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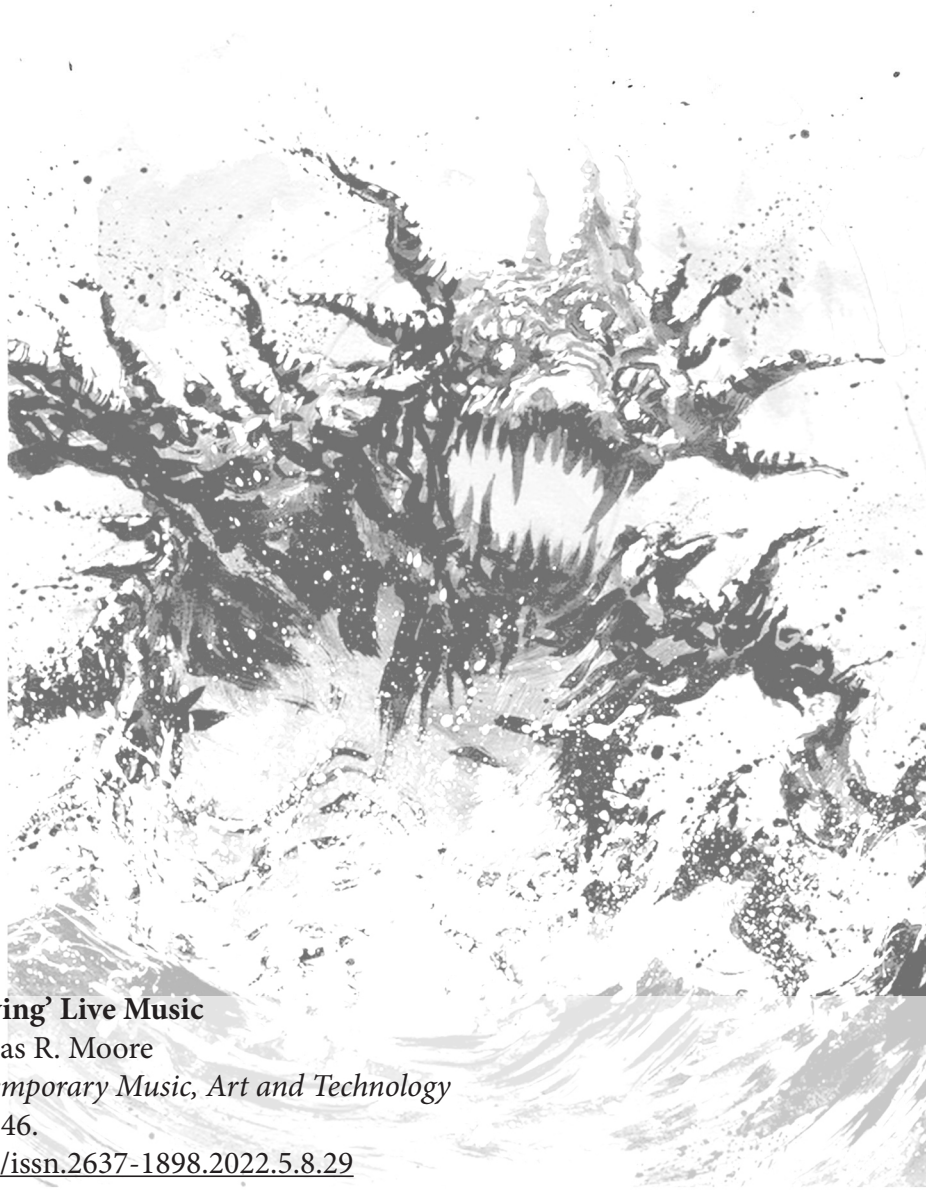

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Pascal Gielen*
University of Antwerp, Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA), Antwerp, Belgium

Thomas R. Moore**
University of Antwerp and Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp (ARIA), Antwerp, Belgium

