

POSTMODERNISM AND TIKTOK
THE SHIFTING AESTHETICS OF DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Jonah Bobilin
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Department of Theatre and Dance

A Brief Introduction to TikTok

Social media sits at the center of a revolution in performance. In the beginning, audiences sat in the theatre, then the cinema, then our living rooms watching television, and now we are in a new age of performance, one which can be experienced anywhere and can be created by anyone. It is a form of media that moves beyond the social and into the performative, as Richard Schechner puts it, “this flexibility of social media means that it can be used not only for personal contact but to convene a public in the digital commons.”¹ The recent popularity of TikTok demonstrates a shifting in performance aesthetics as illustrated by the app’s design and the way users interact with it.

TikTok is particularly relevant to this discussion of shifting performance aesthetics because of its recent virality and particularly clear illustration of these recent developments. TikTok was the most popular app downloaded in 2020, is available in 154 countries, and US TikTok users average 858 minutes per month on the app.² Says Guinaudeau, Votta, and Munger:

TikTok represents the synthesis of four of the most powerful trends in social media: a feed that displays many distinct and complete pieces of content per minute; the televisual medium that has always been the most broadly popular and powerful; algorithmic recommendation that structures the user’s experience to a greater extent than any major social media platform to date; and a mobile-only interface designed to take advantage of a smartphone’s user-facing camera.³

Notably, TikTok is a form of dramatic performance (or a hybrid of social media and dramatic performance) being that the primary communicative medium is short video. This is distinct from other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter which respectively operate on the non-dramatic mediums of image and text. TikTok is also primarily “structured around memetic processes, rather than interpersonal connections,”⁴ unlike most other platforms.

This paper will examine the extent to which the design and usage of TikTok by its community indicates a new dominant performance form in the public sphere that shifts away from dramatic realism and will specifically argue that TikTok incorporates key tenets of postmodern performance.

Framing, Non-realistic Performance Styles, and Internet Aesthetics

By existing within the frame of a phone, performance on TikTok is automatically foregrounded and estranged. Keir Elam writes in the *Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, “When theatrical semiosis is alienated, made ‘strange’ rather than automatic, the spectator is encouraged to take note of the semiotic means, to become aware of the sign-vehicle and its operations.”⁵ This discussion references Brecht’s notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt* — to defamiliarize or to make the familiar strange⁶ — which is often achieved through various metatheatrical techniques that call attention to the performance as a fabrication.

By appropriating Elam’s discussion of dramatic foregrounding as well as the discourse surrounding Brecht’s *Verfremdung* and applying it to digital performance, one can see that all digital media is inherently estranged by existing within a screen. However, it is not merely the screen that foregrounds the performance, indeed the screen of one’s phone is quite different from that of a cinema where the audience sits in the dark and by convention is meant to focus solely upon the film. With cinema and television, the goal is for the spectator to become entranced by the fictional world, to “lose themselves,” and the aesthetics are designed to this end. Conversely, phone apps, such as TikTok, have a graphical interface which specifically foregrounds the dramatic event. The spectator sees text such as “For You,” hashtags, and sometimes a note from the creator overlaying each video as well as an icon for the creator, a heart-shaped button to leave likes, a comment button, a sharing button, and a button to find the original audio used in the video. Additional text frequently overlays videos as captions, titles, and to provide additional commentary which is not vocalized. Introductory text may be used to set up spectators’ assumptions in a manner comparable to Brecht’s idea of *literarization*;⁷ however this notion goes

further on TikTok by actively encouraging spectators to interact with the performance and add their own text via the comment section, which may then be used to introduce a subsequent video.

Beyond the interface, lip-synched audio or voiceovers as well as open captions are also used to as means to perform and comment upon the performance. An interesting recent convention is the use of an automated voice (such as Siri) for these voiceovers, which contributes to the estrangement and digital metatheatricality. “Because TikTok is an extension of Musical.ly, popular culture songs are an essential component of the platform and included in most videos, especially dance challenges.”⁸ TikTok encourages users to sample and reuse existing audios in their content. The use of lip-synching, narration, and external audio underneath videos creates a disunity between action and sound, which estranges the performance and further pushes it away from any sense of realism.

Perhaps the most novel feature of TikTok is that it is designed to encourage participation in trends that operate via meme format (which shall be discussed later). Suffice it to say that the use of a meme format, as a form a codification, is not unlike the estrangement effects Brecht observed in *Jingju*⁹, and further contributes to an awareness of the event as performative. By using a meme format, even media forms like the news (which many youths might consider boring) may be rendered interesting and novel as evidenced by the successful TikTok account by the Washington Post, which during the past US election cycle used meme conventions to produce a viral video reminding citizen of each presidential debate.¹⁰

Performance styles on TikTok are also markedly different from the dominant style of realism seen in theatre, film, and television indicating a cultural shift in the acceptance of other less realistic styles. On TikTok, performers may directly address their viewers, and they often do so. Indeed, there seems to be no pretense that the performance is anything other than an artistic

fabrication, which departs from the dramatic realist convention of audience enthrallment.

Additionally, performances may be diegetic, the “story time” is a common format in which a creator simply recounts a real-world experience that they had. While we tend to be extremely aware that what we are watching is not real, we can still appreciate a good performance.

Schechner writes that “social media can be seen as a social laboratory in which individuals can experience different personalities in order to construct/display different selves,”¹¹ and he further argues that digital living is especially performative because we have many powerful tools to construct this image of self. Filters make it easy to redesign the way we look, and editing allows us to remove that which we wish to remain hidden. These filters can be used as “digital costuming” to indicate character, but generally do so in an discernibly non-realistic sense.

