Materialising the Digital

A Double-Layered Approach to Technology in Theatre

Gier by Christopher Rüping, Deutsches Theater, 2025 © Thomas Aurin

Elsbeth Hoefkens

April 2025

Introduction

33 performances, in 8 different theatres, from 27 different makers,
26 with some form of digital technology, none of them really audience-interactive,
21 of which used video projections,
16 of them live recorded video, the others pre-recorded,
6 of them projected on a white back wall, 3 on hanging white cloths, either whole or strips,
6 on (mostly) white pieces of décor, 1 on a (translucent) canvas, 3 on a white projection screen, 1 on a huge mirror, 1 on an image of a VIP room in a football stadium, 2 also in the auditorium,
10 with visible filming devices,
2 live played games,
82 other digital elements; 1 robot vacuum cleaner, 4 mobile phones, 8 screens, 3 very old tv's, 1 scene written by ChatGPT (at least, as far as I know), 61 Bluetooth speakers, 2 laptops, 1 sound looping station and 1 totally virtual performer,
and 16 meetings with inspiring people later, I am sitting behind a desk writing this essay.

A paper summing up my exploration, my experiences, my research on theatre and technology in Berlin, in association with the Ernst Busch University of Theatre Arts and with the support of the Culture Moves Europe Fund. Leaving out the neck pain from looking at the English surtitles hanging most of the time (way too high) above the stage, the moments of awkwardness when everyone was laughing accept me and the endlessly clapping rituals at the end of each performance ;). I have enjoyed every minute of it. Including the *Ieuwwww* and *Bahhhh* during a youth theatre performance about trash. It was, without doubt, a rich and insightful experience.

The key question that remains is: What has all of this brought me? What insights emerged from watching and analysing these performances, and from engaging in conversations with artists and professionals working with technology? What can be learned about the intersection of theatre and technology?

Well, in my case, a great deal. Digital technology has been present in theatre for quite some time, and many fascinating artists are actively exploring its possibilities. However, it would be impossible to capture and do justice to all of these observations and insights within the scope of this essay. The diversity of digital technologies, theatre spaces, and the people working with them is both vast and inspiring. Therefore, rather than striving for completeness, I have focused on a specific topic that emerged from my observations.

My research began with a broad inquiry: how can technology in theatre create innovative forms of audience engagement? This led me into a diverse and fascinating range of conversations with game designers, scenographers, VR and AR specialists, theatre makers, dramaturgs, choreographers, puppeteers, programmers, and many others. We explored how technology can expand time and space, generate images, create new worlds, new narratives, and immersive or interactive ways of storytelling.

Yet, throughout these discussions, one fundamental question kept surfacing: why use technology in theatre in the first place?

In my view, the answer to this question is twofold. On one hand, technology enables new forms of storytelling in theatre, allowing the virtual to visualise the imaginary. Here, its applications range from being deeply embedded in dramaturgy to serving a purely aesthetic function. These new forms expand the ways we see, understand, and ultimately engage with the world, aligning with theatre's inherent power to question reality, reframe perspectives, and inspire transformation.

On the other hand, theatre also offers a space to critically examine technology itself—how it functions and how it shapes society. Our physical and virtual realities are deeply intertwined, as evidenced by the number of performances that begin with the familiar request: "Please turn off your phones". The distinction between the physical and digital worlds has become increasingly artificial, and theatre has the unique ability to reflect on this relationship, fostering a deeper understanding of the impact of digital technologies. By integrating technology not just as a tool but as a subject of inquiry, theatre can prompt reflection, critique, and even reimagine what technology can be.

This exploration sparked my interest in how technology in theatre can create additional layers of meaning within a performance. I wanted to approach technology from a dramaturgical perspective, focusing on what its use can generate in terms of meaning. This curiosity motivated my analysis, leading me to examine how different uses of technology shape and transform theatrical storytelling. This process of reflection also led me to experiment beyond the page: alongside this essay, I created an immersive virtual world titled *Becoming real*, which offers a spatial, interactive translation of the ideas developed throughout this research.[1]

Of course, there is no single answer to this question, as the possibilities are as vast as the variety of digital technologies and the ways they can be integrated into theatre. Some performances use technology purely as a tool, while others make it a central theme. And to be clear: I value all these different approaches and do not intend to judge or prescribe how technology should be used in theatre.

Instead of making a value judgement, I want to propose a perspective that highlights the layered nature of technology's use and meaning in theatre, to inspire artists. Rather than viewing technology simply as an instrument, I suggest examining its materiality —an approach that many scholars and practitioners have explored in depth. Scholars such as Sarah Bay-Cheng, Matthew Causey, and Chiel Kattenbelt have explored how digital technologies and media shape performance beyond their practical use.[2] Kattenbelt, in particular, defines intermediality as the interaction between media forms, such as live presence and digital projection, that produces a new layer of meaning. While my approach is informed by this perspective, I focus more specifically on the internal layering within a single technology—its *double materiality*. I distinguish between the materiality of the object (e.g., a camera or phone) and the materiality of the medium it generates (e.g., a video projection or voice memo), to examine how each layer operates dramaturgically—and how meaning emerges through their interplay.