HIDE TO SHOW: 'MEMEFYING' LIVE MUSIC

Abstract: Michael Beil's scenic composition *Hide to Show* (2021) thematizes a basic principle of social media, namely hiding mistakes, failures, or any vulnerable matters with the purpose of simulating an ever-perfect, active, and successful image and profile. Beil's piece, with memes and memefication as a guiding principle and compositional format, plays along the hyperreal boundary between live performance and digital re-representation. The audience is continuously misled and often left guessing between real and digital, confusing a real body with its projected simulation and live performed music with a (pre) recording. Perhaps more misleading, the live music and vocals are frequently processed in real time, too. Mistakes, but also individual interpretations and authentic appropriations of the piece are smoothed out or erased. Beil's composition may realize with this 'fixing' technique one ideal of today's live performer: guaranteed perfectionism on stage. In this article, a performer-researcher from *Hide to Show* and a sociologist of culture and politics analyze the possibilities and limitations of digital art and Internet culture found in Beil's work. What (new) requirements are demanded of the live performers and technicians? And how does digital simulation affect the artistic experience and aesthetics of contemporary art music and of social life itself?

Keywords: perfectionism, meme, digital performance, scenic composition, simulation, hyperreality, the Real.

* Author's contact information: Pascal.Gielen@uantwerpen.be.
** Author's contact information: thomas@thomasrmoore.co.uk.

Playing lonely together

There is a certain amount of irony in the fact that, due to the aftermath of ongoing health measures against the Coronavirus, *Hide to Show* has only enjoyed a limited number of performances. Michael Beil's scenic composition seems to have been written especially for the unreal crossroads in which we now live. The performance by the Nadar Ensemble,[2] for whom the piece was especially composed, reflects something of a parody of the current pandemic society. We can now all arguably relate to following set of lyrics: "Algorithms, ones and zeroes – You will never own – I will always be a network – You are all alone". This message is ubiquitous and repetitious throughout the entire performance of *Hide to Show.*

All of us have by now grown accustomed to full days, weeks, and months sitting in front of our computers. In the last two years, not only have meetings, lectures, and concerts, but also cocktails and even full dinners been organized to be experienced from behind our screens (De Munck & Gielen 2020). Without that mediating technology, communication seemed and sometimes became impossible. In many cases, it was even prohibited by law. But even without those bans, people nowadays seem to prefer to communicate in isolation. In *The Lonely Century*, Noreena Hertz (2020) describes how communication technology and social media paradoxically are at the roots of loneliness found in contemporary societies. Even when people are physically together in a cafe, restaurant,

2 *Hide to Show* is the third piece Beil wrote specifically for Nadar Ensemble. The first, *exit to enter (2013)* laid the foundations for the aesthetic video choices we find in *Hide to Show.* Here, actions performed and recorded live by the musicians become a moving tafferel of images and avatars, each substituting the other for the perceived performance of the rigorously composed sound- and movement-track. In 2015, Beil wrote *Bluff* for Nadar. This piece and particularly its rehearsal process built the trust between ensemble and composer required to produce an evening-long composition like *Hide to Show.* For the third performance of the 30-minute piece, the ensemble collectively opted to perform the complicated, through-composed, and action-filled piece, by memory. *Hide to Show,* an hour long, through-composed, action-filled, danced, and sung piece *must* be performed by memory. Without the collective experience (and active decision from the ensemble) of *Bluff,* neither side would have engaged in this monumental project. A third piece, *Key Jack* (2017) by Beil for pianist without piano, delineates a clearer line to *Hide to Show.* Not only does it expertly combine the video processing and aesthetics found in *exit to enter* and *Bluff,* it further develops Beil's instrumentalization of the musicians' roles in his pieces. In both *Key Jack* and *Hide to Show,* he actively and continuously develops their movement repertoire and personal idiosyncrasies to be artistic tools he immediately put to use in both pieces. *Key Jack* is for pianist without piano. Important to note is that this piece can only be performed by a trained pianist. The musician must perform the fingering, posturing, and attitude of a concert pianist, 'jacking' the traits in a performative exhibition. Each movement, from eye-blinking to snapping to chord-playing, is timed perfectly with the composer's tape and each is recorded. The playback then occurs simultaneously and immediately in three-fold: on two life size projection panels and live.

or playground – how often do we still spot people, young and old, absorbed in their devices? This seems to be a new digital art, 'being-alone-together': communicating with the whole world, just not with our loved ones sitting across the table. Covid-19 has only magnified that development. In hindsight, Beil seemed to have foreshadowed this social reality through his composition, which though only premiered after the pandemic had struck, had already been completed by the beginning of 2020.