On TikTok, there is a heavy use of archetypes (and gender roles) to establish character because they are easy to perform and be understood. Characters are worn as masks in an almost Brechtian way and tend to be defined through emphasizing social roles, class, and age in an archetypal and analytic manner rather than one that is emotional, uniquely personal, and fully developed. Certain gestures and truisms are selected and represented while the rest is not; in this way, the performance is often metonymic and we usually do not lose sight of the performer beneath. One can behave in a certain way and people will know that they are pretending to be an “influencer,” a YouTube “beauty guru,” or some other staple role of the internet. For example, Mark Gaetano frequently plays school secretaries and teachers whom he depicts metonymically through voice and movement.¹² Gaetano remains uncostumed and makes no attempts to obscure himself as the performer while enacting the roles. Gaetano’s work is of specific relevancy to this discussion because he points out fundamental truths in our world using habitual movements

derived from the lifelong performance of certain societal roles, this is to say that he employs Brecht’s concept of *gestus*¹³ in his gesture of typing and walking albeit almost certainly unknowingly.¹⁴ Yet, these performances do not devolve into two-dimensional stereotype because the depictions are not misrepresentations or lacking dimensionality, rather they revel in what is most key to the character and reject everything else. After all, the fully-fleshed-out character (with a complete dramatic arc) of the realist theatre is hardly necessary for 60-second TikToks.

TikTok’s Collective Dramaturgy

One of the most fascinating innovations of TikTok is the way it manages to completely disrupt such concepts as “high and low,” central meaning, linearity, and traditional audience-subject relationship, which it accomplishes through a *collective dramaturgy*.

“On TikTok, the default page is titled ‘For You’ and features videos that have been algorithmically curated to correspond with each user’s interests and engagement habits, not videos posted by friends.”¹⁵ This means that the spectator experiences a subjective stream of media by amateur performers (like themselves) curated by an algorithm as dramaturg which is trained off on a data set representing the collective consciousness of the community. In understanding this notion of collective dramaturgy, let us make one point clear, the algorithm is simply a filter, it is not sentient, hence it alone cannot be considered *the dramaturg*. That role is played by the digital community — a collective that is equally in control and individually out of control. Thus, the algorithm is simply the 21st century tool by which the collective accomplishes its decentralized dramaturgical process.

The spectator-performer dialectic is further subverted when we consider that everyone is both a spectator and performer upon the digital stage, and that we are also simultaneously performing multiple roles (and arguably also performing multiple spectator roles). Hence the individual spectator becomes an interlocutor in the dramatic conversation while the overall community acts as a moderator.

Elam discusses the Russian formalists’ differentiation between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot) in his text,¹⁶ and expanding on these ideas, William Feng describes the “infer[ance of] the coherent *fabula* based on the incomplete *syuzhet*” in his article *Metonymy and Visual Representation: towards a social semiotic framework of visual metonymy*.¹⁷ Of course,

postmodern performance can hardly be described as narrative-based, so it is perhaps more appropriate to say that TikTok lacks any narrative at all. Yet, discussing the performance in terms of *fabula* and *syuzhet* is extremely useful in illustrating specifically how TikTok deconstructs certain tenets of traditional performance in a uniquely postmodern way. So, for the purposes of this discourse we shall shift these terms from their original context and allow *fabula* to refer to the “real-world” progression of an event and *syuzhet* to refer to its dramatic presentation in time.

Now, analyzing TikTok, one can see that the performance is composed of a collectively created *fabula*, whereas the *syuzhet* is entirely determined algorithmically and is experienced subjectively by each individual spectator. This is to say that the *fabula* of a trend is established by the collective as it is created linearly in real time by many different creators; but presented individually, out of order, and in fragments. Furthermore, one’s viewing perspective is determined based on their preferences and patterns alone. One has, at their fingertips, an always accessible stream of a non-linear montage performance — curated for the individual by an algorithm as the dramaturg. Never before has performance been so subjective, so specifically tailored to the spectator. Moreover, each spectator will see the different fragments in a different order when they choose to experience the performance.

Due to the subjectivity of spectator, each having their own “For You Page” (FYP), TikTok inherently deconstructs the idea of central meaning. Since any given spectator will see different individual snippets of the trend (collective performance), the meaning-making is left entirely up to the individual. Thus, the dramaturgical curation is performed both by the collective and the individual, with the ultimate meaning-making entirely within the hands of the spectator. Furthermore, this take on performance is extremely poststructuralist, for not only is the

performance experienced in a different order depending upon the spectator, that is to say non-linear, but the totality of the performance is never fully observed by any spectator. In fact, the majority of the overall *fabula* will almost certainly never be experienced by any one spectator — each person only seeing a handful of perspectives, those which are algorithmically determined to be most popular and most likely to be appreciated by the individual. From these fragments the spectator will then infer some overall meaning.

The performing on TikTok is experienced both out of time, as fragments of the whole, and with no single spectator viewpoint. Conversely, other forms of postmodern performance, such as some works of performance art, are still generally produced and experienced in linear time (even if told out of order) with the totality of the work being available to the spectator. For example, even performances such as Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 10* (1973) which attempt to deconstruct the notion of time are still heavily reliant upon it — the later part of the performance depends upon the marks made at the beginning; furthermore, every spectator watches the progression of events in the same linear order. While the *syuzhet* may be disrupted in performance art (and other forms of postmodern performance), the *fabula* and the overall unfolding of the performance is still generally unified; whereas on TikTok both the *syuzhet* and *fabula* are disrupted. Certainly, there is still a sense of *fabula*, but its totality becomes unperceivable to the viewer. Using the term “object” to refer to individual TikTok videos and the term “subject” to refer to the overall performance, we can see that since each spectator receives different performance objects their overall understanding of the subject is individually constructed and inherently different from spectator to spectator. With postmodern drama, one might see the end of the show before the beginning, but on TikTok one might first see the end of *the performing itself* (i.e. the first video a spectator sees of a trend may be the last video created

in the trend), which they cannot possibly know is the end and which they might not even see at all. Therefore, there is an inherent deconstruction of linearity, emphasized by an FYP which does not depend on a chronology and specifically does not display a timestamp on videos. This is all to say that TikTok, compared to other forms, is a perfect montage, and one that encapsulates postmodern sensibilities.