Scholars and artists alike have long considered questions such as: *What does (digital) technology mean? What can it do? What does it evoke?* These questions are crucial when incorporating technology into a performance's dramaturgy, as materiality itself can generate meaning. Here, form becomes content: the way technology is used directly contributes to the thematic and aesthetic experience of the performance. This raises a broader question: *How does the materiality of digital technology shape theatrical experience?*

To address this, I propose that we distinguish between two different aspects of technology's materiality: the materiality of the object and the materiality of the medium. A camera, for example,

---

[1] *Becoming real* can be explored via: https://elsbeth-hoefkens.itch.io/becoming-real-2025.
[2] Bay-Cheng (2010) emphasises that media in performance function as both material and discursive structures, carrying cultural meaning while shaping dramaturgical form. Causey (2006) similarly argues that digital technologies do not simply support performance but actively reconfigure it, making visible the processes of mediation, fragmentation, and identity construction on stage. Kattenbelt (2010), writing on intermediality, highlights how media technologies create new layers of meaning. These, in turn, transform the relationships between performer, audience, and space.

functions both as a physical object and as a medium. The reason for making this distinction is that these two aspects offer distinct dramaturgical possibilities.

On one level, we can analyse the materiality of the object itself, such as a mobile phone, and explore how its presence in a performance is emphasised, reduced, questioned, or reinterpreted. On another level, the use of the object generates a secondary materiality: the medium it creates. A phone used as a filming tool, for example, introduces a new materiality—namely, the projected video. This then raises the same questions we previously asked about the object, but now in relation to the medium: *What does it mean? What can it do? What does it evoke?*

By separating these two layers, we open up a wider range of material possibilities and meanings. This approach also allows us to examine how the two layers interact. A performance might, for instance, challenge the materiality of the phone as an object while reinforcing the materiality of its medium, such as recorded voice memos. This interplay invites further inquiry: *What happens when these two materialities are used in contrast or harmony? And what meanings emerge from their combination?*

To illustrate the potential of this perspective, I will analyse three performances I saw in Berlin. Two of them employed live video projections, and one incorporated voice memos recorded via mobile phones. While this reflects my experience in Berlin, where I encountered numerous performances with live video projections, I am aware that this still offers a rather limited view of digital technologies in theatre. However, I believe that this approach can be applied to a wide range of digital technologies, particularly those that possess this double materiality: objects that are both physical devices and tools for creating, storing, processing, or transmitting digital information. The technologies used in these performances may also seem quite simple, yet as will become clear, their impact on the theatrical experience can be profound, demonstrating that the complexity of the technology itself does not necessarily determine the depth or scale of its effect.

By embracing the multifaceted nature of digital technology, this perspective allows us to move beyond a simplistic, one-dimensional understanding of its materiality. Instead, it opens up the possibility to view technology as a multi-layered, active material, where both the object and the medium contribute to shaping the performance in complex and dynamic ways. This interplay between form and function becomes particularly evident when looking at concrete examples. Through the following analyses of three performances, I explore how different artistic approaches to technology influence dramaturgy, audience perception, and the creation of meaning on stage.

1. Gier

Two large eyes gaze directly at us, the audience. These blue-green eyes are listening, absorbing the words spoken by four actors seated in the auditorium. We, in turn, absorb the words through these eyes, projected onto a large white screen. I am describing the performance *Gier* (2025), based on Sarah Kane's *Crave*, directed by Christopher Rüping and performed at the Deutsches Theater. On stage, in addition to the large projection screen, we see a film set-up: a camera, lights, a white backdrop, and a chair. Actress Wiebke Mollenhauer occupies this chair almost from the outset, remaining there throughout the performance. The experience of the text is filtered through her eyes. The camera focuses on her, projecting a live video of her face onto the large screen. The other actors—Maja Beckmann, Benjamin Lillie, Sasha Melroch, and Steven Adjei Sowah—move around this setup, shifting between sitting in the auditorium, standing on stage, and approaching or even touching her. While doing so, they share a fragmented, poetic text about human desire, trauma, obsession, sexual abuse, loneliness, and pain. As expected, the emotional weight of the spoken words deepens, with Mollenhauer offering a powerful window into her character's inner world.

Figures 1 and 2. Performance *Gier* by Christopher Rüping, 2025 (Photos: Thomas Aurin)

The Double-layered Materiality

But what about the technology? How does its material presence influence the performance, not just as a tool, but as an active dramaturgical force? To explore this, I apply my proposed *double materiality* perspective. This approach first considers the materiality of the technological setup itself—its physical presence on stage—before turning to the materiality of what it produces as a medium. In this case, as mentioned, the setup consists of a camera, lights, a white backdrop, and a chair. Not just an incidental collection of objects, but a carefully constructed, professional filming environment, evoking associations with interviews, photoshoots, auditions, surveillance, or confessionals – spaces where subjects are observed, framed, and scrutinised. Unlike a mobile phone, this camera is not a casual, personal device but a specialised recording tool, reinforcing a sense of formality and control. Its presence is rigid, demanding a fixed position from the actress. It does not follow her—she must submit to its frame. Building on this materiality, they chose to position the setup prominently on stage, making the technological device a dominant part of the scenography. In terms of function, the camera was used both as a filming tool and as a medium for live projection.

