The Virtual Remote Presence of the Body: Research on the Phenomenon of "Desktop Drama"

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, the world enters the post-epidemic era, and various forms of "online drama" performances emerge one after another. As a type of "online drama", "screen drama" begin to enter the public view in 2020, while the emergence of this subtype of "screen drama" shows another possibility for the form of "online drama". The unique "interface" of the desktop drama cleverly connects the real space and the virtual space, forming a form of virtual remote "presence" with the body as the medium. Through the performance of actors with life logic, the drama story is spread through the Internet. This kind of drama is not mature enough, the number is not large, and there are shortcomings. However, as a new type of drama phenomenon, it is worthy of research and attention.

Keywords: Desktop drama, Screen drama, Online drama, Body, Space.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 epidemic in 2020 has caused the world to experience too much pain and reflection. When 2021 comes, people have not stayed away from the epidemic in the past year, but have entered a post-epidemic era in which they coexist with the new crown virus. When the spread of the epidemic prevented people from going outside and into the theater, the drama did not disappear. Of course, this thanks to the Internet technology in the information age. Various forms of "online drama" are appearing on the screens of computers, tablets and phones in countless homes. Zhuo Mengting, the young actor and director who studied in the UK and studied "performance making" at Goldsmiths College, University of London, said that the essence of this "online drama" is actually "screen drama". She believes that this form of drama "uses video media to record what should have happened in a space, and people can see it in an instant or delayed way." [1] Obviously, the term "screen drama" can more accurately summarize the characteristics of this type of drama rather than that of "online drama". In fact, the extension of "online drama" is quite different from that of "screen drama". Among them, the author is more interested in the drama phenomenon similar to the online drama "Waiting for Godot" directed by Wang Chong during the epidemic period. With the analysis of the form and content of this type of drama, the author thinks that the term "desktop drama" is more consistent with the connotation of this subtype of drama.

2. TRANSFORMATION FROM "ONLINE" TO "SCREEN", "SCREEN" TO "DESKTOP"

With the large-scale involvement of the Internet in human life, the concept of "online" came into being, which mainly refers to the non-physical spatial interaction between users through the Internet as a medium. Specifically in the field of drama, "online drama" can refer to all drama works with dramatic characteristics that are transmitted through the Internet as a medium.

The concept of "online drama" focuses more on the role of the medium "Internet" as a means of communication, with a wider scope. As early as 2009, for example, the National Theatre Live in the UK began to focus on the production of well-produced and camera-inspired productions in cinemas, both in the ways of live broadcast and projection on screen, which initially gave British audiences outside London the opportunity to see

London productions. This mode of transmission quickly spread around the world. During the epidemic, the Poly Cloud Theatre of Beijing Poly Theatre Management Co., Ltd. launched NT Live classics such as "Twelfth Night", "Frankenstein", and "Antony and Cleopatra" through free live streaming online. On December 24, 2020, the drama works "Thunderstorm" and "Thunderstorm · follow-up", produced by Poly Yanghua, were exclusively broadcast on Tencent Video in the way of legitimate drama. As long as people use the Internet devices, they can see almost the same drama works with the live audience. Since then, more and more drama works have been broadcast online, which have been accepted by the audience. The concept of "online drama" has been extended in the network, and any performance with dramatic properties that is transmitted on the Internet can be called "online drama".

During the epidemic period, different from the large-scale live broadcast drama works mentioned above, another kind of online drama works performed by computer video equipment also came into the audience's view, such as, the online drama "Waiting for Godot" directed by Wang Chong on April 5th and 6th, 2020, "End Meeting for All" , "Complete Works: Shakespeare on the Table (at Home)", Table Top Shakespeare, at Home)[1] by the British Forced Entertainment troupe, and "Love in the Time of Corona" directed by British artist Bill Atchison, etc. The reason why this kind of drama works are different from the NT live series, Poly Yanghua's "thunderstorm" and "thunderstorm ·follw-up" is that they eliminate the concept of "theatre", and any space can become the sites of theatrical performances, such as home, streets, table, and paper, which is the expansion of space of stage performance. From this point, this kind of non-theatrical online performance is a little bit like offline "small theatre drama". They belong to a type of "online drama", with the performance in the theatre. Through the technology, this drama broadcast online has obvious difference. They emphasise the screen nature of the receiver rather than the theatre, so it is more appropriate to call them "screen drama".