With *Hide to Show*, the composer explores the possibilities and limitations of digital communication in music. He puts eight musicians on stage in six lined-up, but distinct booths, a kind of display case into which the audience can occasionally and collectively peep and leer, while the players themselves remain separated. On the side facing the public, each musician controls a blind (of the sort common to all houses), alternating between turning the slats to give a peak into their rooms and opening them fully, offering the audience the complete show. This dramaturgical staging raises questions. What happens to artistic practice and teamwork if performers cannot see each other? What does communication mean when musicians can only hear each other through headphones and are in physical isolation? Beil conducts a similar experiment in relation to the audience. What happens when digital images mediate the live performance and technological fixing techniques correct or even exaggerate 'blemishes'? What is hidden and what not? Live music's 'sound' and especially its 'feel' becomes increasingly ambiguous and unpredictable when reality is simulated. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard (1983), the German composer offers us, with this new scenic composition, a taste of hyperreality. The postmodern semiotic concept was coined by the French philosopher in his book *Simulacre and Simulation* (1983). The notion points to the inability to consciously distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced societies. Hyperreality is the condition in which what is real and what is fiction are blended to the point that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins. It allows the mixing of physical reality with virtual reality and human intelligence with artificial intelligence (Baudrillard 1983).

Beil does not, however, only explore the boundaries of digital communication and hyperreality. The performance also plays with and explores formats that abound in Internet culture. *Hide to Show* is mainly structured as a series of short, repetitive, gif-like fragments – in other words, memes: short iconic images that frequently circulate, multiply, and mutate online today. Like memes, the origin of Beil's scenes is not simple to isolate and identify. Baudrillard would conceivably regard them as simulacra: endless copies without an original. Memes are catchy, attract attention, but also fly past our eyes at breakneck speeds. Beil plays with this aesthetic of immediacy. The audience is confronted with a hasty accumulation of scenes that at the outset seem to have little to do with any deeper content.

The performance, at first, feels something akin to the associative scrolling we all find ourselves at some point doing online.

A more analytical observation of the aforementioned characteristics observed in *Hide to Show* suggests that the scenography is based on at least three principles of today's Internet culture: (1) communication in isolation, (2) immediacy, and (3) hyperreality. In this article, we will explore what these principles demand from both performers and the audience. First, we will explore the Internet aesthetics used by Beil. According to Alexander Baumgarten, we can regard aesthetics as being based on aisthēsis (Baumgarten 2007). This contrasts with the more distant scientific approach to the world, one's ability to grasp one's surrounding reality in an affective way with all the available senses. Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics is instead related to the old Greek notion of aisthēsis, which means sensation and affective perception in contrast to intellectual or rational knowledge. For Baumgarten, scientific truth exists outside the possibility of 'aesthetic truth' (veritas aesthetica), which is based on the involvement of human affects in processes of communication and our interpretation of the world. The same analytical concepts and words can differ in meaning because they are uttered differently on account of different affects. One must therefore perceive the author's or artist's affects in the expression of words, music, or visuals to understand their correct meaning(s) (McQuillan 2021; Grote 2021). In our view, aesthetics is a way in which reality can touch us and with which a performer can touch the audience (Carroll 2006; Gielen 2022). But what does this mean in a hyperreality in which our perception of reality is determined by technological mediation and simulacra? With our analysis of *Hide to Show* we will posit and formulate an answer to that question.

We will also concern ourselves with how Beil's scenic composition itself relates to reality. Is *Hide to Show* merely a mimesis of our current Internet culture or is it an artistic reflection of our lived and experienced social (media) reality? In other words: the performance shows hyperreality, but is it itself hyperreal? To answer this question, we confront the concept of hyperreality with another theoretical notion that illuminates our perception of reality, namely the psychoanalytic concept of the Real as established by Jacques Lacan (1991) and further elaborated upon in terms of culture and politics by Slavoj Žižek (2002). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully and deeply detail the multiple theories of both thinkers (both of which rest firmly on Sigmund Freud's writings on psychoanalysis). However, in summary, Lacan's most important addition to Freud's theory is the understanding that our subconscious is structured according to language and was therefore strongly influenced by semiotics. Lacanian concepts can also be approached as a process of subject formation. From that perspective, three interrelated notions in his theory are relevant to our study, the pre-linguistic Imaginary, the cultural and linguistic Symbolic, and the Real.