In addition to obscuring the subject, TikTok’s algorithmic democratization also deconstructs any notion of singular authority. To the postmodernists, the artistic subject becomes art when the artist places it upon a pedestal and calls it such, therefore it is this performative action of naming the art which transforms the idea to an artistic object. TikTok is novel in that it accomplishes this performative naming while effectively eliminating the singular artist, or oligarch of artistic authority, as the namer.

TikTok’s disruption of the traditional subject as represented by artistic object dichotomy effectively destroys any concept of greater or ascribed meaning. There is no single author to the event, and even if there is an original video that started some trend, it will not be seen by every single spectator, nor will it necessarily be recognized as *the* original. Since time is not experienced linearly, the original is usually not the first example of the trend a spectator sees, and if one wants to find the original it may require a long search and great deal of scrolling (if anyone even knows which video is the original). All of this is baked into the app infrastructure, which makes it easy to see what is trending and hard to use as an archive. Just as Roland Barthes suggests the death of the author,¹⁸ so too is there a “death of the creator” online, wherein anything performed digitally immediately enters the public forum and is no longer the property of the author — indeed, on TikTok this “death” is encouraged by the platform infrastructure.

The algorithm as dramaturg is also a fascinating development because it represents the synthesis of the digital and the human. “Algorithms in the software record this [filtering] and use it to create new relations, networks and content, and to recommend new connections or content to the theatre maker and their audiences.”¹⁹ So, the algorithm is neither solely a dramaturgical robot nor entirely human (or a group of humans) — it is the intersection of these entities, a robot made to think like society and respond to one’s individual desires. It also means that in order for creators to go viral, they must now perform for an algorithm in order to perform for other people, which has had implications on how they perform. For example, using certain performative hashtags, which may be trending at the time but are entirely unrelated to the content of the video.

From the chaos, technology has given the spectator some individual order. Yet it must be said that even this order is subject to volatility, and the neural networks which underlie TikTok’s algorithm are entirely dependent on the input data and targets which feed them (assuming TikTok’s algorithm operates at least partially on image recognition and supervised machine learning). The dramaturg is dynamic, an instantaneous system of trends and popularity, but not an objective one. TikTok algorithms are trained on data mined from the collective consciousness, meaning that any bias within the community is also learned by the machine and becomes part of the dramaturgy. Algorithms trained on racist data can result in a racist machine.²⁰ So while the performance is more democratic (where liking a video acts as a vote), it is also one which falls more easily into the tyranny of the majority.²¹

For example, the phenomenon of “cancel culture,” when the community suddenly decides to ostracize someone (deserving or not) in a one-sided wave of popular opinion. It seems that the online community often relishes in its collective power to tear down creators who are sometimes innocent or whose actions are not proportional to the backlash. In their text, *plugged*

in: How Media Attract and Affect Youth, Valkenburg and Piotrowski claim that social pressure is especially strong in digital communities and that youth demonstrate a strong desire to conform.²² Another implication of the algorithm as dramaturg is the creation of social echo chambers in which spectators’ opinions are reinforced and not challenged by outside perspectives. These “social bubbles” develop as like-minded individuals are algorithmically grouped together and are especially problematic due to rampant misinformation and disinformation, which can easily be propagated online.²³ However, these social bubbles can also be positive. They create safe spaces for more subversive perspectives, which are algorithmically sheltered from the backlash of the status quo. However, this digital barrier is always permeable; a user might describe themselves as “getting on the wrong side of TikTok” which typically means that their content has spread to an opposing social bubble and they are receiving hate messages as a result.

Finally, we must examine how TikTok deconstructs any notion of the high and low in the arts. While TikTok is often derided as low art or an ineffectual app where people do silly dances, due to its ubiquity, political influence, and usage as a forum for social change, it (and social media on the whole) is gradually gaining prominence as an artistic form. If one doubts the real world efficacy and influence of TikTok, just look at former U.S. President Donald Trump, who was pranked by TikTokers into expecting a higher attendance for his 2020 Tulsa re-election rally.²⁴ Or look at the @TikTokForBiden mega-account, which was composed of a coalition of TikTokers specifically to realize political action, and which collectively held influence over 80 million users.²⁵ Not to mention that the postmodernists, of course, have never really cared about whether anyone considered their work efficacious or “high art.”

TikTok’s democratic collective dramaturgy is key in its disruption of this hierarchy. No longer is the performance controlled by the auteur director, producer, or even the artists

themselves. Schechner suggest that, “social media [may be] the great equalizer, the perfect vehicle of participatory democracy.”²⁶ The role of the decision maker is now played by the algorithm, and it captures the opinion of the collective — one which is composed of spectators, performers, and spectator-performers. Never before has what goes onstage been decided by the public on such a large scale. It is also the public that not only decides *what* is significant, but also ascribes the *level* of significance to particular pieces. Patrick Lonergan writes that “Value is determined not simply by the quality of what we post — or by who we really are. Instead it is grounded in the reach and impact of our posts.”²⁷ In other words, the value of the piece is determined by how worthy the collective deems it, not the creator’s status or reputation.

Anyone can go viral. That is one of the miraculous features of the internet, you don’t need an agent, a strong audition, or sometimes even a face²⁸ to gain a following. As noted earlier, there is no oligarchy or institution that creates an influencer, they are made by themselves and their audience. There are no elites, no authorities, and no moderators; the closest thing to a moderator being a rather trigger-happy censorship algorithm, but even that, while implemented by a corporation, is an algorithm, not a singular figure of human authority.