This use of the object as a filming device creates a second materiality: the live video projection. This projection, projected onto a large white canvas at the centre of the stage, is not a neutral duplication of reality but an active transformation. The close-up on Mollenhauer's face generates a tension between intimacy and mediation. Her eyes lock onto the camera lens, seemingly engaging directly with the audience, which creates an intense emotional proximity. The enlargement of her face makes every small expression hyper-realistic, amplifying emotions in a way that wouldn't be possible without the camera. At the same time, this intimacy is undercut by the fact that she does not truly look at us, but at the camera. Her gaze, magnified on the screen, creates an illusion of directness while simultaneously emphasising the act of mediation.

Here, the two layers of materiality interact in a way that shapes the dramaturgical effect. The visible presence of the filming setup makes the audience aware of the constructed nature of the image. Unlike cinematic close-ups, which are typically seamless, *Gier* foregrounds the technology that creates this hyper-intimacy. The projection does not merely amplify her presence; it alters it. Her face dominates the stage. She appears monumental, yet paradoxically also trapped within the frame. This duality leads us to a key question: Who holds the power here?

Power and Vulnerability

The static, professional character of the camera suggests authority, positioning Mollenhauer as a subject under scrutiny. Its rigid, fixed nature reinforces this sense of control, while the materiality of the live video projection amplifies her presence, making her appear larger-than-life and seemingly untouchable. Yet this magnification also heightens her vulnerability, exposing her to the audience's gaze. This contrast between the camera's commanding presence and the projection's transformative effect raises a larger question: who is truly in control—the technology, the performers, or us as the audience? What power do we hold in this constructed space?

The answer shifts throughout the performance. Initially, the other actors sit among the audience, delivering their lines as if they, too, are observers. This choice reinforces the impression that Mollenhauer is the subject of an experiment, a testimony, or a trial, rendering her powerless. The dynamic changes when the performers step onto the stage and direct their actions toward the projection. In these moments, her projected image dominates, overshadowing the live bodies around her. Yet when the actors move towards her physical presence, addressing her directly, the authority of the projection diminishes, and her unmediated self reasserts itself—no longer magnified or mediated, she is exposed in her rawest, most vulnerable form.

This constant interplay between presence and mediation continues throughout the performance, with power shifting between the live body and its magnified, fragmented representation. This oscillation between visibility and exposure mirrors *Gier*'s thematic exploration of desire and trauma: the longing to be seen, the fear of being truly known.

Constructing Authenticity

Moreover, the act of image production remains apparent, preventing the technology from becoming invisible. Between scenes, the actress creates moments of rupture—pausing to drink water or getting a makeup retouch—that disrupt full immersion and remind the audience that her image is not a seamless extension of her presence, but a carefully constructed, performative entity, continuously mediated and prepared for the camera.

This duality of the actress being both physically present and mediated by technology creates a tension, amplifying the performative nature of the theatre. Where theatre itself is already inherently performative, in *Gier*, the projection serves not only as a tool of representation but as a force that magnifies the act of performing. We are constantly aware that the actress is constructing her presence while simultaneously being constructed by technology that frames her image. This layered construction complicates the audience's perception of authenticity, as we shift between the immediate emotional presence of the live body and its fragmented, magnified counterpart on screen.

The Act of Looking

The dramaturgical implications of this material duality are further explored in the tension between the act of watching and being watched. The actress seems to gaze directly at the audience, engaging the viewers intimately, while simultaneously, other performers observe her both live and projected on screen. The camera positions her as an object of an unseen observer, creating a sense of vulnerability that pervades the performance. The actress, rendered hyper-visible, is under constant observation—she cannot escape the framing imposed upon her. This dynamic reinforces a sense of powerlessness, as she has no control over how she is perceived, positioning her as both the object and the subject of the performance.

However, moments when the actress shifts her gaze—either toward her own image on the screen or to her fellow performers—create a powerful reversal. These shifts break the one-sided gaze and reintroduce the agency of looking. She momentarily reclaims some control over how she is seen, challenging the deterministic nature of the surveillance imposed by the technology. This oscillation between being observed and observing herself creates a complex dramaturgical experience, enriching the performance and inviting the audience into a layered understanding of the power dynamics at play.

This dynamic is further complicated by the role of language and interaction. Not only is her image shaped through the technological apparatus, but also through what is said to and about her on stage. The actors' lines, delivered not only to her but also in reference to her, reinforce the idea that her identity is not fixed, but continuously negotiated. The narrative is collectively constructed—shaped by the performers through dialogue and positioning, and by the audience through perception and response. In this way, both the theatrical medium and its spectators actively contribute to how her story unfolds and how her presence is understood.

Figure 3. Performance *Gier* by Christopher Rüping, 2025 (Photo: Thomas Aurin)

Conclusion

The material presence of technology in *Gier* is not merely a means of amplification; it functions as a central dramaturgical mechanism that enacts the play's exploration of vulnerability, exposure, and fragmented identity. The performance foregrounds what I describe as the double materiality of technology: its physical presence as an object—here, the static, professional camera—and its function as a medium, producing the projected image. These two material layers interact in ways that are not neutral or additive but deeply interdependent, shaping the dramaturgical effect through contrast and tension.