The Imaginary is structured by needs and image-identifications. The Symbolic is structured by language and the law and, finally, the Real is that which can neither be pictured nor articulated through language. The Real is central to Žižek's theory and based specifically on Lacan's analytical apparatus. However, Žižek combines Lacan's Real with insights from cultural studies and critical theory. As it pertains to this article, it is important to underline that, according to both theoreticians, the Real determines our reality and our everyday actions. In that sense it is constitutive and forms a 'hard kernel' at the heart of our existence. The concept does not point to reality, but to truth itself, and is therefore the opposite of fiction, fantasy, or dreams. However, while the Real is real, Žižek suggests that we cannot verbalize it. We can only experience it through enjoyment, alienation, trauma, transcendence, sublimation, etc. For the purposes of this article, we will approach this notion more poetically as the 'truth of life itself', which will necessarily include death and transiency in its definition. Understood from this perspective, the Real cannot dissolve in a hyperreal simulacre, but remains hidden from our culture. It is not susceptible to codes, concepts, and images and never has been. Paraphrasing Lacan: the Real precedes the symbolic order. We can only experience or feel it directly and not through signs (or verbiage). This approach allows us to question whether what remains hidden in *Hide to Show* could ever become visible. In other words: does the scenic composition simply 'show' the Real by suggesting that what is hidden can in fact never be shown? Less abstractly formulated: does the live performance offer a taste of life itself without putting it into words? Even though Beil uses extensive technology and infrastructure that acts as a digital and factual wall between the players themselves and between the players and the audience, during the performance one can arguably experience real life lurking just behind that facade. In this way, *Hide to Show* is profoundly different from our everyday Internet experience. Below we will argue the exact details of how Beil goes about this.

Embodied disembodiment

Throughout most of *Hide to Show*, the players not only cannot see each other (while playing), their focus, at least visually speaking, is also kept from the audience. When the blinds open on each of the little boxes, the players have been instructed to either focus on their private room or on a space just two meters in front of the décor. For the audience, it appears as though any sort of eye contact has been strictly forbidden. Bodies are physically on stage, but at the same time they are dreamily absent. Like zombies, they bathe in an atmosphere of apathy and detachment that shows no involvement at all with each other or with the audience. Yet the musicians play together flawlessly and despite an unbroken

fourth wall they manage to keep the viewer firmly under their spell. It betrays strict stage direction or better, a meticulous composition combined with hours of rehearsals. Our experience suggests that when bodies cannot physically interact and resonate with each other, every movement, every sound and every image must be meticulously set in advance. Because of the combination of both the highly detailed compositional instructions and the inherent isolation in the piece and the time period in which it was created, the performers required a specific rehearsal strategy. Furthermore, *Hide to Show* must be played from memory. Though memorization is not a novel approach, this piece is 75 minutes long and includes not just notes on a page, but detailed choreography and play-acting as well, all of which requires a high level of commitment to the project from the performing musicians.

Initial rehearsals took place in separate and smaller formations because of both the (contemporaneous) pandemic and the simple fact that the players would, in the end, be separated on stage. The eight musicians initially rehearsed in fixed duos and recorded the 32 scenes individually. As a whole group, with Beil, and after Nadar's sound engineer had layered the videos into one complete montaged video, the ensemble studied the recorded rehearsals together and offered collective feedback. Full company rehearsals in the hall progressed in a similar fashion to theatre or dance performances, i.e., the composer (similar to a stage director or choreographer) led the rehearsals, choosing where to begin and offering feedback. However, unlike typical dance or theatre productions, in matters of physical acting and timing, the performers were solely reliant on the critical feedback offered by Beil. There was no ability to fix issues of synchronization through typical collective and embodied ensemble playing. The separateness created by the décor and composition further generated a kind of rehearsal energy that was also unique to each performer (or more exaggerated than usual). Just as our everyday lockdown virtual meetings, emotional issues such as frustration, exhaustion, excitement, and even satisfaction were often felt individually and seldom shared through the walls of the cabins, making the ensemble rehearsals even more separate and isolated.