There are internet celebrities, called influencers, who are “seen to have the power to circulate their opinion widely, create opinions and convince others in the network to adopt those opinions, in politics, relationships or purchasing decision;”²⁹ however, their status is fickle and dependent on their ability to generate viral content. Other platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram stress interpersonal connections (i.e. you see who you follow); however, TikTok is centered on the algorithmic suggestion of personalized content, including work created by people that the spectator does not follow. Early studies seem to indicate that users spend the

majority of their time on the platform browsing their FYP, thus it follows that to maintain one’s status as an influencer must continually produce trending content.³⁰

Certain users on TikTok are verified, which seems as though it would create a class system; however, in terms of reach, verification is largely meaningless. Neither the verified nor the verifiers have any control over whether a particular creator’s content will become popular with the collective and consequently be picked up by the algorithm. Moreover, there are enough unverified creators who consistently go viral that the mark is essentially empty — lacking verification certainly doesn’t impede anyone from going viral, if that were the case, then the app would cease to function. Simply put, if one has a large platform, then they have influence, and neither the little blue verification checkmark nor their follower count maintains that influence in and of itself.

By examining TikTok’s collective dramaturgy, we have seen how the app’s infrastructure and usage promote a performance environment that is uniquely democratic. This algorithmic dramaturgy results in a subjectively experienced *syuzhet* and inferred *fabula*, which utterly deconstructs any sense of linearity or narrative and effectively annihilates the notion of central meaning. Moreover, the app’s ranking of content is entirely constructed on the ever-changing collective opinion, meaning that influencers are platformed by the community and must continue to generate popular content to maintain their status; consequently, there is an elimination of a delineation between the high and low.

Collective Performance and the Disruption of the Performer/Spectator Dichotomy

In addition to TikTok’s collective dramaturgy, the creation of content itself is also a collective process — one which is ongoing and contributed to by many performers. With social media, compared to other forms of performance, we see an increase in interaction between the performers and spectators as well as a merging of these two roles. Everyone is encouraged to partake in the performance of social media. Describing one user, Lonergan notes that, “[he] and his wife are celebrating not just by seeing the show but by *being seen* seeing the show.”³¹ Hence the traditional roles of spectator and performer are devolving on social media into the synthesized role of spect-actor (to borrow a term from Augusto Boal³²). This active partaking in performance is characteristic of postmodernism, as Carlson describes it, “a new attitude toward the audience and to their active collaboration.”³³

TikTok’s design encourages interaction in a few key ways. Similar to other forms of social media, posts contain a comments section where other users can interact with content, one another, and the creator. Commentary alone hardly constitutes audience participation in a collaborative performance, however TikTok is built with the ability to replicate, reference, and respond to other users’ content with unprecedented adaptability. If one leaves a comment on a TikTok, the creator might respond via video, and if they do, then the TikTok interface will display the original comment as an overlay, hence making the comment part of the performance in addition to being its impetus.

TikTok is also equipped with livestream capabilities, which are perhaps the closest thing to traditional live performance. When livestreaming, performers tend to directly address comments as they are posted with no temporal displacement between the initial comment and the

creator response. Livestreams allow creators to “guest” other users, allowing for live collaborative performance via video stream.

Unique to TikTok is the ability for performers to “duet” or “stitch” other creator’s videos, which provides another mechanism for interaction and commentary. Duets allow one to play another user’s video alongside their own, while stitches allow users to clip and integrate sections of another user’s videos in their own. These features are what makes TikTok revolutionary, they have resulted in a platform that thrives on replication (the postmodern implications of this sampling shall be discussed in the following section). In their paper *Extending the Internet Meme*, Zulli and Zulli write, “[we] observed that imitation and replication—the driving forces of mimesis—are latent in TikTok’s platform design. Accordingly, we argue that TikTok can be read as a mimetic text in and of itself, extending [...] Internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure.”³⁴ This creates what Zulli and Zulli refer to as “imitation publics,”³⁵ or memetic discourse communities.

Suffice it to say that the spectator is no longer a passive watcher, they are encouraged to participate via the public forum of comments and more importantly are expected to create their own content that references their co-spect-actors. The app depends upon it. Like many other social media platforms, the bulk of the content is created by everyday people; however, unlike other platforms, there is a heightened sense of interactivity from the duet and stitching features. Creators can argue with one another, have discussions, and collaboratively create content purely through live recorded video.

As a matter of fact, trying to separate a spectator from a performer in the digital realm is nearly impossible. Even a black avatar that never comments, who only views and likes videos, acts dramaturgically as part of the algorithmic judging. Those who comment, which are most

users, are now actors and their commentary becomes part of the overall performance. People who have seen their comments will now view the media informed by that perspective.

Comments are nearly always performative, they are meant to be seen by others and inspire some reaction. Hence the collective performance is composed of many different videos connected by a central subject (trend) and between these posts the performance continues in the comments, played out by spect-actors.

At this point we have yet to broach one key question upon which this entire discussion rests, “how is all of this a unified live performance?” One would certainly not argue that Facebook is a form of dramatic performance or that YouTube is *live* performance. However, TikTok is different from these other platforms specifically because it is built on memetic processes, which result in an app that is designed for trends. Postmodern performance has certainly never required narrative structure, so really all that is needed is an understanding among the participants that what is being experienced is something larger, or to put it another way, “goes together.” Not every video on TikTok is related to another; however, many are and are connected algorithmically by their virality. On TikTok, trends constitute unified performance.

Because the performance is non-linear, always interspersed with other unrelated videos and noise, and only portions of the whole are visible to the individual spect-actor, it is difficult to read the pieces of the performance as related, but they are. This is also precisely why it is such strong implementation of poststructuralist intentions; the method of presentation effectively obscures the subject to the point that it cannot be perceived in its totality deconstructing any perception of objective truth. The pieces are unified as performance because they always

reference the same subject (trend), albeit collectively created, spread across multiple accounts, and sometimes in disagreement or opposition to one another.

