sometimes more intimate than in a traditional theatre setting – but accompanied by a lesser sense of shared presence with other audience members.

> If I'm watching it in my room or living room – basically, at home – I feel less judged. And the start and finish of the show, and the in-between, all feel different, even something as simple as not having applause. Sure, some people might miss that, but for me, it actually helps me dive deeper into the performance, reflect more. (RD2024)

It's worth noting that most of these performances explicitly ask for and make other spectators' participation visible. Yet the textual presence of others differs from physical presence; it is not necessarily "less intense", but one can withdraw from it more easily. This point is well illustrated by a spectator's remark:

> In *Non Player Human*, I watched the others' responses – everyone was typing 1-2-1-2 – and when I'd see a lot of 1s, I'd be like, "Ugh, but I chose 2". It kinda bugged me, because I didn't want to be too influenced. So even though I was watching alone, I saw that almost as a stimulus. (RD2024)

On one hand, there is relief in being free of "others' gaze", giving a feeling of being able to form a more personal and less inhibited bond with what one sees. On the other hand, the emotional tension that derives from collectively sharing a performance is reduced. Experiencing these contrasting dynamics with the audience also prompts reflection on in-person live performance's distinctiveness.

Personally, I didn't have much trouble focusing; in fact, I might say that being in a comfortable, familiar setting allowed me to pay more attention to the show's themes. I found the real issue to be a drop in the intensity of the experience, not a distraction problem, because I realized what it means to watch a performance surrounded by people and just how significant that is. They're not just other folks consuming the same thing as you, but part of the environment you're in at the moment you're watching a performance. Being alone in front of the screen without their feedback – without their emotional tension – made the show feel a little more cinematic, almost like I was watching something happening without truly participating. And that's interesting, because it might highlight something fundamentally important to our experience of theatre but which we rarely focus on, likely because that withdrawal of the audience – of all the other spectators – just doesn't happen when you go to a real theatre. (RD2024)

As this spectator acutely articulates, merely knowing that the viewing is shared does not recreate the collective nature of theatre attendance. At RD, the audience might be *simultaneous* but is not *co-present* (Gemini and Brilli, 2023)[2], lacking the potential for physical, reciprocal impact. However, that doesn't necessarily dilute the experience; in fact, for some viewers, it represents a liberation from the constraints of shared presence, opening a kind of closeness reminiscent of one-to-one performances (Heddon et al. 2012) or confessional dynamics typical of social networks' digital intimacy.

5.5. *Testing as a Spectatorial Posture*

A final thread in spectatorial practices before digital performance is the audience's analytical attitude. Spectators of varying backgrounds and experience levels often adopt a stance akin to "user testing". This trend is partly tied to RD's nature as an artistic residency program, casting the audience as evaluators of works in progress. The research method – gathering last edition's interviewees into a viewing group – further amplifies this critical, exploratory attitude. Nonetheless, it emerges that this approach goes beyond assessing the artistic content, pushing spectators to pay close attention to the technological implementation and to the devices themselves. Exploring affordances takes on the character of "unboxing" the performative device.

I wanted to figure out how the space was set up, because it all looked like one continuous setting, but on each screen, you'd see just one aspect, and sometimes you'd see someone moving from one area into another. So I was trying to understand the floor plan of the place they were in – I thought it was pretty interesting. (RD2024)

This testing mode challenges spectators to balance experimenting with the device against a more conventional spectating posture that follows a dramaturgical flow. Some interviewees explicitly mention that, in their experience, "the device is the content".

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2. We use the term physical co-presence without restricting it to a solid, three-dimensional setting. A performance in a digitally generated environment – where the audience is present by proxy through avatars and can act in ways that affect others' virtual presence – can still be considered co-presence, as long as a form of mutual physical influence is enabled. This is therefore not an impossible scenario for a digital performance, but rather a still underexplored avenue in such projects.

I approached it like an investigation, because at first I didn't understand what was happening. Then at some point, I pinned the AI's whiteboard onto my screen and tried to read everything written there, seeing if it matched what they were saying or what they weren't saying. Occasionally, I focused more on what they were saying and how it differed from what was on the whiteboard – even the lyrics of the songs they sang. I really liked that sense of discovery, of figuring out what I wasn't getting. (RD2024)

Occasionally, this experimentation transcends the performative device, becoming a chance to explore unfamiliar platforms and tech.

I tried out Twitch a bit while watching these performances, and I liked finally having a reason to do so, because I'd never used it before and discovered it's fun. So for certain performances, it was even the most interesting aspect, in my opinion. For example, with *Non Player Human*, I was more curious about how the interactivity worked, which is basically the content in itself. So for me, in some performances, that aspect was what sold me the most. And *Metabolo*, that first phase where you enter the world and can move around and explore – I think it's only possible with these kinds of technologies. I find it really cool and immersive, which is crucial. I love being able to enter a world via a computer or device. (RD2024)

I definitely felt the impact of the technology in the play that got banned live on Twitch; that's basically technology at its core. Then there was that piece with artificial intelligence, with its frenetic writing, which definitely gave me a sense of something technical, because in the end, technology and our frantic rhythms are somewhat connected. (RD2024)

