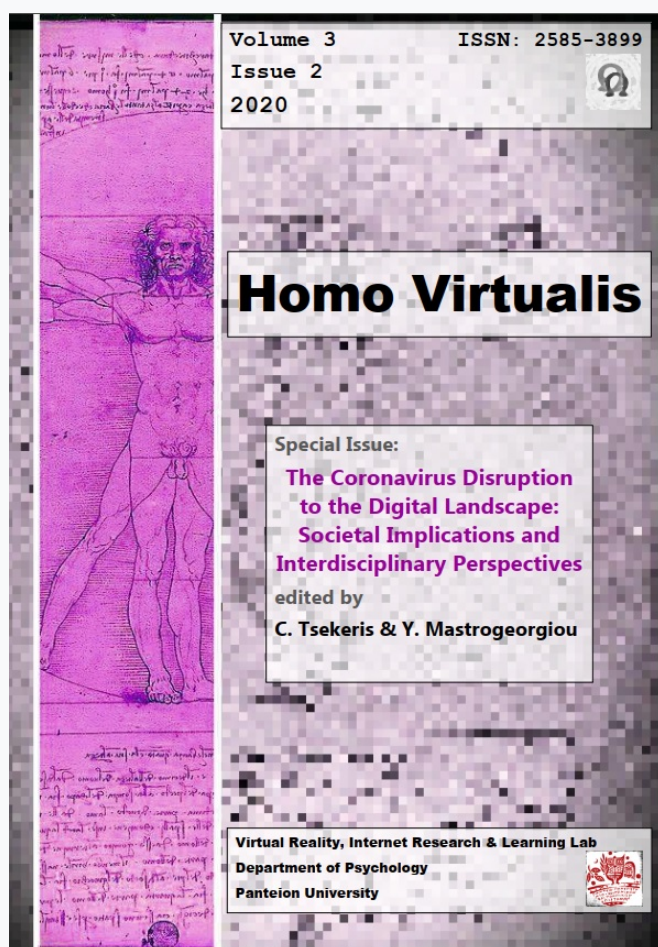


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## Theatre and Performance Go Massively Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications and Side Effects

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## Theatre and Performance Go Massively Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications and Side Effects

Eleni Timplalexi <sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, theatre groups and companies started massively providing online (filmed) versions of their productions. Theatre performances, live-streamed or recorded, have been shown online before, but mostly as a supplementary strategy, assisting the promotion of a live performance, not as a cultural trend per se, nor to the massive extent it has been happening during the pandemic. However, the consumption of this sort of online content, as this is literally what becomes anything posted on the web's hypertextual multimedial selves, cannot occur without consideration of the potential implications and side effects. What exactly is it we are watching on our screens, why is it marketed as theatre and performance, and why do we consume it as such? In the paper, the Phelan/Auslander debate is revisited, as this eradication of the distinction between the live and the mediatized may indicate performance's crucial shift away from independence towards technological, economical and linguistic dependence from mass reproduction. However, before lightheartedly welcoming this hybridity of massively experiencing online performances, which springs out from the collision between live performance (art) and web content (creativity), it is worth considering welcoming first digital performance hybrids emerging within and in between the medial restrictions imposed by the pandemic. These bold, experimental, participatory, 'transparent' intermedial forms of expression may prove out to be a source of strength in times of crisis.

**Keywords:** theatre, performance, COVID-19 pandemic, online content, intermediality

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## Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed a significant increase in the number of theatre groups and companies providing online (filmed) versions of their productions, usually for free, either on a persistent or temporally restricted basis. Actors and theatre practitioners are massively entering the commercial cyber-spatial terrain of influencers, youtubers, and social media, rendering their 'art' easily accessible and at the disposal of global audiences. However, the free consumption of these online products on our screens cannot occur without consideration of the potential implications and side effects.