On the level of the object, the camera asserts itself as rigid, immobile, and authoritative. It demands submission from the performer, anchoring her spatially and visually. As a medium, however, the projection it generates transforms this static setup into something fluid and affective: a magnified image that amplifies intimacy, yet simultaneously dehumanises. The actress becomes both monumental and vulnerable—larger-than-life, yet trapped in the frame. This contrast between the object's commanding presence and the medium's aesthetic and emotional force is where the performance's meaning is most actively produced. It is in this dynamic interplay that power becomes unstable, and identity is exposed.

This dual materiality also structures the act of looking. The projection positions the actress as the subject of surveillance, but her gaze back towards the camera or her fellow actors temporarily reclaims agency. She shifts from being merely observed to observing herself, revealing how control oscillates between the technological apparatus and the performer. These reversals not only destabilise the audience's perception of authenticity but also expose how identity is continuously negotiated through bodies, technologies, and the narratives constructed around them.

By the end of the piece, the tension between these layers culminates in the actress's departure from the theatre and her dive into the Spree River—a gesture of symbolic release from the constraints of technological framing. Yet even this moment of escape is recorded, reminding us that there is no simple exit from mediation. Her live body vanishes, but the image remains. Her disappearance, though suggestive of autonomy, is absorbed into the very machinery she seeks to leave behind, highlighting the inescapable entanglement between technology and self-representation.

Ultimately, *Gier* shows that technology in performance is not merely illustrative or supportive—it is constitutive. Through the interaction of object and medium, presence and projection, the stage is transformed into a site of psychological and emotional struggle. Desire, trauma, and identity—the central concerns of Kane's text—are not only represented, but materially enacted through the technological apparatus. The performance demonstrates how double materiality—far from being a conceptual abstraction—becomes a lived aesthetic strategy that exposes, fragments, and reframes the self on stage.

2. Im Herzen der Gewalt

We are witnessing a dramatic incident taking place on Christmas night. At the same time, we see a reconstruction of that night unfolding in parallel at the police station, at the victim's sister's house, and in the hospital. These reconstructions are accompanied by multiple perspectives and opinions on what happened. The events of that night revolve around two men: Édouard, a Frenchman, and Reda, a man of Algerian descent. They meet, talk, flirt, and have sex. However, by the next morning, what began as a beautiful encounter turns into a nightmare. Reda steals Édouard's phone, pulls out a gun, threatens him, and rapes him. *Im Herzen der Gewalt* (premiered in 2018 at the Schaubühne) reconstructs this traumatic night, exposing layers of racism and homophobia while showing Édouard's struggle to both recount and process his experience. This adaptation of Édouard Louis' text, directed by Thomas Ostermeier and performed by Christoph Gawenda, Laurenz Laufenberg, Renato Schuch, and Alina Stiegler, raises critical questions about narrative authority: Who has the right to tell a story? Who controls how violence is represented and understood? Moreover, the piece highlights how systemic violence, perpetrated by governments and the police, impacts those who are already marginalised the most.

Figures 4 and 5. *Im Herzen der Gewalt* by Thomas Ostermeier, 2018 (Photos: Arno Declair)

The Double-layered Materiality

Just as in *Gier*, this performance employs live video projection, but the material qualities of the filming device and the live projection, as well as their dramaturgical applications, differ significantly. The most striking difference in terms of materiality is the filming device itself: rather than a large camera, as used in *Gier*, *Im Herzen der Gewalt* relies on a mobile phone. This seemingly minor shift introduces a fundamental change in what I refer to as double materiality: the phone as both object and medium. As such, it reshapes the dynamics of agency, authorship, and audience perception on stage.

On the one hand, we can examine the phone as a physical object—its small size, portability, and personal associations all contribute to its dramaturgical function. On the other hand, we can analyse the medium it generates: the live projection, which frames, distorts, or amplifies what is captured. It is in the interplay between these two materialities that new meaning emerges: where the object's intimacy may be contradicted by the public reach of the medium, or where the personal becomes political by virtue of its framing. This analysis follows these two layers—first, the phone as theatrical object; second, the projections it creates—to explore how their interaction shapes the performance's inquiry into surveillance, storytelling, and control.

The Phone as a Theatrical Object

The first material layer of the mobile phone is its presence as a physical object on stage and the way it is handled by the actors. First of all, the phone grants the performers a level of ease and fluidity in filming themselves that would be much harder to achieve with a professional camera. The phone is lightweight, mobile, and familiar, allowing for an intuitive interaction between performer and device. This accessibility is not incidental but is woven into the fabric of the performance itself. Throughout the piece, a single mobile phone is passed between the actors, shifting hands depending on the scene. As a result, every performer alternates between being the observer and the observed, between controlling the gaze and being subjected to it. This redistribution of agency directly influences the dramaturgy, as it not only determines what is captured on screen but also reflects the power dynamics at play within the narrative, raising questions about who gets to document a story and whose perspective is prioritised.

The phone's status as a typically personal device further underscores this redistribution. Its communal use dismantles the assumption of individual ownership and transforms filming into a collective process, merging multiple viewpoints into a unified yet multi-voiced narrative. This shift from individual to shared control also undermines the idea of a singular gaze, instead highlighting a multiplicity of perspectives shaped by whoever holds the device at a given moment.