This principle is best demonstrated by an example, and for our purposes let us examine one similar to the theatre with which we are familiar. *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*, was a “musical” created by fans on TikTok based on the 2007 film *Ratatouille*.³⁶ In this collective performance, which occurred over the course of several months, creators on TikTok imagined what the film would look like if adapted into a musical. Creators presented contributions to this fictive musical in the form of suggested designs, choreography, songs, playbills, and other offerings. Described by many as the “first crowdsourced” musical the disparate videos on TikTok were eventually compiled into a benefit concert in order to raise money for the Actors Fund.

Clearly, the pieces of content surrounding this trend were related to one another and constituted the overall performance of a musical. At the same time, each post stood alone as a single object. However, it is a simplification to describe each video as having separate authorship. A song created by one TikToker might be used in other videos and sung by other creators, complicating the concept of authorship itself. Key moments in the referenced film had multiple interpretations, different songs, and suggested designs. Furthermore, even the same song might have conflicting performances from various users replicating the original content.

And this structure is hardly exclusive to *Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical* — no, this is the case for every single trend on TikTok. Due to the recurrent sampling and referencing, encouraged by TikTok’s design, individual videos (artist objects) are always connected to one another by multiple algorithmic lineages, which are only apparent some of the time and to some spectators. The result is a performance composed of interwoven strands, of multiple

interconnected stories unfolding simultaneously as they come across users’ feeds and collide with one another.

Bree Hadley writes that “the creators of such platforms take it as read that audiences have the competence to enact dramaturgically coherent extensions to their storyworlds—to make, not merely take, meaning. To circulate it, advocate for it and even on-sell it, in a way that can eventually take the original creator out of the loop.”³⁷ The performance begins with a stimulus and is then carried out in a live collective response, resulting in a spatiotemporal layering wherein the totality of the performance is composed not only of a fragmented timeline but the simultaneous performances of multiple nonlinear timelines. To put it another way, multiple performances (or overall trends) are also always occurring concurrently and collide with one another as well as contradictory interpretations of the same trend. This means that a single video might reference multiple trends, making it the child of multiple performances, and when this child is referenced by another user the breadths of all performances expand.

This is what is meant by the term *collective performance*, it is a performance centered around some trending subject (be it an idea, piece of audio, or even just a phrase) and interpreted in various ways by various users. The individual artistic objects are thus unified in a greater performance and are entangled in a network of associations, replications, and references, which mimics the dramaturgical algorithm itself (a neural network analogous to the interconnected nodes and pathways of the human brain). This form reflects the postmodern aesthetics of an “inchoative breaking-up [and] continual movement, displacement, or repositioning.”³⁸ Because there is neither a linearity to the *fabula* nor the *syuzhet* and each of the performance objects are created by different people TikTok’s collective dramaturgy works with its collective

performance to disrupts all three of the Aristotelian dramatic unities; namely, action, time, and place.³⁹

It is exactly this collective reciprocity which also makes the performance live, even if the individual pieces which compose the spectacle are recorded. As users continually post, access, and comment on the content surrounding a trend, a sense of digital liveness is established, described by Ludmila Lupinacci as an, “unpredictable flow and potential eventfulness.”⁴⁰ Or as Lonergan puts it...

Every posting to a social media platform is inherently unfinished, in the sense that it is always open to being altered, either directly or through the resources that frame it. Even on a site that is no longer being maintained, a post can still be copied, edited, re-circulated, and perhaps transformed. [...] its creation continues to unfold before us; indeed, we may actually contribute to that creation by adding comments, by editing the original content, by sharing it onwards, by ‘liking’ what we have seen, and so on.⁴¹

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, the collective performance herein described is also often a cross-platform performance, which may continue within popular culture across various other social media platforms.

To further explore the idea of liveness, despite the content being recorded, let us look to Peggy Phelan’s seminal essay *The Ontology of Performance*. Phelan argues that, “Performance’s life is only in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations; once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.”⁴² Phelan’s argument is concerned with the marking nature of the camera, she argues that by being recorded the performers behave differently, changing the playing, hence the piece becomes something other than live performance.

Naturally, Phelan’s scope somewhat limited because her essay predates the rise of social media. Phelan’s arguments are directly addressed by Lonergan in *Theatre & Social Media*,

where he writes, “But Phelan’s views are less readily applicable to social media. User-generated content can unfold in real-time (as many digital performances do) and can thereafter be archived [...] Online creative content is (to paraphrase Phelan) always disappearing, in that it is always becoming *something else*.”⁴³ Hadley expands Phelan’s ontology in line with the notion of a collective liveness and interconnected event composed of replications. She attempts to unify Phelan’s ontology with Philip Auslander’s counter-claim that the live and mediated are not necessarily opposed.

Even then, though, the event of encountering an archived version of a theatrical event is likely to be different each time, as the instructional, promotional and other content around the archived video or text changes, and as fellow users add comments and links to expand the experience in their own unique ways.⁴⁴

While Phelan argues that “performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive,”⁴⁵ it is precisely this reproduction on social media which forms a live event and makes trends a form of collective performance. Moreover, this concept of a synergistic liveness is dependent upon both TikTok’s collective dramaturgy and collective performance. This is not to argue that the content is not partially archival, it is still recorded after all; however, if one views the trend as the performance rather than the individual pieces of content, it quickly becomes clear that the overall performance is ongoing instead of being limited to the temporal scope of a single recorded video — to echo Lonergan, it is a performance that is always becoming something else.