## The question(s)

Besides the fact that this apparently selfless practice by some of those producing theatre may be interpreted as disguising the need to remain artistically relevant and important, it may also signify performance's crucial shift away from independence towards technological, economical and linguistic dependence from mass reproduction – although independence from mass reproduction had in the past been discussed as performance's greatest strength (Phelan, 1993). When theatre goes online, it renders itself usually available on the same platforms as viral videos, adverts, and gaming, and is 'consumed' as another online product; does it not then succumb to the erasure of its strongly-held live-action ontological privilege over the recorded, the mediatized or even the streamed, as argued by various theorists in the 1990s and 2000s?<sup>2</sup> In 1993, Peggy Phelan wrote:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance's being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance (Phelan, 1993, p. 146).

Although it is understandable that, on a collective subconscious level, online theatre and performance may serve some of us today as indexes or signifiers standing in the position of absent, signified cultural meaning, reminders of what theatre and performance *was* before it all started, what happened to the debate about the notion of theatre's 'liveness' under the light of coronavirus lockdown and social distancing?

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<sup>2</sup> The reader is reminded of the discourse about 'liveness' around the turning of the century (Dixon, 2007), with performance theorists such as Sontag, Kirby, Pavis, Causey, Birringer, Phelan, Auslander and Dixon taking positions for and against the mediation/mediatization of theatre performance. The essence of the debate can be brought down to two opposing views: Phelan's (1993), supporting Benjamin's approach about the loss of aura of the work of art in mass reproduction, and occurring with new technologies, and the other Auslander's (1999), arguing that the ontology of performance has been transformed within the new space provided by new media, also discussing terms such as 'mediatization' and 'mediatized'.

Theatre performances, live-streamed or recorded, have of course been shown online before, but as a supplementary strategy, assisting the promotion of a live performance (AEA Consulting, 2016), not as a cultural trend per se, nor to the huge extent that has become evident during the pandemic. The live event used to retain its distinctiveness and superiority over the recorded one, let alone the streamed or the mediatized.

However, what we are currently experiencing through this massive trend of theatre performance going online, occurring because of the parallel inability for the staging and watching of a live performance in a physical space, is the actual eradication of this very distinctiveness between the live and the recorded, the streamed or the mediatized, even an equation of a live theatre performance with a somehow digital version of its own. Is 'liveness', after all, a tool solely for marketing reasons, a notion serving a rhetoric attributing an ontological advantage to analog theatre over recorded, streamed and mediatized performances, awaiting to be hypocritically restored to live action when theatre companies manage to escape the twilight zone of COVID-19 and probable global financial crisis? What exactly is it we are watching on our screens, why is it marketed as theatre and performance, and why do we consume it as such, instead of perceiving it as a hybrid form of spectacle, which obeys the laws of hypertext and the web rather than those of live-action theatre performance?

### **(De)contextualising performance on the web**

Web 2.0 is a wild space, with its own interactive, participatory laws and a simplified like/dislike rationale. When analog theatre/performance -massively or not- goes online, there is the danger that the delivery of its message depends so much upon a medium serving so often communication and commercial purposes that its message "has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb" (McLuhan, 1969, p. 4). In other words, when theatre performance is shown online, be it recorded or 'live', it becomes another item on the web's hypertextual multimedial selves, serving as 'content' instead of 'art' on a website, a web channel or platform. The semiotic richness of hypermedia soon results in an ontologically flat, content-oriented construction, which absorbs artistic performance as just another of its potential elements, such as text, animation and advert banners.

Dedicated art professionals, theatre goers and critics are mere tenants on the web, a territory that belongs to 'prosumers' (Toffler, 1980).<sup>3</sup> These can be defined as natives of the digital revolution, who produce and consume material (video, text, image etc.) of their own making, often collaboratively, on platforms such as the blogosphere,

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<sup>3</sup> The role of the 'prosumer' was introduced as a term by Toffler to describe the re-integration of production and consumption in one unique function in light of the "third wave" economic form (Toffler, 1980).

virtual worlds and social media.<sup>4</sup> Professional theatre artists aspiring to address their audiences in this context have no more say or prestige than these creative web users who are often too involved in producing and promoting their own amateur content on the web, as well as consuming the content of others.