A third factor that influenced ensemble rehearsals was Beil's complex live video and audio electronics, built and performed by Warped Type from Düsseldorf. Nearly everything that the musicians do in the rooms is recorded live, cut, and manipulated by software written by Beil and Warped Type especially for this performance. The 'new' videos are then projected back onto the blinds on the front of each room, the person in the room, or a combination thereof. The players perform the recorded actions live and based on detailed instructions written in the composer's score. However, the critical feedback of both the composer and his computer scientist colleagues was required to create the expected and required level of perfection for this piece. The participation of the technicians was

thus not a secondary phenomenon of Beil's composition, but an active choice on his part to include them in the compositional process and in its manifest rehearsal practice. For the players, they became the essential link to their fellows in the rooms next door, often only 'seeing' each other in reproduced, after the fact, videos displayed on their closed blinds. Furthermore, the musicians could only hear each other through the in-ear monitoring, making the exact location of the other players (something normally taken for granted) a further unknown. All together it contributed to making *Hide to Show*, from at least the standpoint of the ensemble's interactions, a disembodied performance.

This disembodiment is further enhanced by the occasional use of so-called technological fixing techniques, in which live music and vocals are processed in real time. On occasion, missteps such as erroneous tones were corrected in real time. Just as we hide mistakes, stutters, or stumbles on social media today to present an ideal image or profile of ourselves (De Munck & Gielen 2022), Beil deployed technology to create error-free scenes. At these key moments, perfectionism itself becomes a simulation. The act of failing on stage suddenly becomes extremely difficult. Each player's singular accents and authentic interpretations, which are unique to the body of each performer, were kept under sharp control. Combined with the rigorous direction, these occasional technical fixes limited appropriation of the music. Or more simply put, during these specific scenes, the players were discouraged from inserting their personalities or 'owning' the music.

But does this make *Hide to Show* a simulacre? The technological disembodiment of the human voice can dissolve any authenticity and singularity. Correcting wrong pitches and crooked melodies could also take the life out of the live performance. Playing live always means taking risks for musicians. It demands a risk and weaknesses, and vulnerabilities are necessarily taken into account. Without this, the arc of tension, required for an audience to understand and accept that what they are viewing is a performance, would simply slacken (Huizinga 1949). This may be the ambivalence found in any live experience. Tension builds in part because the audience knows that the performer can always lapse or misstep. The life of the live performance is paradoxically based on that failure. Borrowing from Edgard Varèse, music is the art of organizing raw sounds, random sounds, or noise into a sounding composition (Varèse 1917). That is why music is always artificial, literally: created art and created life, so always not real. The tension of a live performance consists, among other things, in the fact that noise can still break through the orchestration in an uncontrolled moment. The possibility of hiccups, a cracking voice, a wrong tone, note, or rhythm, but also a sweating body, or an uncontrolled movement creates the chance that real life

could temporarily break through the artificial.[3] Subverting Beil's title: showing art and making music heard is only possible by hiding the rampant, rough life of sounds and noises (or, like John Cage, by framing them within an artificial framework (Cage 1960)). In this way, we could understand Beil's title literally. Life in the wild must at least be tamed to be able to speak of art. But if the public knows in advance that that life can no longer break through (thanks to technological fixes), all tension could dissipate. Nothing would remain of a *live* performance. One can just as well listen to or watch a recording at home. After all, cutting out the risk of failure or vulnerability also means cutting out life. It makes live music sterile, soulless, and lifeless. This may be one of the reasons why so many recordings made during the Covid lockdown were so wearisome.

Beil is clearly very much aware of this potential for sterility. Though he aims for perfection and does his best to create it by tactically deploying auto-tune and a click-track to fix this time-coded piece, he also cherishes the inevitable small mistakes made during the recorded sections in which no computer correction occurs.[4] These small little blemishes, repeated over and over again thanks to Beil's idiosyncratic[5] and repetitious usage of video feedback loops, lets the audience know that what they are seeing is actually live – it's real and not pre-recorded. In addition, *Hide to Show* knows how to create tension, and thus life, in a new way. There are still real live bodies on stage and even a layman-spectator must realize that the players are performing a mighty feat to string all 32 scenes together unscathed. In other words, although Beil employs hyperreal principles of technological media mediation, the public's awareness of a reality remains. It is a reality of sweat, blood, and tears, the hard work the players must put in to keep the virtual wall straight, intact, and scatheless. It is this embodied disembodiment that makes *Hide to Show* a completely different experience than simply scrolling on the Internet. That experience of real life is further enhanced by the physical presence of the audience. Bodies that collectively breathe, laugh, remain silent, cough, and clap. Bodies that resonate with each other and with the performers who make *Hide to Show* a visceral experience that puts hyperreality in brackets, at least for a moment. In other words, Beil has not completely disembodied his scenic composition. As a result, the spectator continues to savor the Real between the virtual.

