Materialising the Digital

A Double-Layered Approach to Technology in Theatre — **Short Version**

by Elsbeth Hoefkens

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

Introduction

How can we better understand the role of technology in shaping theatrical experience? This question guided my research in Berlin, where I attended over 30 performances—many of which made use of digital technologies, particularly live video. Rather than evaluating all these works, I chose to examine one specific insight that emerged from these experiences: how technology operates on stage not only as a tool or theme but as a material that shapes dramaturgy. More specifically, I explore the *double materiality* of digital technology—its function both as a physical object and as a medium.

Building on existing academic literature, including Chiel Kattenbelt's ideas on *intermediality*, which explore how different media interact to produce new meaning, as well as Sarah Bay-Cheng's and Matthew Causey's analyses of how media technologies structure performance and perception, I shift the focus inward. I analyse how the two material layers within a technological device can interact to shape audience perception, storytelling, and the construction of meaning on stage. By distinguishing between the materiality of the *object* (e.g., the phone or camera on stage) and the materiality of the *medium* it creates (e.g., projected video or recorded voice), I examine how these elements interact, and how performances use their contrast or harmony to shape narrative, intimacy, and power.

To illustrate this, I analyse three performances I encountered during this research: *Gier*, *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, and *News from Beyond*. Each piece uses technology differently—visually or acoustically, centrally or subtly—but all engage with the layered presence of digital devices in ways that challenge, subvert, or heighten theatrical storytelling.

Gier

The performance *Gier* (Deutsches Theater, 2025), directed by Christopher Rüping and based on Sarah Kane's *Crave*, features a striking use of live video. The fragmented, poetic text explores human desire, trauma, obsession, sexual abuse, loneliness, and pain, all of which are deeply woven into the performance. On stage is a static setup: a professional camera, a white canvas backdrop, lights, and a chair. Actress Wiebke Mollenhauer sits within this frame throughout the performance, her face continuously filmed in close-up and projected live onto a screen. The camera is not just a recording tool, but a dominant scenographic object—static, professional, and authoritative. It does not follow her movements; rather, she must submit to its fixed gaze. This setup anchors her in place, turning the camera into a symbol of control and observation.

As a medium, the projection amplifies her presence, making every micro-expression visible. Her image becomes monumental and emotionally charged, yet also disembodied, trapped within a technological frame. Her gaze seems to meet the audience, yet it is directed at and mediated through the lens, creating both emotional proximity and distance. The performance thus plays with double materiality: the object (camera) implies surveillance and constraint, while the medium (projection) distorts, intensifies, and ultimately transforms her presence.

This tension between visibility and control becomes central to the dramaturgy. Power shifts between the live body and its digital double, raising the question: who holds control—technology, performer, or viewer? The projection does not merely reflect her presence; it alters it, displacing her physical body and turning her into both a person and a mediated construct. These choices echo key themes in Kane's work: the longing to be seen, the fear of exposure, and the fragmentation of self. By foregrounding the act of mediation, *Gier* challenges the audience's perception of authenticity, intimacy, and control, revealing the very mechanics through which presence is shaped on stage.

Figures 2 and 3. Performance *Gier* by Christopher Rüping, 2025 (Photos: Thomas Aurin)

Im Herzen der Gewalt

In *Im Herzen der Gewalt* (Schaubühne, 2018), directed by Thomas Ostermeier and based on Édouard Louis' autobiographical novel, live video projection is again central—this time not via a professional camera, but a mobile phone. While this technological shift fundamentally alters both the aesthetic and dramaturgical dynamics, it also serves to mediate a narrative composed of multiple, conflicting perspectives. The play reconstructs the night shared by two men—what starts as a tender encounter gradually turns into an act of violence. The phone is small, fluid, familiar, and a personal object—one we all carry, use, and rely on. On stage, however, it becomes a shared tool. Everyone films, is filmed, or films themselves—sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. Passed between actors, it subverts its

status as a private possession and becomes a collective storytelling device. As performers alternate between controlling and submitting to the gaze, the phone mediates shifting power relations within the narrative. This redistribution of authorship and agency reflects the play's central tension: Who has the power to tell a story?