This discussion of liveness is intrinsically linked to liminality. Phelan writes that, “Performance’s being, [...] becomes itself through disappearance,”⁴⁶ and it is specifically the concept of disappearance which is so vital to Phelan’s ontology. TikTok is designed to only play a video once (unless one is following a creator in which case the content might appear once on their FYP and once on their “Following” page). This means that within the dramatic presentation

of the performance, each piece is only viewed once, after which it disappears. Reproductions, as noted by Hadley, must be viewed as separate pieces — which is no different from the sampling that occurs in the typical postmodern performance. Of course, the videos do not completely disappear, “leav[ing] no visible trace afterwards,”⁴⁷ however contextualized as merely parts of a whole, the live collective performance effectively expires. Taking a single photograph of a production hardly prevents the entire show from being considered performance. On TikTok the same principle is true, the only difference being that both the live performance and recorded remnants are actually the same set of objects. Additionally, the app design discourages archival use by having no easily searchable chronological order. To find an old video one would have to remember the creator’s account handle from when they first came across the content, navigate to that user’s page, and then scroll through the page to find the piece of content, which becomes increasingly arduous to locate as one moves further from the original date of production. This means that in practice, due to the sheer quantity of content, individual pieces become lost — and if one cannot find the proverbial needle in the digital haystack then it has, in essence, disappeared.

Because trends, by nature, have a short life span there is a sense of liminality to the performance, and consequently a disappearance. On TikTok we only see what is popular *right now*. The algorithm rarely, if ever, recommends videos that are more than a few months old. This is largely due to the nature of internet trends which tend to develop and die extremely quickly, as noted by one user, “[on TikTok] within a week you’re out of date.”⁴⁸ Indeed, it may be attributable to social media that people nowadays seem to have shorter attention spans. Although this may simply be generational since the TikTok community is largely composed of youths, and youths tend to value speed and variety.⁴⁹

TikTok’s infrastructure encourages quick performances. Videos are typically less than one minute long (in fact only very recently have three-minute videos been allowed) and TikTok even has a separate mode for videos that are shorter than 15 seconds. While less restrictive than Vine, the time restriction still heightens the moment, the “liveness” of the performance, and imbues it with a certain urgency. In some ways, social media platforms like TikTok achieve the type of performance that Futurists like Marinetti wrote of, a performance style which is “Brief. Grasping in a few minutes, a few words, and a few gestures innumerable situations, feelings, ideas, sensations, events, and symbols.”⁵⁰ Sections of videos are sped up and sometimes even entire videos (although this is hardly the norm). Building off of YouTube’s performance style, time is never wasted and dead time is generally removed using jump cuts. This cinematic technique gained prominence in with the Nouvelle Vague, and while often avoided in modern film, it has received a resurgence of popularity on TikTok. Some TikTokers, like Maria Jeleniewska,⁵¹ are referred to as “transitioners” and have gained a large following simply for their masterful ability to perform transitions (cuts across time) in creative and artistic ways. On TikTok, the jump cut has been transformed into the communally recognized art form of *transitions* — although it does bear noting this form does go far beyond the simple jump cut.

Returning to the subject of liminality and incorporating the concept of cutting across time, we can now make another observation. Although the overall runtime of a performance on TikTok is far longer than that of a traditional dramatic performance (which tend to only last a few hours or so), if we were to sum up all the fragments seen by a spectator (i.e. determine the overall time in performance) we would not find it that much longer than what we see in the dramatic theatre. Hence the limen is retained by being stretched through fragmentation. Rather than watching a single performance all the way through we are watching many performances, all

shattered and intermittent, as is the nature of TikTok’s collective performance and disjointed *syuzhet*. All performances are interrupted by other performances.

As noted by Valkenburg and Piotrowski, “adolescents’ desire for speed and variation has accompanied a quickly growing trend toward media multitasking.⁵² TikTok’s extends this concept of media multitasking to a performative level; we watch entire performances in 15 second increments spread out over the course of a few days (or weeks), out of order and interspersed with multiple other performances. Certainly, there is noise — many of the videos we come across stand on their own and are not part of any greater community trend — but that is not to say that collective performances do not exist, they absolutely do, simply that they are sporadic performances which perpetually disrupt one another. And it is precisely this presentation format which makes performance on TikTok so poststructuralist.

Finally, let us deconstruct Phelan’s notion of the camera as marking the performance. It is essential to understand that we are in the middle of the convergence of the private and personal, engendered by the ubiquity of surveillance. As Schechner writes, “privacy is all but gone. We all expect to be surveilled, we know we live in the panopticon.”⁵³ The pervasive prevalence of data collection and surveillance capitalism is causing a generational shift away from privacy. Phelan’s notion that the act of recording irreparably marks performance is not wrong per se, but in a world of surveillance this distinction is largely becoming meaningless. On social media we constantly televise our lives on the internet. As we are forced to relinquish our data and digital traces it becomes increasingly uncertain when we are being watched and when we are not, leading to an era in which we are always performing. Since the young spect-actor always feels surveilled, their distinction between performing while being recorded versus simply being watched in-person (as

in a typical performance) is fading. Consequently, the performance is increasingly less marked by the camera in a way that is different than how it is marked by a live audience.

Just as there is an ongoing tension between the public and private, so too is there a tension between fiction and reality. After all, when we describe a person as real we typically mean that they are not “performing,” likewise when we describe someone as fake (or not real) we often mean that they are acting in an overtly performative way. In resistance to the mainstream idealization of self we see on social media (think the flawless filtered skin of the beauty guru) there is also an obsession with candidness. A person might have a second account to post content which is less formal, edited, and perfect. Perhaps it is a question of agency. While we are no longer in control over whether our lives are made public, we can still control the dissemination of this information. Hence by self-publishing, by baring of oneself to the public, there is certain control retained. And already we can see a generational divide between the youth and older generations who are far more obsessive about keeping portions of themselves private whereas with younger people this is largely slipping away as a cultural norm.