3 A whole subgenre exists for those seeking the inevitable blemishes and outright falls. One needs only do a Google or YouTube search for 'Perle Nere' or simply 'concert fails.'

4 This category represents the vast majority of the scenes.

5 See *exit to enter* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxuwaN9yP9U) or *BLACKJACK* 2012 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iYlejiftAg).

Memefying culture, cut up reality

In *Hide to Show*, memes that have circulated the Internet are then copied and put live on stage. Etymologically speaking, meme comes from the Greek word 'mimētḗs' which means both 'imitator' and 'feigner' – and hardly can be absent in a performance that intentionally thematizes hyperreality. Just as memes act online, the memefied moments in *Hide to Show* are seemingly 'pasted' one after the other without any substantive link. Besides the fact that they can all be found on the Internet (and are highly entertaining), the scenes composed by Beil, on the surface at least, appear to have little in common with each other. For example, what does a Beach Boys song, "In my room", have to do with the Leek Girl "Levan Polka" dance? Just like online, they appear here offline at first sight without context. Their presence in the performance seems like a random choice. The scenes in *Hide to Show,* like their online versions, appear to wander both bottomlessly and detached from time, despite their tangibility on a physical stage.

A meme's success depends precisely on their universal recognizability. This means, among other things, that they must be easily understandable or 'legible' without any historical and geographical context. This requirement presupposes cultural codes and also demands as little 'on the spot' deciphering effort as possible. As a result, however, memes feel like pieces of displaced culture, which can have an alienating effect. By using this medium, *Hide to Show* presents a fragmented, carved, and perhaps also cut up reality. Just as on the Internet, the memefied scenes are highly entertaining, but simultaneously, absolutely disorienting. Where do they come from? When were they made? And why are they shown here? Inherent to this 'context collapse' (Marwick & Boyd 2011), any key or legend is withheld from the viewer that would help to decipher the presented memes or scenes. The only thing the public can rely on is a memory of memes that they may have previously seen on the Internet. This result is an immediate, bite-sized, and manageable composition. Without time and without geographic context, culture simply must rely on immediacy. Images instantly attract attention. Hyperreality therefore also means hyperactivity. Following the logic of an attention regime, the viewer must constantly be re-stimulated. And so, *Hide to Show* never stalls or comes to a standstill. There is always something to see or listen to – and often multiple and simultaneous miniature scenes battle for the audience's attention. Beil's composition masterly weaves catchy 'Acid' samples with his own upbeat vocaloid-style jingles in a captivating counterpoint that bangs on at an extremely high tempo. The acted-out images, both live and reproduced, are also alluringly inviting thanks to quick costume changes and the video-feedback-created layered reality. Beil, in one scene, even goes so far as to map players' legs onto the torso of others (playing even further with the interchangeability of

components found in a modern meme). By applying this principle, *Hide to Show* manages a certain charm. Scenes seem to constantly compete and constantly push each other out of the way. Furthermore, they never really seem to settle before the next has already made its entrance.

Beil also varies and copies his memes, as they scream for attention, appearing and disappearing at breakneck speeds. Yet *Hide to Show* itself does not follow this online logic completely. The scenic composition, for example, does not only grapple with, but outright contradicts the principle of immediacy simply by holding the audience in their seats for more than an hour. The viewer also cannot just scroll associatively like a typical Internet consumer without any act of commitment. In our case, Beil determines what the public will see and hear as well as the duration thereof. Moreover, *Hide to Show* does not float above history, but is embedded in a historical tradition of music history, at least in a tradition of the performing arts, namely the concert. The audience sits still and has no buttons to press or screens to swipe that would operate the performance. The sovereign power rests entirely with the composer and in this case equally with the players to whom the viewers willingly surrender (Schwartz & Godfrey 1993) for more than an hour. Moreover, the performance is not bottomless. The concert hall where the performance is played is physically and materially grounded in a geopolitical space with its own cultural policy, specific cultural education, and traditions. With *Hide to Show*, Beil therefore places the work first and foremost in an artistic tradition that critically observes and comments on everyday social phenomena. Although the scenography is highly entertaining, the viewer cannot escape a sharp and bitter undertone which is in stark contrast to the seemingly random online supply of memes. With further consideration then, Beil's selection does not come across as random at all. Some memefied scenes demonstrate it implicitly, but others sing loudly and explicitly: loneliness! Does not all social media, all our lust for communication and connection, hide our growing loneliness? Like memes, today we seem to float like cybernauts, bottomless and rudderless in a historical vacuum. We cling to fleeting images, easy tunes, and messages. We network endlessly in the vain hope of finding footing and anchoring. Meme etymologically also refers to 'mimeme', which is ancient Greek for 'root'. In *Hide to Show* there is a melancholic atmosphere in which precisely that desire for roots and being able to take root grows ever more present and palpable.