Another important material effect is the phone's subtle presence on stage. Unlike a professional video camera, which asserts itself as a visible and imposing piece of technology, a phone blends seamlessly into the performance environment. Its familiarity as an everyday object allows it to shift between active and passive presence without disrupting the theatrical illusion. It might be held up to record an intimate moment, then set aside, tucked into a pocket, or left on a table, where it briefly disappears from the audience's awareness, just as phones do in daily life. This contrasts starkly with *Gier*, where the larger camera setup emphasised the act of filming and therefore the mediation of the image. In *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, the phone's ability to vanish and reappear mirrors the fluid way technology infiltrates human interactions: sometimes noticeable, sometimes invisible, but always shaping perception. This subtle integration reinforces the dramaturgical structure, ensuring that the act of filming is not an isolated spectacle but an organic extension of the performance itself.

Beyond its physical presence, a phone carries inherent meanings that set it apart from a professional video camera. It is not just a recording device—it is an extension of the self, filled with personal data: photos, messages, and fragments of daily life that were never meant for public viewing. At the same time, a phone is commonly used to create content for an audience, such as vlogs, social media posts, and tutorials. This dual function—personal documentation versus public storytelling—plays a crucial role in the performance. The footage captured on the phone moves fluidly between these roles, capturing moments that feel both intimate and public, such as when the two men film themselves in bed in a vlog-like manner, and scenes where the phone serves as a neutral recording tool, as seen when crime scene photos are taken, or the perpetrator is photographed at the police station. Rather than positioning the audience as intruders on something personal, the performance plays with the tension between private and public, blurring the line between what feels personal and what is intentionally shared as part of the narrative.

The phone's small scale and cultural familiarity further support this integration. Because it does not command attention like a professional camera, the act of filming often escapes notice—it becomes embedded in the rhythm of the performance rather than marked as an exceptional gesture. This allows the technology to operate both visibly and invisibly, reinforcing the double function of the phone as both a theatrical prop and a recording tool.

Figure 6. Performance *Im Herzen der Gewalt* by Thomas Ostermeier, 2018 (Photo: Arno Declair)

The Role of Video Projection

The second material layer is the video projection itself—the images generated by the mobile phone and their dramaturgical impact. These projections are not neutral representations but active theatrical elements that shape the audience's perception. In *Gier*, the presence of a professional camera not only enhanced intimacy but also accentuated the artificiality of theatricality. In *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, the mobile phone fosters a more immediate, intimate atmosphere. The actors frequently engage directly with the phone's camera, looking into it as they perform, which fosters a direct connection with the audience. The phone's close-up perspective draws viewers into tactile details, such as forensic investigators dusting for fingerprints, capturing the fine powder settling, the delicate brushstrokes, and the slow reveal of traces left behind, making these gestures almost tangible.

These close-up shots foreground the phone's ability to render the private publicly visible. The intimacy of the scene, such as the two men filming themselves in bed, is heightened by the familiar aesthetic of vlog-style footage, while also inviting discomfort. Rather than intruding on a private moment, the audience is offered a staged performance of intimacy, framed through a medium that blurs the personal and the performative.

The performance alternates between different modes of filming, creating a dynamic interplay between the recorded and the live. At times, the actors are fully aware of the camera, performing directly into the lens as though addressing an imagined audience. These moments resemble social media performances, self-curated and intentional. At other times, the camera functions as an unseen observer, capturing moments as if unnoticed by those being filmed. This shift between self-representation and external surveillance plays a crucial role in the performance's interrogation of power, exposing the vulnerability inherent in being recorded.

These varying modes—self-recording, documentation, passive observation—reflect the phone's inherent flexibility. In everyday use, a phone can shift seamlessly between acting as a private journal, a public platform, or an anonymous lens. The performance capitalises on this ambiguity, using the phone's functional multiplicity to complicate the audience's perception: Are we witnessing self-expression, surveillance, or staged documentation?

This dynamic is further complicated by a final material aspect of the medium: the manipulation of the footage. The projections appear in black and white, are not always live, and, at times, screenshots from a live video freeze on the screen, or pre-recorded videos are shown. These aesthetic choices interrupt the flow of live action, disrupt temporal continuity, and foreground the constructed nature of what we see. The audience is constantly reminded that these are mediated images—filtered, framed, manipulated.

Moreover, the use of pre-recorded footage, frozen images, and live video adds a temporal complexity to the storytelling. These layers do not simply reflect memory; they actively shape it. For example, at one point, a screenshot from an intimate moment—where the two men lie together in bed—is projected onto the screen, even as the live action continues. The juxtaposition of past and present creates a layered effect: the tenderness of the moment lingers as a ghostly reminder, even as the narrative moves towards violence. In this way, the technology makes memory visually and emotionally present, turning a private moment into a haunting witness of what is to come.

This manipulation—through freezing, delay, or replay—underscores yet another function of the phone: its capacity not only to capture time but to reshape it. These aesthetic interventions simulate features of smartphone apps and social media interfaces, where live content is often captured, filtered, paused, or curated before being shared. The phone thus becomes not just a lens, but a

temporal interface—a device through which time can be controlled, stretched, or reoriented, foregrounding the constructed nature of memory and narrative.