As the results of the 2020 presidential election came in, a cohort of TikTok creators (then collectively called TikTok for Biden) launched a livestream,⁵⁴ which then became a series of livestreams that lasted a few days. This livestream is notable because it demonstrates the shifting attitudes of young people, specifically prominent young TikTok creators, towards being watched. During the livestream creators ate food, walked around their homes, and otherwise completely broadcasted their lives for the world to see. Schechner writes (referring to JenniCam) that due to social media, “we can each be Jenni;”⁵⁵ a statement that perfectly characterizes this livestream. Remarkably, multiple TikTokers even slept on camera including Charli D'Amelio (currently the most popular influencer on the app)⁵⁶ who, on one occasion, simply left the camera rolling as she

passed out on her carpet for a few hours. This is a fascinating development because sleeping is almost sacredly private — the time when we are in the least control of ourselves and the most unguarded; as well as when we are arguably the least socially performative. Yet, it seems that now even our sleep can be a self-broadcasted as live performance.

As further evidence of these shifting norms of privacy, let us look to Zoom classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Younger students are more likely to show up to classes as if they’ve just rolled out of bed (and probably have), in sweatpants and tank tops, eating their breakfast, etc. whereas older people tend to be more concerned with maintaining societal roles and a certain formality even within their own homes. Video content might even be filmed while the creator is on the toilet, as noted in the comments of a TikTok by Sasha Allen.⁵⁷ Evidently, if one taping content within the lavatory, all concepts of privacy are starting to devolve and collapse. While the toilet creator still may be “wearing” some form of a social mask, the circumstances public respectability have undoubtedly shifted.

On the flip side of surveillance, the perceived anonymity of digital performance also lends itself to this notion of unmarkedness. Should we choose to be, it is far easier to retain anonymity online (at least to a certain extent). Thus spect-actors, untethered from the corporeal consequences of their performativity, are liberated from the camera’s mark. Even if the performance does not disappear the performer can, hence they are freed from the inhibitions associated with being watched.

To summarize, when the camera is on we increasingly no longer care, and if one does then they can simply digitally mask themselves into anonymity, effectively eliminating themselves from the recording. The line between the private and public is collapsing, consequently we are all shifting into a perpetual reflexive performance of self. This being the

case, Phelan’s notion that the act of recording irrevocably alters performance begins to break down. In the shifting attitudes of online performance, we are in an eternal collective live performance, therefore the distinctions of Phelan’s ontology become inconsequential.

Internet Semiotics: Memes, Trends, and Sampling

TikTok is a social media platform specifically designed to promote sampling (as evidenced by the stitch and duet features discussed earlier). TikTok is a world of pastiche. Trends are fundamentally comprised of postmodern replication, which forms the basis for TikTok’s collective performance. When one watches a trend like the renegade dance, they are watching variations on the same dance, different performers repeating the same movements to the same audio. It is the exact same performance replicated by different performers, hence the viewer experiences multiple perspectives of the same subject. In a dramatic context, this would be analogous to multiple audience members walking onstage and performing the same monologue (except that on TikTok all of this would be out of order). Each individual performance is a variation, a new unique spectacle, which references the central idea of the trend or acts against it.

Framing digital performativity as communication we can see that TikTok exists at the intersection of theatrical semiotics and the fascinating internet sign system of memes. Memes are interesting because they not only communicate a message, but generally also express a mood (or flavor) and provide commentary on the signified. We are using the term meme here in its broadest sense, as a codified internet sign that communicates an idea, behavior, or style, not in the more restrictive sense, that being of popular internet image. By this definition, phrases and performances can also be memes, which we can see in stitches where phrases such as “Is it bussin Janelle?” not only have a codified meaning but also suggest an attitude and reference a particular source video. If one asks, “but is it bussin?” in the comment section of a TikTok they are referencing this meme to convey a particular message and attitude, which, because the

language is codified, would be unintelligible to someone outside the TikTok discourse communities where this meme is circulated.

Zulli and Zulli write that “positioning TikTok as a memetic text means that the videos produced on the platform or specific features like effects and sounds all have memetic potential, either by spurring imitation or being imitated, lending much more concreteness to the nature, form, and location of memes in the digital context.”⁵⁸ Then expanding upon this argument they explain that, “that TikTok extends the Internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure [...] and helps us theorize imitation publics on TikTok, wherein networks form through processes of imitation and replication, not interpersonal connections, expressions of sentiment, or lived experiences.”⁵⁹ This notion of the *imitation public* combines the idea of internet “social bubbles” with memes to conclude that communities develop via algorithm from similarities in memetic language and further argues that the separation between these publics is reinforced as they grow and their memetic communication becomes increasingly codified.

Memes are the medium through which trends on TikTok are communicated (i.e. the language of TikTok’s collective performance). Since this is a type of sampling, we can thus conclude that primary communicative medium of TikTok’s collective performances is one which is highly postmodern. With trends there is no original video, or at least the original is not given the final say. Yes, we might know who started a trend (and ask that they be given credit), but the “original” creator neither has control over the direction of the trend, nor are they given any particularly authority over it. What one creator samples and uses is equally valid to the original as a distinct work and after the original inspiration passes through the many layers of sampling we typically see on TikTok the original may not even be of particular relevance. As argued in the earlier discussion of collective dramaturgy, trends are created by the collective, not a single

author; however, we can now see how TikTok’s memetic sampling is leveraged to enforce this collective ownership.

Zulli and Zulli found that the most common TikTok videos were those which made use of sampling, indicating a strong postmodern influence in content creation.

