CHAPTER 1

Theatre as Technology

> There is little on this earth more outmoded than the live theater.
> —Rebecca Schneider, "Slough Media" (72)
>
> Is the theatre really dead?
> —Paul Simon, "The Dangling Conversation"

1.1 Beam Me Up

I want to begin not with theatre, but with television, old-fashioned television remediated to the internet that I began watching while confined by the pandemic in 2020: *Star Trek*, now known as *Star Trek: The Original Series.* It's a pleasure to watch a show that I was allowed to see only incompletely and intermittently as a kid, since it was on after my bedtime. The cardboard-looking sets, the suburban LA scenery of various "planets," the unconvincing "aliens," the interstellar ubiquity of English, the troubling gender and racial politics are at once new and familiar, but one retro element of *Star Trek* is, for me, particularly striking. In later series, such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the communications devices that the crew use to call the *Enterprise* are lodged in the metal insignia they wear on their chests – slap the insignia, speak, and Riker or Data or Worf will hear you back on the ship. But in the first series, they use an avatar of the flip phone, a handheld device that hinges open to broadcast. It was, of course, well ahead of its time then, magically summoning both the voice and the performing body, captured in the phrase unspoken on the show yet etched in popular memory, "Beam me up, Scotty."

More arresting today, though, is how the communicators work. When Kirk or Spock flips one open, they're wielding a two-handed engine, as one hand cradles the device while the other apparently turns a dial – *tunes in.* Much has been made of the ways emergent technologies are predicated on their predecessors: how the acting in early films appropriated the styles of

the theatre; how the powerful computers in our pockets, bags, and backpacks today are still conceptualized as "phones." Despite dilithium crystals and antimatter, for Kirk and the gang in 1966, to boldly go involved bringing a familiar technology along for the ride, a small, forward-leaning device that still required analog tuning: transistor radio.

This archaeological perspective on the projection of analog technology into the digital future registers a principal theme undergirding *Star Trek*: the human versus the machine. In several episodes, notably "Return of the Archons" in the first season (February 9, 1967) and "The Ultimate Computer" in the second (March 8, 1968), Kirk outwits a computer by posing to it a self-canceling choice, reframing the affectual language of ethical dilemma to defeat the binaristic protocol of machine thinking (recall, too, the endless sparring between McCoy and Spock about emotion and logic). For me, at least, this tiny detail indexes the series's conceptual mission to its technological imagination. *Star Trek* maps the future on the anxiously passing present, on retrogressive mechanical and social technologies, on analog radio, on the gender relations that make space a sexual playground for Kirk and McCoy (and very occasionally for Spock, too), on design that often seems to clothe its "new civilizations" in the colorful castoffs of Orientalist fantasy.

Obsolescence haunts *Star Trek* today; the original series, alongside *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, and *Star Trek: Enterprise*, was made for broadcast television, but is now typically streamed to a laptop. A future consigned to its always already passing technology: this temporality, this conjunction of material, social, and aesthetic technologies, is where *Star Trek* is most closely dialed in to the obsolescing stage. Like Kirk's analog communicators, like television on my laptop, the temporal modality of the theatre as a technology is not so much the passé as the *en passant.* Writing in his landmark study *Technics and Time*, Bernard Stiegler notes the transformative interactivity of the categories of the human and the technological, the *who* and the *what*, a transformation especially suggestive of the interactive technologies of theatre, "the one, bio-anthropo-logical, the other, techno-logical," creating a relation in which "the *who* itself redoubles [. . .] the *what*: conditioned *by* the *what*, it is equally conditional *for* it" (*Technics and Time* 2:7). Taking "humans" to be "prosthetic beings, without qualities" (2:2), Stiegler sees this relationship as "transductive," a dynamic "catalyzed by the advancing of the *what* (insofar as it is already there, and insofar as it tends spontaneously to differentiate itself in advance from the differentiation of the *who*, since the *who* is always inscribed in a system of *whats* overdetermined by

technical tendencies)" (2:7). Theatre uses bodies (*who*) and things (*what*) that are mutually transformational; the *who* of an actor is also a *what* for the audience, itself a *who* transformed into a *what* by the theatre.[1]