Storytelling, Surveillance, and Power

The interplay between the materiality of the phone as an object and the projected video as a medium ultimately shapes the dramaturgy in profound ways. In contrast to *Gier*, where the act of filming is largely externalised, *Im Herzen der Gewalt* internalises the process of image production within the performers' actions. Since the actors control the camera themselves, storytelling becomes decentralised, a collective act, allowing for multiple perspectives to coexist rather than a single authoritative gaze. Everyone is filming, being filmed, or filming themselves—sometimes involuntarily documented, sometimes deliberately crafting their own image and story. The phone is not a passive tool but an active agent in shaping the story. This dynamic reflects the central tension of the performance: Who has the power to tell a story? Who decides what is seen and how it is framed? The police, the sister, the public eye—all contribute to the reconstruction of the incident, mirroring the way truth is shaped by those who document it.

The phone's theft during the performance adds further resonance. Beyond the immediate loss of a personal object, the theft signifies a loss of narrative control. The phone, as both a repository of memory and a means of documentation, is taken away, reinforcing the vulnerability of those who are filmed. This moment resonates with the broader themes of the piece, in which testimony is constantly challenged, rewritten, and mediated by external forces. In this context, the phone's disappearance highlights the fragility of personal agency and the ways in which control over one's own story can be stripped away.

This loss of control is further underscored by the fragmented storytelling structure, which contrasts with the supposed objectivity of the police interrogation, the overarching frame for the performance. While the interrogation aims to reconstruct the night's events as accurately as possible, it is inherently shaped by subjective perspectives, biases, and omissions. The phone itself reinforces this paradox: it functions both as a personal device and as a tool of documentation, capturing crime scene photos and mugshots. Yet, the police officers' clear racial biases in how they discuss the perpetrator expose the illusion of neutrality, revealing how power influences the way stories are recorded and told.

Finally, much like in *Gier*, the direct gaze into the camera creates, as mentioned, a relationship between the performers and the audience. But the act of looking not only establishes intimacy but also implicates the audience in the act of watching. However, because a phone is an inherently personal device, this effect is even more pronounced. In some moments, the perspective shifts: rather than simply watching the actors, the audience sees the world through the character's eyes, placing them within the scene. This shifting perspective reinforces the performance's exploration of surveillance, self-representation, and the power dynamics of storytelling.

Conclusion

In *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, the integration of live video is more than a technical device—it becomes a dramaturgical strategy shaped by the phone's double materiality. As both a physical object and a medium, the phone shapes how power, authorship, and perception are constructed on stage. Passed between performers, it loses its status as a private possession and becomes a shared tool for documentation, representation, and control. This redistribution of agency transforms storytelling into a collective act, decentralising authorship and inviting multiple, shifting perspectives.

Simultaneously, the projection layer does not merely reflect reality but constructs it. It magnifies, fragments, freezes, or replays what is captured, making the act of mediation itself visible. These visual manipulations complicate the experience of time and presence, and destabilise the boundary between private memory and public narrative. The audience is not just watching a story unfold; they witness how that story is filtered, framed, and reassembled in real time.

The performance also draws on the phone's everyday ambiguity. It serves as confession, documentation, surveillance, and performance—often all at once. This multiplicity of modes reflects how the phone functions in everyday life, seamlessly shifting between personal device, social tool, and passive observer. The result is a dramaturgy that mirrors the instability of truth, testimony, and representation in a world saturated by screens.

Ultimately, *Im Herzen der Gewalt* forces the audience to reflect on their own role as observers in a world saturated by screens. The performance does not simply portray the fragility of memory or the instability of truth—it enacts it. Through the interplay of object and medium, presence and projection, *Im Herzen der Gewalt* reveals how stories are not merely told but mediated, filtered, and contested. The double materiality of the mobile phone is not just present—it is performative. It becomes the mechanism through which control shifts, perspectives collide, and meaning emerges.

3. **News from Beyond**

Three "mediums" stand before us, each equipped with a *ghost device*, promising answers from the *Beyond*. Shortly before, we, the audience, had sent in our own questions via sms— Big questions we might had. Up until now, however, we still didn't know what the "Beyond" was and what exactly was meant by "Big questions". I am talking about *News from Beyond* (2025), a performance by the artists collective Gob Squad performed at the HAU theatre. Not long after the performers portraying "mediums" got introduced, they leave the theatre space to step into the *Beyond*—which turns out to be the neighbourhood outside of the theatre. There, they begin their search for answers, asking strangers to respond to the questions we submitted. Questions like: *What should my daughter study? How do I grow old with dignity? How do we solve the climate crisis? Will I ever have a career?* The responses from these so-called "spirits" and "ghosts" of the *Beyond* reach us through voice memos recorded on *ghost devices*, which, in reality, are mobile phones. Yet, the answers come not only from words. Objects, sounds, and even other animals seem to carry meaning, offering unexpected clues to resolve the unresolved. Gradually, these findings take on a physical presence in the theatre: objects are carried in, and eventually, people themselves step onto the stage. The *Beyond*—or rather, the world outside the theatre—is both mystified and made tangible, inviting us to see it anew and reconsider our connection to what lies beyond the performance space.