### **The difference(s)**

Following Marshall McLuhan's classification of hot and cool media (McLuhan, 1969), theatre should be considered a hot medium in that it offers a linear, non highly participatory experience in terms of the dramatic presentation of fiction. The computer and the smartphone, as highly participatory for the user, are considered an emblem of cool media. However, it could be claimed that theatre as a system is the 'coolest' of all mediums in that the theatre convention requires the co-presence of an actor and a spectator, despite the fact that, at the dramatic level, it often remains hot and linear, non participatory. On the other hand, the computer/smartphone is not only cool phenomenally but also literally: the screen, usually a combination of glass, plastic, and metal—clean and clinical—permits cool blue light to shine through. Can a theatre performance online retain the hotness of live action and pass it through the cool glass of the computer/smartphone? Or does it unavoidably become a computer mediatized spectacle?

Lars Elleström, when describing the modalities of the media, defines the material modality as "the latent corporeal interface of the medium" (Elleström, 2010, p. 17), containing three modes: human bodies, other materiality of a demarcated character such as flat surfaces and three-dimensional objects, and material manifestations of a less clearly demarcated character, such as sound waves. Hence, it becomes clear that the material modality of theatre and that of the computer/smartphone differ. The former "must be understood as a combination of several interfaces, sound waves, surfaces that are both flat and not flat and with both a changing and static character, and also the very specific corporeal interface of human bodies" (Elleström, 2010, p.17); in contrast, the material modality of the desktop/laptop computer or smartphone is said to be a flat surface of changing images, combined with sound waves coming from a concentrated source, and text, allowing advanced interaction with the displayed interface (Elleström, 2010). The writer concludes that:

Traditional live theatre is produced and displayed by a range of technical media, the bodies of the actors being the most important, but it should not, and actually it cannot, be stored. A filmed theatre performance can be stored, but what is being stored is, as a matter of fact, not the performance, but a transformed version with very different modal and qualified qualities (Elleström, 2010, p. 45).

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<sup>4</sup>Of course, many theatre artists, spectators and critics are prosumers as well, however, they undertake these 'roles' rather distinctively: when they partake in, watch or evaluate a theatre production online they are actors, spectators and critics respectively and when they generate content, not intentionally artistic, e.g. pictures of themselves in foyers on social media, they are prosumers.

Furthermore, semiotically speaking, live theatre performance may boast to be highly iconic, with symbols and indexes enriching the performance text. A filmed version of live theatre performance is supposed to retain that basic iconic quality but also constructing around it a strong indexical layer, visible or invisible, depending on the level of the spectator's immersion; in other words, a filmed version of a live theatre performance functions primarily indexically, as it always stands for, reminds of, signifies a performance that has already taken place in front of a camera. On a second level, that performance may have been fabricated based on different levels of convention, resemblance and contiguity (Elleström, 2010). However, not only a filmed version of a live theatre performance completely alters the semiotics of that performance by adding an omnipresent indexical layer on top of it, it also gets incorporated on another semiotic plane, that of the hypertextual web when it goes online. It thus becomes clear that the distance between the semiotic qualities of a live theatre performance and those of a filmed version of it presented online is so immense.

## **Implications**

In the process of the collision of works of art (live theatre performances) and web content (creative material), such as the one occurring in the case of a filmed live performance presented online on some webpage, the category of art succumbs to the category content, as it becomes part of its larger picture, a mere component amongst other elements such as pictures, advertisements and news. There is some considerable tension emerging between art and creativity that cannot go without implications:

*Implications for artists.* Obviously, technological change and unemployment occurring because of the pandemic are issues for any citizen and not just artists. Beyond that, as theatre and performance proclaim the necessity of professionalism and skillful training, with professional artists, often members of guilds, such as actors, directors and playwrights being involved in theatre making and performance, it is striking that the majority of those producing theatre suddenly accept that their artistic performances get deployed on the web, received and evaluated alongside prosumer amateur content, and, more or less on the same conceptual and aesthetic basis.