How do the theatre's technologies – the stage and auditorium (if there is such a structure), the writing of plays (if plays are written), the conventions of acting – dramatize what a given theatre is and does? And how do those changing technologies change the theatre's implication of the human? Theatre, in this view, cannot articulate a perdurable, universal "human," though that sensibility is often reinforced by the drama and theatre's use of bodies as their matériel. Rather, the signifying embodiments, signifying materialities, and signifying narratives of theatre as rhetoric and practice at once articulate, depend on, and are altered by the reflexive emergence of a conceptual "human" – or posthuman, antihuman, transhuman – defined by its inscription in and of the technological. Long before the new materialism, things (*what*) onstage have had the potential vitality of a *who*: Philoctetes' suppurating foot is a useful example of something that is part of a *who* that becomes a *what*, exerting its own action in the play, anticipating Othello's handkerchief, Nora's letter box, The Foundling Father's nibblers. Moreover, theatre also depends on technologies of showing, of making visible and audible: the *orchestra* and the *skene* door, the pageant wagon heavens whence Lucifer falls to the hellish streets of York, Hamlet's sterile platform, the raked stage of the Restoration rake, the gilded box of the St. James's society dramas of the 1890s, the Performance Garage festooned with mics and screens. In *Theatre as Technology*, I explore a potentially controversial perception, that the theatre's immersion in and foregrounding of technology render it always already obsolescent, making *obsolescence* the temporal and medial condition of theatre. Or, to put a spin on Paul Simon's question, the theatre is never "really dead," but always appears to be passing away.

An axiom: theatre is a technology that uses technology to represent a technological interface with the human; or, differently put, theatre is an ecology of technologies with different temporalities and different kinds of purchase on the human. A second axiom: conceptions of the human and of the technological are dialectically entwined; the theatre, and especially the technics of acting, foregrounds this tension. As Yuk Hui puts it, human beings "have always lived in a hybrid environment surrounded by artificial and natural objects," in which the "artificial and the natural are not two separate realms," but instead "constitute a dynamic system that conditions human experience and existence," the being of "the human" itself (*On the Existence of Digital Objects* 1). On the one hand, the theatre

relies on and projects human bodies as its instrument and object of representation. And yet, as elsewhere, the "human" in the theatre is sustained and defined by the technologies of its making. Much as the pervasive digital animation animating more recent made-for-streaming series like *Star Trek: Discovery* and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* frames the passing of the televisual, the entire apparatus of theatre – its dramatic language, formal dramatic and theatrical genres, conventions of gesture and movement, the design of lighting and machinery, the architecture of the stage and audience, the location of performance space in social place – witnesses the constant change of what *theatre* does, and *is*. As technology changes, the "human" it both extends and defines changes as well, a dynamic especially visible in theatre, where the "human" is visually constituted at the intersection of bodies and technologies. And while the "new" – Ezra Pound's summons to modernism to "make it new" – is not the summons of all theatre (traditional theatres in a sense operate under the banner "keep it the same"), and both "the new" and "the obsolete" are grooved to the epistemologies of capitalism, the theatre's predication *as* a technology locates its temporality on the cusp of passing.

The technologically contingent theatre represents a contingent humanity. One of the salient dimensions of theatre, whether conceived in terms of its institutional identities, its technological armatures, or its engagements with other forms of representation, is the feeling that theatre operates under the sign of its waning capacity to engage an emerging humanity. Aristotle, for example, conducts a naturalist's description – an autopsy, really – of a genre of representation manifested as a script, a text, or poem that does its tragic work, *katharsis*, most perfectly when the noise and distraction of the theatre, the technologies of *spectacle*, are left behind.[2] Taking up mainly old plays, plays that survived the collapse of Athens and the reinvention of its theatre, *Poetics* documents another dimension of theatre's constant evanescence: the affectual amplitude of a lost technology, the homeliness, perhaps, of speaking on a telephone, of Shakespeare in doublet-and-hose, of turning the dial to bring in the radio voice, of broadcast television. Much as Aristotle does in analyzing tragic theatre by anatomizing what it leaves behind, Aristophanes' *Frogs* skewers its theatre by mocking the performance style of plodding Aeschylus and screechy Euripides. We, Aristophanes seems to say to his audiences, don't live in *that* theatre anymore, much as we might still long to hear its harmonies, for David Wiles, "the harmonies of citizenship" (*Theatre and Citizenship* 39).[3] In this sense, Aristophanes anticipates Thomas Elsaesser's sense that "Obsolescence names the grieving and mourning, the denial and

disavowal, but it also nurtures an insane hope and hubris that we might be able to bring this embalmed past" – and the humanity embalmed there – "back to life" (*Film History as Media Archaeology* 341).