The most common TikTok videos that were observed also illustrated mimesis at work. On any given day, we observed users replicating the same type of video or similar video concepts using a sound or effect over and over again. These videos primarily took the form of “challenge” videos, whether that be dancing or “check” videos where users described and projected identities in a roll-call fashion. [...] Also common were duet or chain videos, where people reacted or added to other users’ TikTok videos, and experience videos, where users described similar experiences applying the same sound. These videos illustrate physical imitation — copying dance moves — reactive imitation — capitalizing and expanding on someone else’s video — and narrative imitation — describing the same type of experiences.⁶⁰

A semiotic analysis of internet language illustrates some fascinating linguistics trends relevant to this discourse. Humans began writing in images (icons), gradually transitioned to text (symbols),⁶¹ and now with the use of emoji and emoticon we are headed back toward the pictorial. Gretchen McCulloch believes that emoji serve a gestural linguistic function which replaces the physical body as commentary in online communication.⁶² Since so much of human communication is accomplished through gesture, posture, and facial expression — all of which are removed in the digital realm — emoji and other images help to bridge the gap. Memes also serve the same function of communicating attitude and commentary through a codified system of replicated images and ideas.

Mememes can be referenced synecdochally, by using a phrase like “poggers” I reference a specific visual image which implies a physical reaction and communicate a specific attitude which is only understood by those familiar with the code. Initializations like “ttyl,” “tl;dr,” or

“imo” are designed to be easily typed in text messages, but are also example of language that might be considered highly cryptic.

While this is an interesting discussion of linguistics, what does it have to do with performance theory? Well, TikTok’s performance style is heavily affected by memes, making it drastically different from traditional dramatic performance. On TikTok, performers are not simply exchanging a codified symbolic language of memes, nor are they only performing theatrically — i.e. signifying in a primal sense (through ostension).⁶³ Rather, they often are doing both: performing memes, or in semiotic terms, *ostending symbols*. This is inherently commentative and non-realistic. Because memes communicate attitude metonymically (by referencing a shared idea) one cannot perform a meme without simultaneously commentating on one’s own performance. Hence rather than the actor performing their own commentary on the action, the meme performs this function, which can be leveraged to act in opposition to the dramatic action.

For example, by using a meme format that communicates satire, one can perform a more authentic caricature without the fear of their performance being misconstrued. We can examine this notion of commentary by looking to Brecht’s concept of the actor who comments upon their character within the performance.⁶⁴ However, rather than the actor providing both the performance and commentary in an ostensive manner (through showing), when memes are used as commentary the semiosis is mismatched. Therefore, while the acting is ostensive the commentary is now symbolic and codified, which provides greater clarity on specifically what is being performed vs. the attitude of the performer to the performance.

For example, a queer creator might perform the stereotypical straight male “beauty standard” as a joke. They might emphasize their performed “heterosexual masculinity” by

holding up a dead fish, which is a meme sign that specifically references a viral TikTok by Josh Zilberberg in which he points out the number of men who think posting pictures of them holding a dead fish is attractive.⁶⁵ Since this video was created within TikTok’s queer imitation public, it can be read specifically as a criticism of performative masculinity, hence within this imitation public the performed symbol of holding up a dead fish signifies not only the role of a stereotypical man, but specifically does so with a satirical attitude. In fact, this is the specific context of a video by Jeremy Scheck in which he mocks the idea of the male beauty standard.⁶⁶

Scheck’s video has a few more layers to it. For one thing the fish is an emoji (an icon) which departs the performance further from any sense of realism. The sound is a combination of a SpongeBob quote and a song, which estranges the video while also providing commentary and another attitudinal layer to the video. A person familiar with memes might even draw an implicit connection between the SpongeBob audio and the SpongeBob mocking meme which is commonly used to express satire on the internet.⁶⁷ In fact, one can reference this meme to express a mocking tone simply by AtERnaTIng LOweRcAsE aNd cAPiTaL LeTTeRs when they type — in this context, the act of capitalization becomes performative, and it changes the meaning of the sentence metonymically communicating an attitude by referring to a meme image with an associated satirical connotation.

To further expand this example, if the creator had thought the joke was still not clear enough, they might play the song *Sweater Weather* underneath their video and draw attention to the sound (perhaps through open captions). Because *Sweater Weather* is associated with the queer community (especially bisexuality), the use of this audio would provide a commentary that contradicted the visual image of performative heterosexual masculinity. The creator would then be performing one meme while using another to create disagreement, thus indicating the first

meme was expressly satirical. This intricate web of memetic sign systems is highly reliant upon the spectator to correctly interpret how the various signs work with one another and is priceless what sets performance on TikTok apart from dramatic (purely ostensive) performance.

Finally, looking at the post dates of these TikToks, we can see the Scheck’s video actually predates Zilberberg’s indicating that there is likely another earlier fish-holding meme within the imitation public that both these TikToks reference; however, any attempt to chart this chronology is extremely difficult for the reasons outlined in the prior discussion of collective performance. What is more, any attempt to apply a chronology is meaningless due to TikTok’s collective dramaturgy — the algorithm might play either of these videos first, or not at all, and it will be different for each spectator. To further complicate chronology it must also be noted that memes created within an imitation public as part of a trend may remain even after the trend fades from virality. For example, using the name Karen to refer to a racist middle-aged meddling white woman. Even the holding-of-a-fish sign (while not necessarily associated with a particular trend) is still in use months after Scheck’s video.⁶⁸

While these two videos do not constitute a trend in and of themselves, they do illustrate just how complex the codified meme sign systems on TikTok can become, and how the meaning making between related videos is highly subjective. This discussion also clarifies the notion of the ostended symbol (performed meme) and how it contributes to a non-realistic performance style that allows the creator to externally comment upon the performance via meme. Lastly, it expands the analysis of TikTok’s platform infrastructure which encourages sampling and replication on a grand scale, and practically demonstrates how these memetic processes form the basis for TikTok’s collective performances when applied to larger communal trends.

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