Figures 7 and 8. Performance *News from Beyond* by Gob Squad, 2025 (Photos: Dorothea Tuch)

The Double-layered Materiality

The dramaturgical use of mobile phones in *News from Beyond* offers a compelling exploration of their dual materiality: as physical objects and as media that generate a distinct sensory experience. Whereas *Im Herzen der Gewalt* foregrounds the phone's role as a filming device, *News from Beyond* reimagines it primarily as a tool for auditory communication. This contrast reveals the object's adaptability and underscores how its specific use—visual or acoustic—shapes the dramaturgical experience in fundamentally different ways. It also draws attention to the distinct dramaturgical potential of the medium it produces—voice recordings that mediate between presence and absence, intimacy and distance.

The Materiality of the Object: the phone

At the level of the object, the phone remains familiar: a small, everyday device that is both highly personal and inherently connected to a broader network. It is small, intimate, and something we all carry with us. And it is used to communicate, to navigate the world, and to share experiences. In *News from Beyond*, however, its role is subtly redefined. At the very beginning of the performance, the audience is asked to take out their own phones to submit questions, momentarily engaging with the device in its typical interactive capacity. Reinforcing their function as interactive tools. Yet, as the performance progresses, this interactivity is stripped away. The phones become transmitters of pre-recorded messages rather than tools for direct exchange.

In contrast to *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, where phones are actively used on stage for filming, here they are primarily present through their function rather than their physical visibility. The phone as an object fades into the background as the actors take them with them, shifting the focus towards the materiality of the medium it produces— recorded voice messages.

The Materiality of the Medium: voice recordings

Unlike in *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, where the phone primarily functions as a filming device, *News from Beyond* emphasises its role as a medium for auditory connection. The recorded messages bridge the gap between the theatre and the outside world, carrying not only voices but also the ambient sounds of the city, the rhythm of breath, and the subtle tonal shifts in a stranger's voice. This materiality of sound creates a direct and immersive form of communication—one that is both detailed and tangible. For a moment, the phone transports us elsewhere, generating the illusion of presence in another space and making the outside world feel strikingly immediate within the theatrical setting.

The phone thus transports us, interestingly, while the performance initially invites audience participation, being connected to the *Beyond*, the communication becomes entirely one-directional. The audience listens but cannot respond, unlike in a typical phone conversation. As a result, the phone stops functioning as an interactive device and instead becomes a framing tool, shaping our perception of the outside world rather than allowing direct engagement with it. The voice memos not only provide a mediated glimpse into the outside world but also act as a lens through which our own previously submitted questions are reframed. The responses we receive are filtered through the perspectives of strangers, shaping how we interpret our own uncertainties and concerns.

Interplay Between Object and Medium: creating a lens

Here, the double materiality of the phone plays a crucial role. Its presence as an object is both reinforced and subverted: while its name and function are playfully altered, its role as a connective

device is made strikingly literal. The voice recordings, in turn, take on a heightened significance, as they become the primary focus of the performance. By limiting the audience's ability to respond, the performance shifts the usual interaction with a phone from active engagement to deep listening. Rather than being preoccupied with formulating a reply, we are drawn into the rich, unfiltered textures of the recordings, which unfold in time, demanding our full attention as they develop. Together, the performance transforms the phone from its typical role as a tool for quick communication into something entirely different—namely, a vivid lens through which we experience and engage with the physical outside world.

In addition, by framing the phone as something mystical and recontextualising the outside world as the *Beyond*, the lens the performance creates encourages us to perceive the familiar in a new, almost enchanted way. The way in which objects and people from the *Beyond* are later presented on stage, as if exhibited, further enhances this shift in perspective. What was always there, yet perhaps overlooked in daily life, is now framed as something extraordinary. The audience is invited to rediscover a sense of curiosity toward the real world, making space for meaningful interactions that might otherwise be dismissed.

Questioning technology

Besides creating a lens, this performance also questions our use of technology in daily life. As discussed, *News from Beyond* frames mobile phones as ghost devices, humorously and ironically mystifying an object we typically associate with instant digital communication. Phones, usually a means of virtual connection, are now transformed into tools for reaching the *Beyond*. However, as the performance unfolds, it becomes evident that this "Beyond" is nothing other than the real world outside the theatre. This shift in function prompts us to question our daily relationship with technology: Does it truly connect us, or does it create distance between us and our physical surroundings? In a paradoxical reversal, the very device often blamed for isolating us now serves as a bridge to real-world encounters.

Figure 9. Performance *News from Beyond* by collective Gob Squad, 2025 (Photo: Dorothea Tuch)

Furthermore, this dramaturgical approach highlights how technology mediates our perception of reality. The voice memos do not simply provide answers; they reshape our questions by filtering them through the voices and perspectives of strangers. This process disrupts the closed loops of digital communication, where algorithms often reinforce our existing viewpoints, and our phones keep us absorbed in personalised content rather than in the world around us. In everyday life, we rarely stop to engage with strangers on the street, let alone ask for their advice—but here, the performance makes this encounter literal. Instead of remaining within a self-curated digital bubble, we are confronted with unpredictable, unscripted responses from the physical world—voices we might not have otherwise encountered. What lingers are these voices, the unexpected answers, and a renewed awareness of the world beyond our personal digital habits.

Conclusion

In the end, the phone's double materiality—its presence as both an intimate, everyday object and a medium for transmitting voices—emerges as a central dramaturgical force in *News from Beyond*. Gob Squad reimagines the phone not merely as a tool for communication, but as a performative lens through which reality is reframed. Passed into the audience's hands and then withdrawn, the phone shifts from an interactive device to a vessel of distant voices, gradually transforming our relationship with it, from a tool of habitual distraction to a portal for unexpected connection.