Ventriloquizing the absent voice of tragedy, *Frogs* records one dimension of the theatre's enactment of nostalgia, but a feel for the obsolescent particularly marks the invention of modern professional theatre, where a savvy disdain for the outmoded is the sign of the salable. From Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* in the 1580s scorning "the jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits" (*Tamburlaine*, Prologue l.1) to Hamlet's echo of Marlowe in the mighty, old-fashioned line of his "Pyrrhus" speech (*Hamlet* 2.2.288), to say nothing of the jigging veins of *The Mousetrap*, this theatre urgently claims the value of the new by incorporating the technology of the old.[4] The Stage Keeper in the Induction to Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* recalls the scurrilous playing of Tarleton and the more festive theatre of an earlier generation (l. 33), all pushed aside when the Book-holder and Scrivener arrive to outline the play's newfangled "Articles of Agreement" with the audience (l. 57), a contract that excuses the ignorance of those who take "*Jeronimo* or *Andronicus*" as "the best plays yet" (even as the audience's judgment has "stood still these five and twenty, or thirty years") and confirms today's up-to-date playwright as "loth to make Nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such like drolleries" (ll. 95–98, 114–16). Perhaps Jonson was just envious. Shareholding, landowning Shakespeare (whose long career, of course, spanned the decades from *Titus Andronicus* to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*) both transformed and benefited from the capitalist stage in ways that Jonson, at once a jobber in the theatre system and feudally patronized by the king, never quite managed. At the same time, Jonson's salty prologue ironically confirms the stage as the instrument of a kind of happy obsolescence, still marked today by that pervasive Broadway term for staging a classic: *revival.* And, of course, Jonson here also occupies a long critical tradition, alongside essays from Lope de Vega's 1609 *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias in este tiempo* to Bertolt Brecht's "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect" that contract the future, the *new,* by asserting a medium entwined in the past, the obsolescing *old* it restores as it repudiates.

Nostalgia promises return, and Aristophanes' satire evokes it as desirable and possible; Aeschylus' and Euripides' plays are still available, and their theatre persists as a viable artistic, ethical, and technological instrument. It might be fun to dial up a transistor radio in a media archaeology lab, but it will operate only as long as analog broadcast remains profitable. As a

gathering of social and aesthetic technologies, theatre stands in a different relation to obsolescence than any of the technologies it deploys at a given moment in history: a specific device (Pepper's ghost), instrument (stage lights), or practice (darkening the house). When Siegfried Zielinski avers that technology "is not human; in a specific sense, it is deeply inhuman" (*Deep Time of the Media* 6), he alerts us to the ideological dimension of theatre's implication in and of the human, perhaps most visible in the likening of theatre to that most powerfully naturalizing instrument of ideology, the body. But while the summons to dissever theatre from organicism, "the conception of theatre itself as a living, reproducing, and dying body," is powerful, simply replacing that metaphor with a different one – the "network," as Sarah Bay-Cheng and Amy Strahler Holzapfel elegantly suggest ("The Living Theatre" 9) – misses a key dimension of the deep time of theatre. For although theatre's "temporal processes" are, like those of any technology, "dynamic and inherently unstable" (24), the notion of theatre's essential ephemerality is confined not to individual performances but to the instrument itself. Insofar as "discarding and obsolescence are in fact internal to contemporary media technologies," so, too, *obsolescing* is the condition of theatre (Parikka, *Geology of Media* 142).

The provocative variety of the obsolescing stage is crystallized by a list of terms brought forward in a special issue of *October*, a list used to characterize "the obsolescent today": *ruin*, *relic*, *slum*, *passé*, *outdated*, *decline*, *decay*, *down-market*, *overlooked*, *imperfection*, *cliché*, *dilapidated*, *repulsive*, *worn-out*, *ridiculous*, *backwards*, *discard*, *pathetic*, *failure*, *dysfunctional*, *trash*, *pariah*, *stench*, *clunky*, *despised*, *orphan*" ("Introduction" to Obsolescence 4). While all of these terms are regularly applied to superseded devices and media, most also participate in familiar ways of talking about theatre, even apart from any specifically "antitheatrical" discourse, especially when theatre is compared with the technologies used to record, display, and broadcast performance developed from the late nineteenth century onward (theatre *fails*, is *passé*, *outdated*, full of *clichés*, *backward*, while film, television, and digital media *succeed* in remaining contemporary, future-leaning, cool). In the contemporary critique of media, theatre mainly appears, when it appears at all, as an *orphan.*

Yet the orphan theatre awkwardly fails to disappear in the face of media understood as, unlike theatre, *technological.* Perhaps theatre's temporal slack has to do with its instrumental use of human bodies, which seem to signify an unmediated liveness and presence, and with its intermedial character, combining technologized bodies with a range of other technologies, each with its own distinctive history, relation to nontheatrical

dispositifs, and temporality. As Craig N. Owens suggests, theatre "stubbornly preserves its most ancient technologies, deploying them along with its most advanced," suggesting that theatre "is not simply an architectural artifact; it is also a machine and an archaeology, a cabinet of curiosities" (*Staging Technology* 9). More to the point, as the Dramaturg for Brecht's *Messingkauf* observes, in the "houses of fabricated dreams," the contemporary theatre, one

> can see both the old and the new machinery that we use to deceive you. Every age has contributed its own few tricks. Since the invention of powerful lamps we've been able to represent night-time on stage. The techniques of perspective, which are somewhat older, have helped a great deal. And recently we've started using projectors. (*Messingkauf, or Buying Brass* 20).