*Implications for art critique/evaluation.* The fate of online performance critique is another issue, for it is easily scattered amidst hyperlinks and comment boxes and diminishes under the thumbs up-thumbs down symbols of web platforms. Evaluative approaches to art, until recently dominant in the reception and analysis of theatre and performance, especially after the theatre avant-garde explosion of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, may have to be reconsidered as more or less irrelevant in the digital/web context (Suhr, 2015). It seems rather hypocritical to import live action performative artistic value and impose it on any web content instance; any content on the web is

vaguely *creative*, but not all is artistic.<sup>5</sup> A good performance does not necessarily lead to a good film of it – nor does a good film of a performance promise the artistic qualities of the filmed theatre production. Hence, it becomes evident that every instance of online theatre/performance content has to be evaluated on its own, and cannot ‘inherit’ any artistic value from the physical live performance it stands for.

*Implications for spectators.* The focus of attention, a prerequisite for the reception of an analog theatre performance, cannot remain intact and isolated from potential interactive advertisements, other hyperlinked titles or even the very frame of the computer monitor. Hence, our experience of watching becomes spatiotemporally fragmented, interrupted by other experiences of our ordinary lives (e.g. food delivery and telephone calls) or other cyber-experiences, from intentional or semi-automatic clicks from the spectators’ part. Furthermore, in terms of the impact of recorded, live-streamed or mediatized/intermedial<sup>6</sup> performances on spectators, especially when traced through web platforms and social media, a crucial shift towards a quantitative rationale is evident, with “views”, “likes/dislikes” (even brief comments often express mere liking/disliking) reigning, immediately measurable through numerical details appearing on the screen, as opposed to a qualitative one, e.g. fragments of interviews with spectators or extended, justified, critical comments.

### Side effects

If theatre and performance had not so unexpectedly, so willingly accepted its mass mediatization during the pandemic, if it had intentionally skipped the challenge of going massively online, then one could be persuaded that Phelan was right. The ‘aura’ of theatre, as known before the pandemic, would have remained intact, as it would have done if it had suddenly undertaken meaningful political action on the streets, despite the lockdown; the performance avant-garde artists of the 60s would have been very proud. But, instead, one witnesses what could be called “Phelan’s nightmare”.

If theatre wants to conquer the web arena, it first has to acknowledge that the arbitrary privilege of its ontology over mediated performance, supported by theorists like Phelan, can remain intact neither *now* nor *after* the current crisis any more. Nor can this privilege be hypocritically restored to the live event after this massive trend of going online. If it can actually go massively online once, without losing anything from its ontology, what really distinguishes live performance from a mediated one? Either its ‘aura’ as a work of art (Benjamin, 1968) evaporates as it abandons its magic circle, be it a stage, an amphitheatre, or a deserted factory, or it does not, because

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, there are remarkable examples of art destined for the digital terrain right from the initial moment of their creation, such as internet art works or some video art, but this is understandably a completely different case. Such cases will be discussed shortly.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of intermediality receives attention by Elleström (2010), especially in relation to media borders and multimodality.

such an aura simply does not exist. However, it is clear that the notion cannot apply solely when convenient. Marshall McLuhan sheds light onto a view of the world in terms of our media awareness:

By this I mean to say that because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world (McLuhan, 1969, p. 4).

The nostalgia with which theatre artists, critics and audiences tenderly caress theatre during the pandemic, the way we embrace it, how we cling to it by still conferring it superior art value even on its new context, the web, according to the aforementioned position, unfortunately proves theatre performance as a potentially *passé* medium. Funnily enough, Baudrillard's remarks also pinpoint nostalgia as a sign of the removal from the realm of reality towards the realm of simulacra:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality-a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6-7).