If people look further, they will find that there are many different sub-types in "screen drama". There are many differences between works like "Waiting for Godot"[2] and "End Meeting for All", which emphasize the use of social software and rely on various computer softwares for storytelling, and other dramas that emphasize the nature of the screen but lack the reliance on computer software itself. With the help of the more mature concept of "desktop movie"[3], the author calls screen dramas such as "Waiting for Godot" and "Ending Meeting for All" as "desktop drama". The most notable feature is the sense of interface, which is also the biggest difference between it and other types of "online drama". "Waiting for Godot" and "End Meeting for All" are directly displayed with online video communication tools, have achieved a certain dramatic effect through screen switching, and pay attention to the interaction with the audience. At this time, the actors seem to be acquaintances who use computer software to conduct video conferences on the computer desktop with the audience. While shortening the distance between the audience and the actors, the interface between the display and the virtual space is realized through the "desktop" interface. "Desktop drama" uses the desktop program of electronic equipment to emphasize the feeling behind the screen with the visual sense of the camera, and emphasizes the interaction between people and others through desktop software and computer equipment. The performers are faced with the invisible "desktop" and various softwares on the desktop, and take them as a part of theatrical performance to play a narrative role not just as a recording tool.

In summary, this article believes that "desktop drama" refers to drama work that is directly related to the development of a story and desktop programs running on interactive electronic devices, and it belongs to a subtype of "screen drama".

3. THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION BETWEEN VIRTUAL SPACE AND REAL SPACE

Judging from the existing drama works that conform to the connotation of "desktop drama", the desktop of interactive electronic devices plays a

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1. There is "Table Top" in the title of the play, but its performance is in the form of an actor sitting at a real table, with the use of common salt shakers and pepper shakers at home to replace all the characters in Shakespeare's plays to explain the story. It is only broadcast online, and the desktop application in the electronic device does not participate in the drama narrative process, so it is not classified as a desktop drama."

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2. If there is no special emphasis, "Waiting for Godot" in this article refers to the desktop drama "Waiting for Godot" directed by Wang Chong.

3. Desktop film" is a type of movies born out of mockumentary, with subjective narrative, and the entire story unfolding entirely on the computer desktop.

vital role as a bridge between the virtual and reality. The "interface" interpreted by the "screen" and the "desktop" is the connector to the cyberspace. Cyberspace is a virtual space, and a space composed of digital coding and decoding. This cyberspace for interactive visualization of information has a tendency to "dismantle" [2]. The sublation of the body in cyberspace makes it possible for the subject behind the computer screen to be reincarnated or disincarnated into hyper-cognition. [2] From this point of view, desktop drama emphasizes people's spiritual exploration when their thinking is transformed into media symbols. Viewing from Wang Chong's "Waiting for Godot" to "Ending Meeting for All" by the "Forced Entertainment" troupe, this is indeed the case. Through the desktop drama, the spiritual world has been activated after the physical activity space of people is constrained under the influence of the epidemic.

Because of the virtual nature of the space in desktop dramas, the direct use of computer cameras as shooting equipment, and the space in which the drama takes place is generally relatively small, there will be no large-scale body scheduling in desktop dramas, but more close-up of the faces, as well as the symbolic expression of the information and emotions of the subject's thought process. [2] This also requires that the tabletop drama should be more adept at the exploration of the characters at the spiritual level. Wang Chong's choice of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" can also illustrate this problem. "Waiting for Godot" is a two-act tragicomedy by Samuel Beckett, an Irish modernist dramatist, in 1953. When people whose freedom is restricted during the epidemic watch Chong Wang's "Waiting for Godot" on the Internet, they feel the long wait brought by the epidemic on the psychological level. By the end of the play, more than 1,900 comments continue to express the audience's understanding of "waiting" and reflection on the present. The real space where people live is watched because of the drama "Waiting for Godot" presented in cyberspace. In addition to the communication of the "interface", the drama itself has also become a bridge of space blending.