Rather than disappearing "entirely into the dramatic effects they produce" (Craig N. Owens 10), the multiple temporalities of the technologies absorbed into the theatre apparatus keep those technologies visible, and make the theatre's representation of its own technological mediality essential to its work.[5] Moreover, as an apparatus, theatre participates in the "double operation of this term – as designating both individual scientific machines and a larger, overarching social machinery that produces, manifests, and manages desires," indeed, in which a change in the apparatus articulates changed modes of subjection, clearing "away the old subject, replacing it with a newly reshaped one, constituted by new desires, which are above all the desire for apparatuses" (Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch* 22). Less "*a* medium" than "a set of media," perhaps "even a privileged example for the convergence of media in, or on, what we now call a platform" (Harries, "Theater and Media before 'New' Media" 12), theatre's *avant* edge, by inveterately staging new technologies alongside their creaky avatars, the projection screen upstaging the fire curtain so to speak, sets up shop in a distinctive temporal wound, what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun memorably calls "the bleeding edge of obsolescence" ("Enduring Ephemeral").

Perhaps because its objects – films, recordings – persist on the medial horizon, film and film studies instructively engage with obsolescence conceived as "a mimetic impulse towards re-enactment, recovery, and redemption" (Elsaesser, *Film History* 334) in ways that revealingly sideline theatre. Although Elsaesser's understanding of film's occupation of and interactivity with other media doesn't extend to theatre, he does outline an altered perspective in which *obsolescence* as "a negative term within the technicist-economic discourse of 'progress through creative destruction,'" and mediated through the "principle of 'planned' or 'built-in'

obsolescence" of manufacturing and marketing in the 1950s, has shifted, "signifying something like heroic resistance to relentless acceleration, and in the process has become the badge of honor of the no-longer-useful," even providing a "rallying point for sustainability and recycling while also making an eloquent plea for an object-oriented philosophy and a new materialism of singularity and self-sufficiency of being" (*Film History* 335). Obsolescence, "understood as the survival of a witness to past 'newness' while renouncing past utility, can therefore also harbor utopian aspirations and even be the vehicle of lost promises and unfulfilled potential" (346). The objects of obsolescence provide a critical perspective that Elsaesser terms the "loop of belatedness" (348–49), in which film's "peculiar ontology of undeadness and not-aliveness" (349) locates critique in an expressive and interactive temporality, "a special relation of past to present," where the "present rediscovers a certain past, to which it then attributes the power to shape aspects of the future that are now our present" (348).[6]

This perspective, Elsaesser reminds us, "has not gone without discontent, critique, and outright rejection" from archaeologists, social and cultural historians, and "from within the fields most directly affected and addressed by media archaeology such as cinema studies, film history, media studies, media theory and art history" (*Film History* 352). Perhaps this setting-aside of theatre is, now, just a professional reflex among scholars of *newish* media, but perhaps it also arises from theatre's alternative occupation and practice of obsolescence. While historical critique can replicate Elsaesser's attention to earlier modes of theatre, those objects are long gone. *Hamlet* at the Globe, *En Attendant Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone, *Hair* at the Public do not populate our present in the way that, say, the 2020 Disney+ film of *Hamilton* on Broadway does, or that even more recondite films do: Shakespeare silents, for example, or the films and footage that Ethan Hawke's Hamlet composes into his film-within-a-film in Michael Almereyda's 2000 *Hamlet.* And yet, much as Hamlet's film to catch the conscience of a king marks a moment of technological temporality (Hamlet digitizing analog VHS tapes and then editing them for projection), theatre bears its obsolescence within it. The theatre's reputation for constant desuetude is articulated by its productive use of, and signification of, technologies, including human technologies, that are sometimes emergent, but always marked as passing, by a sense of *pastness*.