The phone's double materiality operates in subtle but complex ways. As an object, it almost disappears—tucked into pockets, handed over casually—yet its presence shapes how scenes are framed. As a medium, it generates live projections, black-and-white recordings, and frozen screenshots. The footage moves fluidly between vlog-style intimacy, documentary realism, and surveillance-like distance, blurring boundaries between the personal and performative. These shifts mirror the instability of truth and memory: the object (the phone) blends into the action almost unnoticed, while the medium (the projection) disrupts linear time, intensifies emotion, and alters the audience's perception.

The phone does not merely capture events—it manipulates them. Its projections replay, freeze, and distort, turning memories into lingering traces. The phone's onstage theft intensifies this idea: losing the device means losing narrative control, underscoring the vulnerability of those recorded. The phone becomes both witness and weapon, a tool for storytelling and for power. Through the interplay of object and medium, *Im Herzen der Gewalt* interrogates how stories are constructed, whose voices are amplified, and how digital mediation can both empower and erase.

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

News from Beyond

News from Beyond (HAU, 2025), created by the artists collective Gob Squad, offers yet another shift in focus: here, the mobile phone is not a visual device but an auditory one. The mobile phones are introduced as "ghost devices". At the start, audience members are asked to submit questions via their phones to the "Beyond", which is later revealed to be the world outside the theatre. These questions—such as *What should my daughter study?*, *How do I grow old with dignity?*, or *How do we solve the climate crisis?*—are answered in the performance through voice memos, recorded by the performers as they approach strangers on the street. These recordings, carrying not only words but also the ambient city soundscape, the rhythm of breath, and the texture of unfamiliar voices, become the central medium through which the performance unfolds.

In this performance, the phone's double materiality is reversed: its presence as an *object* fades into the background, while its *medium*—the sound—takes centre stage. The phone is recontextualised as a mystical tool for communication and stops functioning as a device for interaction. Unlike traditional phone conversations, this exchange is one-directional: the audience listens but cannot respond. Rather than encouraging rapid interaction, the audience is asked to listen, to attune themselves to the voices of strangers, reframing their own questions through someone else's perspective.

The piece reframes the ordinary as strange. The dramaturgy frames the familiar (the phone) as something mystical, and the real world (the "Beyond") as something magical. This subtle reframing invites a renewed attention to reality. Everyday street sounds and advice from passersby are elevated to something near-poetic. Yet alongside this enchantment lies critique. *News from Beyond* questions the illusion of connection that phones often promise. By slowing down communication and foregrounding deep listening, the performance proposes a different use of technology—one rooted in attentiveness, openness, and the possibility of meaningful encounter.

Figures 6 and 7. Performance *News from Beyond* by Gob Squad, 2025 (Photos: Dorothea Tuch)

Conclusion

Across all three performances, technology is not treated as merely a staging aid or a neutral tool, but as a central dramaturgical agent. The concept of *double materiality*—the interplay between object and medium—offers a useful lens for analysing how technology shapes theatrical meaning. As both a physical device and a sensory medium, technology influences how performances engage with power, presence, authorship, and perception. In *Gier*, the professional camera exposes and confines. In *Im Herzen der Gewalt*, the mobile phone decentralises storytelling and blurs boundaries between private and public, testimony and surveillance. And in *News from Beyond*, the device transforms from a tool of distraction into a channel for unexpected connection.

The meaning in these performances arises not only from the content of what is recorded, projected, or heard, but from the very form these technologies take and the way they operate. Each work shows how theatre can use digital tools to interrogate truth, intimacy, and control—not only thematically, but through the live interaction between object and medium. In doing so, these works invite us to reconsider our own relationship to technology: not simply as users, but as interpreters of the material traces it leaves behind.

Together, these performances show that digital technology, when treated as a layered material presence, can do more than illustrate—it can *perform*. It shifts narrative control, exposes how memory can be fractured, and invites us to question what we take as real. By engaging both object and medium, these works remind us that how we frame, listen, and watch fundamentally shapes what we perceive, and how meaning emerges from that act.