Hyperreality vs. the Real

Disneyland is arguably Baudrillard's best known example of what he termed hyperreality in the recreational life of the contemporary Westerner. Here, children and adults alike go to literally live a fantasy. "Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra". It yearns to be fake so that rest "can be seen as real" (Baudrillard 1983, 10). While the park itself is harmless, Baudrillard's message is more all-encompassing. For him, daily life, thanks to ubiquitous technology, takes on a constant veneer of simulation, an ever-present innuendo to the absence of anything real. In *Hide to Show,* Beil clearly finds inspiration in Baudrillard's ideas, for example in the Leek-Dance meme and thread that appears early in the piece and morphs into the work's grand finale. The origins of the Hatsune Miku version of "Levan Polka" are murky, but it is undoubtably an Internet sensation (with its 16 million + views). Early on in *Hide to Show*, Beil re-examines, parses, and then reconfigures (arguably) the 'original' leek-dancing farm girl video.[6] At first, we only hear the highly catchy tune played back with equally recognizable electronic instrumentation. However, just three scenes later, Beil treats the audience to the first live, flesh-and-blood, version of the meme. The dance is still couched in one of the booths and in what comes across as an attempt to drive the point mercilessly home, Beil shows Miku's simulated and 'mapped' version of the dance on the blinds of the room adjacent to the live dancer.

Miku is from head to toe a fantasy. Her body is a cartoon, animated, and while based on real humanoid design, is clearly an 'ideally' drawn figure. 'Her' official image was first drawn by the manga artist Kei (Sabo 2019). Her voice, the basis for vocaloid technology,[7] is a computer enhanced recreation of several voices, all of whom simply recorded a basic set of phenoms. One can 'let' Hatsune Miku sing simply by playing a keyboard that is programmed with her sample bank. By composing a piece in which players dance her moves live, Beil stretches the concept of sampling, programming the players with Miku's physical movement repertoire and then later in the piece, putting her voice literally into the musician's mouths.

That brings us to the second example of hyperreal inspired scenes. Towards the latter half of the piece, five players group around a table outside of the fixed

6 ЛУЧШИХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЯ, *Hatsune Miku Ievan Polkka Dance Comparison*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTSkygD1wR0.

7 "VOCALOID – the Modern Singing Synthesizer" accessed March 15, 2022, http://www.vocaloid.com/en/.

décor to reenact the famous Beach Boys video clip to their hit, "In my room".[8] Though the musicians' movements are clearly stylized to the 1960s era clip, the music is Beil's and the audible voices were created using vocaloid software. In other words, the players lip-sync this scene, simulating reality on at least two levels. First, simply by 'acting' as though the audible voices were their own. And second, by recreating a visible genre that pre-dates the audible. Beil instructed the musicians during rehearsals to act like the Beach Boys, 'the perfect sons-in-law'. This picture, for him a total fantasy that the players were to enact in real life, matches succinctly with the phantasmagorically created voice – they have little or no basis in reality besides a recognizable language and vocabulary. A few scenes later, those same players are seen jammed into one room for the same number. Only this time, they sing it live – though heavily corrected using auto-tune: a perfect presentation ensured through technical intervention. Just as genetic engineering hopes for the perfect life, perhaps even eternal life, technological corrections here generate the illusion of the ideal live performance, the possibility of artistic perfectionism without fail.