By separating the phone's physical presence from its acoustic function, the performance foregrounds how object and medium can diverge yet remain interdependent. The familiar device fades from sight, but its recorded messages become vividly present, filled with breath, background noise, and the texture of another life. This interplay draws attention not only to what technology shows or tells us, but how it does so: what it filters, distances, or amplifies.

Rather than reinforcing digital detachment, *News from Beyond* reclaims the phone as a tool for encounter. It questions whether our devices truly connect us to the world—or merely mediate it—and offers an alternative mode of technological use: one rooted in listening, openness, and reframing the ordinary. The phone's dual role enables this shift. As an object, it carries personal and cultural meaning; as a medium, it creates a space for new perspectives to enter.

Ultimately, the performance does not just use technology—it questions it from within. It transforms the phone into a stage where presence and absence, nearness and distance, the real and the imagined converge. Through its double materiality, the phone becomes both subject and instrument of reflection, reminding us that how we listen shapes what we hear, and how we frame the world shapes what we notice within it. In doing so, *News from Beyond* challenges us to reconsider our own engagement with technology and the world around us, inviting us to tune in—to recognise the strange within the familiar, and seek meaningful connections in places we might otherwise overlook.

Conclusion

The analysis of the three performances—*Gier*, *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, and *News from Beyond*— provides insight into how digital technology can be explored through its double materiality: both as a physical object and as a medium that shapes sensory and dramaturgical experiences. By separating these layers, new dimensions of materiality emerge, allowing for a more conscious interplay between them. This approach opens up possibilities for creating tension, reinforcing specific elements, or questioning the impact of technology on perception and interaction. While each performance employs technology differently, they all explore the shifting dynamics of presence, mediation, and audience engagement in a world increasingly shaped by digital devices.

In *Gier*, the use of a professional video camera emphasises the act of filming itself, creating a heightened awareness of the mediation process. The camera's presence on stage functions not only as a technical tool but also as a narrative device, intensifying the tension between authenticity and performance. The close-up shots and live projections amplify the actors' emotions, while simultaneously questioning the voyeuristic role of the audience. This dynamic evokes both moments of intimacy, where the audience feels drawn into the actors' inner world, and a deliberate distancing, as the act of watching the performance from a mediated perspective complicates direct connection.

Im Herzen der Gewalt adopts a different approach by using a mobile phone instead of a professional camera, fundamentally altering the materiality and dramaturgical effects of the recording process. The performance plays with the tension between private and public by utilising the phone's dual function—personal documentation and public storytelling—to shift between intimate moments and neutral recordings. The phone's accessibility and familiarity allow for a fluid and decentralised mode of storytelling, as the device is passed between actors, shifting perspectives and redistributing narrative agency. This choice not only reflects the performance's interrogation of narrative authority—who gets to tell a story and how violence is represented—but also mirrors the omnipresence of mobile technology in contemporary society. The phone's ability to shift between being an active and passive presence on stage underscores the fluid integration of digital devices into human interactions, blurring the boundaries between personal and public, private and performative.

In *News from Beyond*, the mobile phone is reimagined as a "ghost device", transforming its function from a visual tool into an auditory medium. The performance plays with the dual materiality of the phone, as both a personal object and a means of connection, while subverting its conventional use. By turning the outside world into the "Beyond" and using recorded voice memos to bring external perspectives into the theatre, the performance highlights both the connective and distancing effects of technology. Unlike in *Gier* and *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, where video projection creates an intensified visual experience, *News from Beyond* shifts the focus to sound, fostering a more immersive and introspective form of engagement. At the same time, it also raises critical questions about how technology mediates reality: does it bridge gaps between individuals, or does it reinforce isolation by limiting direct, unfiltered interaction?

Across all three performances, technology does not function merely as an aesthetic or practical tool but as a central dramaturgical element that reshapes audience perception and participation. Each production interrogates the mechanisms through which stories are constructed and controlled—whether through the lens of a camera, the shifting perspectives of a mobile phone, or the recorded voices of strangers. These works demonstrate that technology, when approached as a dynamic material with its own agency, can transform our understanding of presence, power, and the act of watching. In doing so, they reflect broader societal concerns about surveillance, self-representation, and the power dynamics inherent in storytelling.

Ultimately, by engaging with technology on multiple levels—both as a material presence and as a medium of transmission—these performances highlight how digital tools are not just passive enablers but active agents in shaping theatrical meaning. By utilising live video and mobile phones, they create layered, multi-perspective narratives that invite audiences to critically engage with the ways in which media shapes our understanding of truth, memory, and human connection. In an era where digital mediation is an ever-present force in daily life, these works prompt us to reconsider our own roles as spectators, participants, and storytellers in a world increasingly framed by screens.

Bibliography

Books

Bay-Cheng, Sarah, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson. 2010. *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Causey, Matthew. 2006. *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness*. London: Routledge.

Performances

Gier directed by Christopher Rüping, Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 2025.

Im Herzen der Gewalt directed by Thomas Ostermeier, Schaubühne, Berlin, 2018.

News from Beyond by artists collective Gob Squad, HAU theatre, Berlin, 2025.