### Way(s) out?

So, is that it? No. Apart from the negative aspect of the hybridity emerging from the collision of art and content on the web, what we also witness is the tremendous opportunity for creative intermedial discourse, springing out from the very restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Artists and amateurs, stars and theatre lovers, often uniting forces, are creating hybrid video 'content' with dramatic references, such as Shakespeare's soliloquies shot mostly in people's rooms (Wiegand, 2020) or theatre performed on teleconferencing platforms (Wright, 2020) - and this is a welcome and, apparently, rather appealing surprise. In the former example, *Guardian Culture* in partnership with *Shakespeare's Globe* celebrated the Bard's birthday in 2020 with *Shakespeare Solos*, performed by the *Quarantine Players*, with more than 26.500 views on YouTube (Guardian Culture, 2020).<sup>7</sup> In the latter one, *Creation Theatre*, a theatre company that ran for a month (11 April-10 May 2020) this performance via *Zoom*, is said to have bridged 1.500 households from 30 different countries (Creation Theatre, 2020). Not bad, compared to Simon Godwin's *Hamlet* (2015), produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, available on YouTube, with 9.060 views (Freiherr, 2020).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The numbers of videos/playlists views provided are those appearing on 2020, September 16.

<sup>8</sup> The Royal Shakespeare Company opted for different strategies during the pandemic, such as offering shows on streaming services. Of course, Shakespeare's plays have been broadcasted before (Aebischer, Greenhalgh & Osborne, 2018). The video of the full performance was found posted on a personal YouTube channel. This is an



A brief look at the aforementioned examples indicates that the dynamic impact of these intermedial performative instances is not to be neglected; even judging only by numbers. In Greece, *Onassis Stegi* launched, almost simultaneously, two initiatives for watching free performances online on YouTube during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. On one hand, *On Stage*, with more than 30 "legendary theatrical and dance performances and concerts from the past ten years of *Onassis Stegi*" (Onassis Foundation, n.d.) and *Enter*, a series of new commissions to artists by the *Onassis Foundation* for artworks created in 120 hours at home against COVID-19 blues, also presented on YouTube (Onassis Foundation, n.d.). Interestingly enough, Dimitris Karantzas' response to the intermedial, low-budget concept of *Enter* called *Houseplants* (Onassis Foundation, 2020) enjoyed 9.567 views, whereas a full recorded performance by the same well established theatre director of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (Onassis Foundation, 2020), a very successful performance presented both in 2015 and 2017 at *Onassis Stegi*, which was provided through *On Stage* playlist option, had only double numbers of viewers (20.487 views), despite the fact that it had run live during two seasons and its audience also included teenagers, with organized school visits.

These intermedial forms, in their making between digital media and theatre, take into account the fact that they become materialized *within* digital mediums. Although they embed them, they also make them visible: they do not attempt to create an 'opaque' illusion of theatre, they render 'transparent' their functional mechanisms, they create new cultural meaning at the disposal of everyone. They create new cultural intermedial intimacies, new magic circles encompassing viewers and participants. Theorists some time ago, such as Philip Auslander, welcomed distinctions between media that derive from "careful consideration of how the relationship between the live and the mediatized gets articulated in particular cases" (Auslander, 1999, p. 54) while Steve Dixon discussed presence as a time-related rather than a space-related phenomenon, subject to the notion of spectator's complicity (Dixon, 2007), opening up towards a notion of presence also in mediatized performance examples.