In the digital performance context, artistic experience can drive the acquisition of new types of knowledge, from specific skills to a broader grasp of the broader socio-technical environment. This understanding does not necessarily require explicit thematization by the performance; rather, it often emerges from engaging with the medium itself.
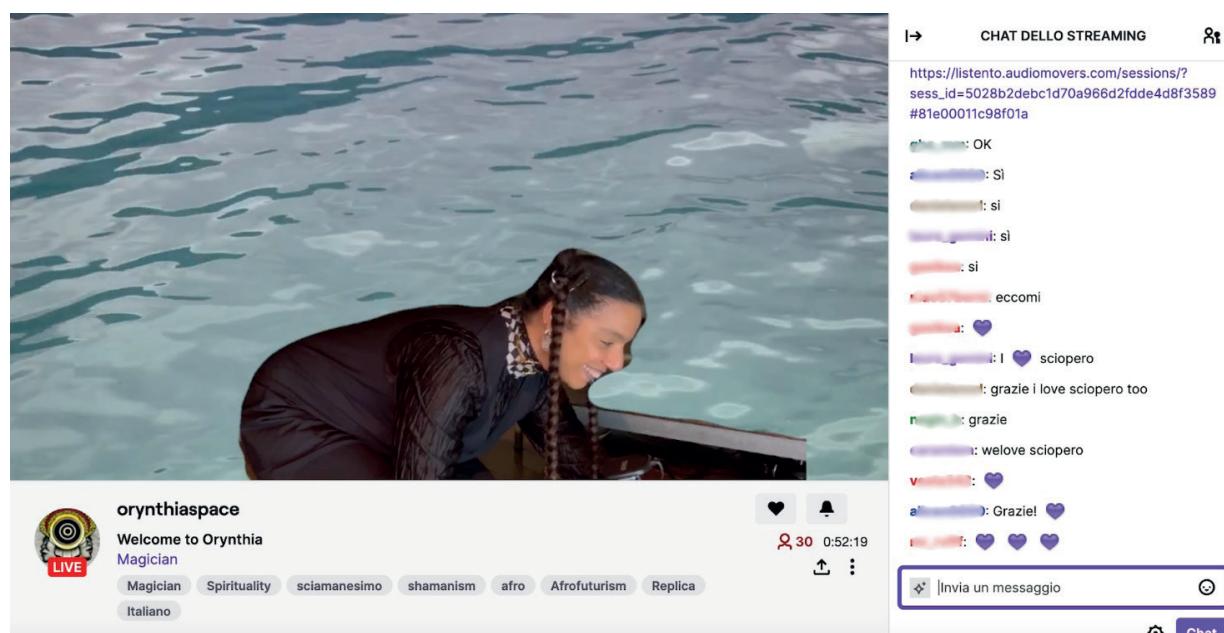

Figure 4. Valerie Tameu – Metabolo II: Orynthia (*Residenze Digitali* 2024). Screenshot from the performance on Twitch.

6. Conclusions

Returning to our initial research question, we find no well-established or broadly shared spectator practices that can be defined as "specific" to digital performance. Nonetheless, certain patterns do emerge in how audiences experience live screen-based digital performances. Despite the variety of projects analysed, the diversity of their contexts, and the differing personal backgrounds of spectators, one theme cuts across them all: a willingness to experiment with an unfamiliar kind of spectatorship – one that merges theatrical and screen-based modes of entertainment with the logic of technological trial.

This stance poses a challenge for spectators, who may struggle to navigate the shifting modes of engagement, lacking a shared set of conventions to guide how and to what extent they should interact, where to direct their focus, or what responsibility they bear for the performance's success. Yet, this disorientation also unlocks creative possibilities and freedoms not typically found in other artistic or entertainment forms. Though the experience can be demanding, its broad acceptance among interviewees points to a mediatization of the roles of performer and spectator, mirroring the mediatization of presence and performative text. In other words, despite the difficulties, spectators manage to weave their traditional theatrical experience into the skills and practices of digital life.

In digital performances, being an audience member is a role relearned with each encounter. The spectatorial relationship that artists and organisers seek to establish is not predetermined but emerges through experimentation. This openness to creative potential, however, clashes with the demands of promotion and reaching a wide audience. Here, the fallacy of simplistic myths – particularly prevalent during the pandemic – that envisioned digital platforms as a "theatre with an infinite audience" becomes apparent. While live digital performances do reduce transportation costs compared to physical ones (though not eliminating them entirely), it is misleading to assume this automatically lowers the effort and resources needed to attract viewers. Digital theatre may overcome physical distances, but it widens network distances: the challenge shifts from drawing people to a theatre to embedding the theatre within users' digital streams, where competition for attention is far more intense than in spatially bounded settings.

Much like a site-specific project, guiding audiences to a digital space – one they would not typically frequent – requires significant resources and effort. In the post-pandemic context, digital performance should be understood as a form of *digital site-specific performance*. From this viewpoint, organisers must foster networks of trust that encourage audiences to engage with proposals spanning *trans-medially* (across channels and platforms), *trans-materially* (between digital and physical realms), and *trans-temporally* (linking different stages of the work).

In this sense, research on Future Screens finds a particularly fertile field of inquiry in digital site-specific performances. Although they certainly do not dominate contemporary media consumption, they foreground the changing relationship with screens within the spectator's experience, as audiences are asked to think through – and reflexively enact – a mode of spectatorship suited to on-screen liveness.

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