Film's temporalities are evident across the contemporary horizon, as old and new technologies, aesthetics, practices, rub cheek-by-jowl with the recorded archive. Theatre's obsolescing is visible and sensible at the fraying interfaces between its intermediated technologies, including the embodied

technologies of acting, the scriptural technologies of writing and of its transmission (manuscript, print, photocopy, digital), and the material technologies by which theatre claims to repair, renovate, and retemporalize itself: the third actor, Bottom's jigging verse as much as the Player King's, the *machina versatilis*, the electric lighting that immediately colored gas lighting with nostalgia, the digital screen. The persistence of the technological past involves theatre in nostalgia, perhaps most visibly at moments of technical (dramatic and theatrical) innovation; streamed to my laptop, Kirk summons the affective embrace of both his medium (television) and his instrument (transistor radio). European theatre at the turn of the twentieth century also witnessed such a moment, in which the "new drama" took shape on, and shaped the rhetoric of, the emerging apparatus of the fully electrified, technologized house. Much as late nineteenth-century realist theatre is reflexively compared to, and often reductively depreciated for, its apparent replication of the superficiality of the photograph, the inventors of modern realism – Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov – imagine a theatre suffused by, and implicitly reimagining, the recording media of photography: in the Ekdals' photographic studio in *The Wild Duck*, when the young officers freeze the life of the Prozorov family long enough to capture a photograph in *Three Sisters*, or in the thought rays that destroy the Captain in *The Father*, reflecting Strindberg's parallel efforts to capture the emanation of the soul on specially treated photographic plates. When Erwin Piscator combined George Grosz cartoons with slide images of World War I soldiers in his stage production of *The Good Soldier Schweyk* in 1928, the modern stage had already been absorbing and representing the discourse of recorded media for several decades.[7]

Theatre is not only a decisively intermedial practice, at once both using and representing a temporally diverse platform, but its technological development also challenges the notion of theatre as a single perdurable medium, leading Samuel Weber to argue that *theatricality*, an abstracted principle of paradoxically un/distanced viewing rather than the material vehicles and instruments of performance, localizes the *medium* in question.[8] It's easy to see why Weber leans in this direction. Theatre's material infrastructures and performance practices are too mutable, too divergent historically, geographically, culturally, and technologically to be claimed (without evident distortion and appropriation) as a singular instrument. Indeed, Weber's swerve to *theatricality* – rather than *theatre – as medium* evokes the challenge of describing theatre as a practice without locating in within a specific temporal and technical armature, a challenge anticipated, but not resolved, by Eric Bentley's well-worn description of the "theatrical

situation," "A impersonates B while C looks on" (*Life of the Drama* 150). Does it matter whether A, B, and C are assumed to be human beings? puppets? robots? objects? Is B understood as a "character" or as a "role," as a represented person or as a set of directions, and what do those directions look like? What does "impersonates" mean in this context? Does it matter whether that "impersonating" activity is inflected by the mid-1950s Method or mid-1960s epic theatricality? Or arises from a conventional mask, or set of gestures and postures? Does it matter that A, B, and C share common geotemporal coordinates, are physically present to each other and to the audience? Have I activated the "theatrical situation" when I do any role-enhanced repetitive activity before an audience, teaching, for example? When I wash the dishes while my cat watches? Does the "my" in this sentence imply social or power relations that obviate or sustain *theatrical* observation, relations visible if A is a Russian serf, or C is Louis XIV? Was a hired man at the Globe in 1600 impersonating the same B that, say, a shareholder like Burbage or Shakespeare was? Are technicians also A?

The historical indeterminacy of the site, practices, and technologies of theatre – including dramatic technologies (in what ways do a script by Shakespeare and one by Elfriede Jelinek share a sense of the written drama's theatrical utility?) – challenge the notion of theatre as medium, and so challenge the notion of *the* history of *the* theatre. Theatre witnesses a persistent impulse toward *remediation*, the representation of one medium in another (Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*); yet staging an alternate past theatrical technology in the present theatre witnesses the complexity of any notion of *theatre* as *one*. Think of the 1585 staging of *Oedipus the King* in the Teatro Olimpico, the remediation of the Stuart masque in *The Tempest*, William Poel's experiments in "Elizabethan" staging in London theatres at the turn of the twentieth century (or his simultaneous work with the Sanskrit classic *Shakuntala*), the persistent efforts to restore the architecture of early modern theatres – Shakespeare's Globe, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse – throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, or the claims of a distinctly modern form of performance, Original Practices Shakespeare.[9] An analogous perception might arise from the contemplation of performance forms originating outside the legacy of European theatre. As a technological ensemble, the highly formal conventions of, say *kutiyattam* – the relationship between conventions of speech, the gender of the performers, the carefully articulated disciplines of (facial, hand, arm, torso, leg, and foot) gesture, the specific display of makeup and costume, the role of music, to say nothing of the specific site and