### University Challenge(s)

However, should theatre want to explore intermedial paths and transfer online, Performance and Theatre Studies would have to acknowledge the fact that Auslander and Dixon were right in their views about 'liveness'. These theoretical fields would first have to recognize as theatre and performance, at least as cyberperformance, the predecessors of today's intermedial forms, such as the ones mentioned above. Long before theatre companies decided to render available performances online because

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important element for the comparison, as it may indicate that the number of views does not depend as much on the performance shown, as it does on the broadcasting on official channels of theatre companies or established media.

of the pandemic, or artists and amateurs post drama related content in the form of videos, the *Hamnet Players*<sup>9</sup> acted *Hamnet*, their version of *Hamlet*, in irc (Internet Relay Chat), *SL Shakespeare Company* mounted productions in *Second Life* (SL Shakespeare Company, 2007) and players of *The Sims* played in the *Veronaville* neighbourhood (The SIMS Wiki, n.d.). All these dramatic performance instances took place in real time, a factor attributed to live performance, by people performing through digital media. It is absolutely essential, before welcoming new intermedial forms of theatrical, performative expression, such as those occurring during the pandemic, to become aware of older experiments and to explore how the notion of theatre and performance remediation<sup>10</sup> may even now enrich the horizons of theatre and performance, even with options such as avatarial embodiment in gaming, or chatrooms as online theatre performances.

So, what do we—as artists and academics—really have to say about theatre performance pretending it suddenly, and massively, discovered its online mediation as an antidote to the pandemic, while also thinking it is not losing its ontological distinctiveness of live action? Why should we go along with theatre producers or groups that think ‘canning’ a theatre performance and offering it online is the best way to deal with the unprecedented need for adaptation of theatre performance to new challenging circumstances? How can we not address the issues that emerge from this medial and potentially artistic shift - from clear media borders to intermediality, requiring just as massively exploring new methodologies and dramaturgies, tracing and mapping creative expression in between mediums, and all of this in opposition to sticking to rigid definitions, limits and evaluative criteria?

The pandemic forced Theatre and Performance Studies to come face to face with the opportunity to acknowledge ‘digital performativity’ on their part, where multiple practices, such as encrypting, trading and posting on social media, are said to be performative. As Jon McKenzie (2001) puts it:

By relating questions and issues of performance and performativity to the broader empirical and conceptual landscape of digital cultures, the notion of performance is not limited to art-, dance- or theater-based practices but is seen as encapsulated in wider processes of techno-social emergence, production and control (McKenzie, 2001, as cited in Leeker, Schipper, & Beyes, 2017, p. 10).

Perhaps rejecting cookies on websites is no less meaningful as ‘performance’ than watching or offering a filmed production online. Or skipping the checking of social media accounts for a couple of days. Or switching off GPS – why do we need it during quarantine anyway? As practices they are trivial, but they are political. Theatre professionals can have a go at this sort of performance as well.

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<sup>9</sup> Irc Theatre, Live!!! (1993), <http://www.marmot.org.uk/hamnet/>

<sup>10</sup> The notions of mediation and remediation are thoroughly discussed by Bolter and Grusin (1999).

## Conclusion

The boldness of experimental, participatory, 'transparent' intermedial forms of expression may be a source of strength in times of crisis. However, in order to generate, access, watch and evaluate them, a revision of the notions of presence and theatre/performance ontology is required, so that the notion of the necessity of physical presence may be revised too. What the pandemic confirmed, with all its tele-practices, may appear to be a craving for physical co-presence in a shared space, but truly is a specific mode of attention, a time-bound sense of complicity. As Dixon puts it "...mere corporeal liveness is no guarantee of presence. We have all experienced nights of crushing, excruciating boredom at the theater, where despite the live presence of a dozen gesticulating bodies on stage, we discern no interesting presence at all..." (Dixon, 2007, p. 133). Furthermore, a shift in the understanding of theatre and performance ontology may be needed in order to create and receive these intermedial forms of expression, bearing in mind the nature of the digital medium. There is space for the development of new criteria which will allow us to experience them as potentially artistic, as in the cases of net artworks or video art, instead of using academy-imposed evaluative aesthetic criteria and discarding them as mere 'content', punishing them for insisting on the real rather than its simulacrum. These hybrid intermedial forms may actually be works of art awaiting to be received and evaluated with new criteria. Further research on the reception and impact of such creations is urgently needed.

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