In the desktop dramas such as "Waiting for Godot" and "Ending Meeting for All", another thing that has a significant effect on space is the way how the image is displayed in multiple Windows on the desktop. These two dramas have adopted the form of "video conference" to unfold the story, breaking through the panoramic viewing experience when watching dramas in the past. Each screen shows a different performance space, just as if a unified performance space on the stage is split and then reorganized. When these spaces are presented at the same time, the emphasis is on the juxtaposition of multiple interfaces, multiple information flows, and "common presence" [3], breaking the single "presence" approach. Taking "Waiting for Godot" as an example, Estragon and Vladimir talked to Pozo who was lying on the hospital bed at their own homes. Vladimir wanted to go out to find Pozo, and Estragon wanted him to stay. Vladimir wanted to go out many times, but was persuaded by the reason of "waiting for Godot". At this time, the three persons ushered in the lucky one in the absurd dialogue, and the lucky one drived the car on the empty streets of Wuhan. Then, the four spaces of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozo and Lucky Boy were tiled on the desktop at the same time. When the image of the Lucky Boy was shown on Yellow Crane Tower, Yangtze River Bridge in Wuhan, his picture occupied the entire screen, and the audience who recognized the contents of the picture were also very excited to interact. At this time, the real space in which the actors were located, the dramatic space in which the characters in the play were located, and the real space in which the audience was located were unified in the continuous switching of the screen, from a single presence to a "common presence".

In addition, the spatial scheduling of the characters in the play is no longer the fixed point of on-field and off-stage in the traditional theatre. Also, it adds the in-and-out of the camera of the characters, the addition or withdrawal of the chat window screen, and the enlargement and reduction of the personal screen. The combination of these images is more like the "montage" technique of movies. In this case, this way of presenting dramatic work is more like that of a movie. This can also confuse the boundaries between drama and film. ("Figure 1")
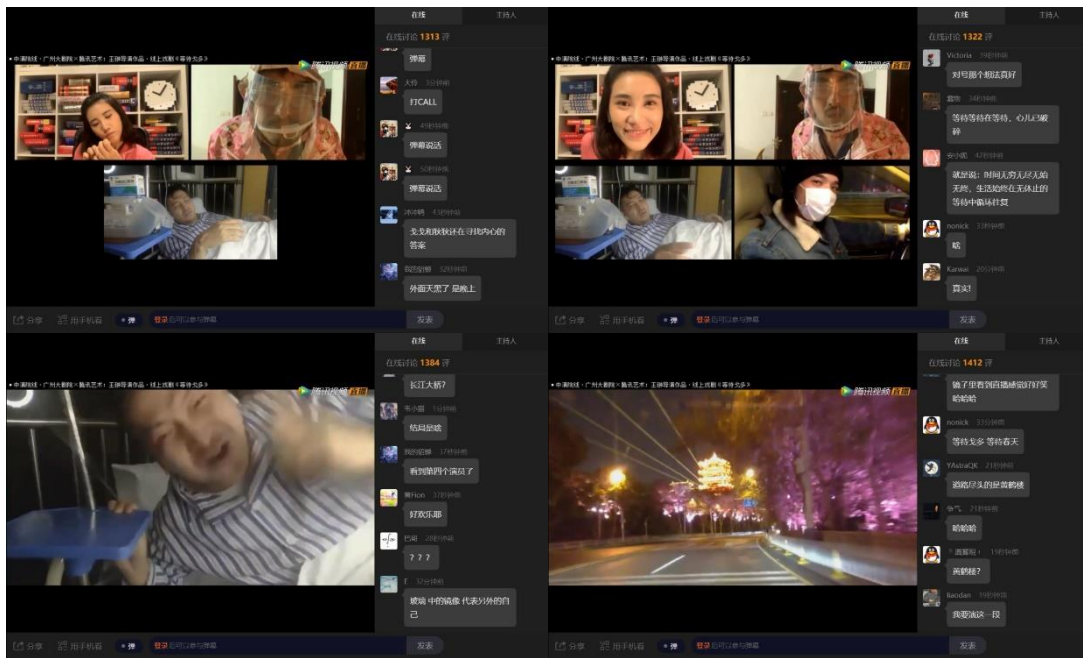
Figure 1 Desktop drama "Waiting for Godot".

4. REMOTE PRESENCE WITH THE BODY AS A MEDIUM

The development of technology allows people to communicate on the Internet to get rid of the shackles of the body. The mobile network allows people to achieve remote presence anytime and anywhere. The "presence" and the "body" have been separated for an unprecedented time. A virtual body is created, and the way in which subjects are present has also been radically updated. [4] In desktop drama works, the sense of substitution in the virtual space is realized by the actor's body, and at the same time, the perception of the body is enhanced. In the communication mode of the virtual space, the body cannot be separated from the virtual space and exist alone. The body is transformed into a new medium in desktop drama.

As a medium, the actor's body in the desktop drama needs to interact with the space. A dialogue relationship is established between the body and the actual environment in which the actor is located, and the interaction with reality is strengthened by means of "remote presence". The remote presence method created by the new media technology has changed the presence of people participating in theatrical activities. There is a certain connection between remote presence method and physical presence method. According to "a physical virtual presence, the sounds and influences captured by the machine will provide conditions for the new form of remote presence. This method does not eliminate the physical presence, but merges with the physical presence, opening a new era of human existence." [4] In the case of desktop drama, during the live broadcast process, the relatively limited real space in the lens focuses the human's attention on the human body itself, which magnifies the meaning of the body's existence. In "Waiting for Godot", the camera is basically fixed. Only in some cases, the actor will move around in the room by holding a mobile phone. According to the camera lens, the space is limited to the actor's home or car. Therefore, the movement of the body will not be like a large-scale movement on the stage in the theatre. Because of the way of shooting through the camera, the actor's body will not stay far away from the camera for a long time. First, people who are too far away seem small; second, the real space conditions are not allowed; third is the need for radio. Therefore, in most cases, actors will perform as close to the camera as possible. And then, the actor's facial expressions allow the audience to see clearly and pay more attention to the actor's body. This is especially evident in the passage mentioned above when Vladimir intends to go out to visit Podro who is ill. During the viewing process, Pozo, lying relatively still in the hospital bed, is farther away from the camera and has fewer movements than the other two. Therefore, the audience's attention will be more focused on Vladimir, who has more body movements. Vladimir wanted to go

out but failed to go out, which can better convey the dual connotation of being restricted by "waiting for Godot but unable to leave" and being unable to leave due to the epidemic situation in the real environment. Just as McLuhan said, "medium is the message", and the actor's body acts as a medium to transmit information. Correspondingly, the viewers who are watching are also using "bullet" comments at this time to publish the feedback of the message recipient, forming a kind of interaction.

In "End meeting for All", the focus on the body is more intense. This play is conducted in a multi-person video conference from beginning to end. The actors in the video have basically never left their seats. People always pay attention to the upper half of the actors. In the epidemic environment, video conferencing has become a way of communication that people are accustomed to. By watching the work, the audience will have the illusion that they are also participating in the meeting, which also reflects a kind of diversity of "presence". The body uses this approach to strengthen the interaction and connection between the virtual space and the real space. As Wang Chong believes, "when our era has virtual space, cyberspace, and online space, our space has changed. Although we are now separated by screens, this is a kind of presence and a kind of synchronicity of our times." [5] ("Figure 2" "Figure 3")
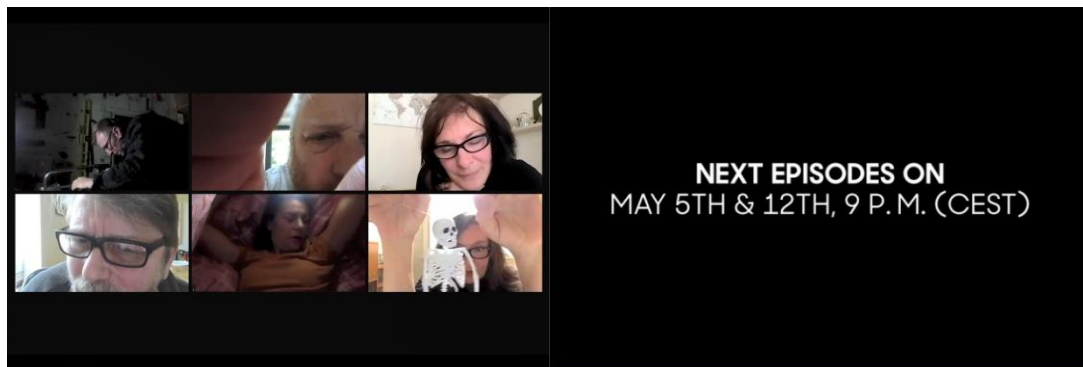

Figure 2 Desktop drama "Waiting for Godot".

Figure 3 Desktop drama "End Meeting for All".

5. DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE UNDER THE CAMERA LENS

In the desktop drama, the performance of the actors is also worthy of attention. Actors and spectators are in different spaces and participate in online dramatic activities. The actors perform in front of the camera, and the spectators watch remotely through electronic devices. This kind of viewing mode has changed from the public performance and watching in the same theatre to the relationship between peeping and being peeped.

"This narrative of internal focus is combined with the screen as its narrative object to form an extremely private narrative perspective." [6] This kind of audience's peeping of the actors is consistent with what the actors are willing to.

In the Internet age, the existence of physical distance has gradually become less important, and long-distance communication has become a normal state. What follows is the increase in people's desire to peep. People hiding behind the screen can watch the lives of others through the computer screen, so

as to avoid dissatisfaction with reality and satisfy their curiosity by accepting sensory stimulation. Now, more and more people are accustomed to social networks, online live broadcasts, and online videos. People in the Internet age consciously or unconsciously become voyeurs. On the other hand, the actors in desktop dramas seem to satisfy people's desire for peep to some extent, either consciously or unconsciously. Once the actor points the camera at his real living space, exposure of privacy will follow. In works such as "Waiting for Godot" and "Ending Meeting for All", the living room, bedroom, study room, and interior of the car in the actor's home can be shown according to the lens, all of which invisibly strengthen the relationship between "peep and "being peeped".

The life-oriented performance confuses the boundary between drama and reality. This is especially obvious at the beginning of the first episode of "Ending Meeting for All". One of the participants in the meeting who wore a yellow clothing asked at the beginning: "Have we started?" The other who wore a silver-white wig said: "We are ready to start... I am now assuming that I am in isolation... Can you hear me? (The voice of another character who has not yet been seated is calling on the phone in the video, which affected the speech of the person wearing the wig)...what happened? This is not funny. And it seems that someone there..." The character in yellow clothes answered: "Come over, do it again." Person wearing a wig said: "Excuse me, I will start again..." In the first six or seven minutes, the online actors are in a stage of debugging equipment and entering the conference state. At this time, the audience will not be clear whether this is the situation deliberately arranged by the plot or the actors really having some conditions before the official performance. According to the experience of real online meetings, this kind of repeated confirmation of whether the network is open and whether the meeting can be started is very common. The state of all the actors in the play is almost the same as that of people in life. This is precisely such a way of performance that enhances the sense of presence and easily brings the audience into the dramatic situation.

However, living-oriented performance does not mean that actors should perform in accordance with their daily behaviors, but that they need artistic processing. Being "like life" is a way for drama to express life. The performance advantage of "being not like life" will arouse audiences' associations about similar life situations. [5] For example, "Waiting for Godot" is a black comedy. The

characters' behavior and language in the play will naturally not behave like ordinary people. They are waiting for Godot's arrival in meaningless conversations and chats, and at the same time confine themselves in place. However, putting this situation in family during the epidemic will make the audience felt a sense of life. In the play, Vladimir and Estragon are played by two actors, one male and one female. The situation of their conversation is very similar to the meaningless bickering and frolicking between ordinary couples at home and the mental state of people who have been confined to their homes for months under the effects of the epidemic. It has to be said that a certain reality of life emerges in the dramatic performance.

6. CONCLUSION

Desktop drama is a product of the post-epidemic era. As an emerging drama phenomenon, it deserves further attention and discussion. As a sub-type of screen drama, desktop films are distinguished by incorporating software applications of electronic devices into the narrative of the drama. In "Waiting for Godot" directed by Wang Chong and "Ending Meeting for All" by the "Force Entertainment" troupe, this is reflected in the fact that video chat software is a necessary condition for the relationship between the characters in the play, otherwise, the entire story will not be able to proceed. Video conferencing software is both the external form of the drama and the props to promote the plot. This is completely different from the use of live streaming software of NT live series of works such as Poly Yanghua's "Thunderstorm" and "Thunderstorm · follow-up", and "Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare, at home" by the "Forced Entertainment" troupe. The unique "interface" of the desktop drama cleverly connects the real space and the virtual space, forming a form of virtual remote "presence" with the body as the medium. Through the performance of actors with life logic, the drama story is spread on the Internet. This type of drama is not mature enough, the number is not large, and there are many criticisms. Compared with the more mature "desktop films", the promotion of the desktop application program on the plot and the interaction with the audience are not sufficient. How far can the dramatic phenomenon of desktop drama go? Is it short-lived or has unlimited vitality? It is still too early to make a judgment, but it should be given enough space and time for its development. By

watching the works, the audience can give the feedback.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Bo Li.

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