That hope for technology, however, is based on an assumption that humans will eventually be able to fully and rationally decode real life and the live experience, and that this will lead to the generation of life itself. It is in fact the belief that we could play god, or for music, that mere virtuosity suffices to offer a catchy performance. However, it is delusional to think that, just like the 'perfect sons-in-law', there is a calculable success formula for liveliness and life itself. Also, that one could develop an algorithm for subjectivity, spontaneity, and authenticity. Returning to Lacan and Žižek, that would mean that we could actually capture the Real in the symbolic order after all. According to that logic, we could also, for example, develop a chemical formula for love or a composition that induces love, such as Patrick Süskind in *Perfume* (1985) who had his protagonist develop a fragrance that spontaneously evokes lust and blind desire. That vain hope, however, conveniently overlooks the evidence that with every endeavor to mold the Real into codes, symbols, and formulas, we immediately quell any life. As an example, think of analyzing sex verbally while making love. This has the immediate potential to undermine any desire to continue the deed or, rather, to match the deed to the word.

As the word cannot replace the deed, the signifier cannot replace the signified. However, hyperreality today, for example, creates the illusion that money can buy true love or that high quality can be fully compensated with quantity. As an example, we can point to common and deceitful commercials that suggest that one can immediately buy a good feeling or even a happy life simply with

8 SHAYMCN 5 HQ, *Beach Boys : In My Room (1964) Remastered Stereo*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hu0Jb-QjGm8.

their product. Hyperreality maintains this illusion by simulating an impression that the Real can coincide with a symbolic order. In semiotic terms, that means the signified, like a man or an object, coincides with their signifier, namely the word 'man' and the word 'object', respectively. In hyperreality, therefore, reality dissolves into signs, just as in the monetized economy, the real economy is determined by the mass psychology and hysteria of virtual markets. The value of a product is then no longer derived from its quality and functionality or its use value, but from its speculative value. According to Baudrillard, the commodities in this state do not have 'use value' (as defined by Karl Marx) but can be understood as signs (as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure). Baudrillard believes hyperreality goes further than confusing or blending the Real with the symbol which represents it. Hyperreality involves creating a symbol or set of signifiers which represent something that does not actually exist, such as Santa Claus (Baudrillard 1983, 130–135). In a hyperreal environment we experience reality as if there is a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified, and no longer any margin of interpretation and imagination between the two as well. Reality is thereby confused with a sign that literally distorts our experience of it.

These days we are surrounded nearly 24 hours a day by the world wide web, and although it could be considered a simulacre, the functioning of the web (as we know it) relies completely on this one-to-one relationship. Our experiences of life and the meaning thereof are strongly conditioned by it. As intelligent as the ubiquitous digital media may be, a major handicap still exists: any interpretation and ability to imagine or fill the gaps between signifier and signified has yet to be generated. This is one explanation, as an example, for the inability for algorithms to distinguish between nudity and porn. According to the London police, it can even be difficult to distinguish between child pornography and a desert landscape (Du Sauty 2019, 81). Artificial intelligence (still) lacks imagination, so it must take any observed reality literally, or in Baudrillard's terms: the sign = the signified. Digital technologies can only capture sounds, images, and movements logically, encoded in a connection of ones and zeros. Sounds and images can vividly be reproduced, but only through logical links of previously stored sounds, images, etc. As the mathematician Marcus Du Sautoy states in his book on artificial intelligence, "A digital camera can take a picture so detailed that it far exceeds the storage capacity of the human brain, but that doesn't mean it can turn those millions of pixels into one coherent story. We are a long way from understanding how the brain can process data and integrate it into a story" (2019, 80).

In contrast to humans, computers have the immense ability to remember anything they record. It's this 'giga' memory – along with their connection speed – that gives the veneer of intelligence. In contrast, people constantly forget and therefore must rely on interpretation and imagination to, for example, link his-

torical facts and 'narrate' them in a consequent story (Gielen 2004). Computers, however, must first register everything encyclopedically to make the 'correct' logical connections and then reproduce a reality – a voice, a sound. Anything outside of this digi-logic, any ambiguity that slips in, escapes the virtual eye or simply blocks the system. This suggests that, despite all current algorithms and meta-algorithms, we now have artificial intelligence, but still no artificial intellectual. Human intelligence exists precisely by the grace of imagination, that ability to glue together illogical and paradoxical events or a contradictory reality. Interpretation for thinking beings rests on that peculiar mixture of factual knowledge (or alleged facts) and imagination: facts and fiction. For us and this article, the Real, the truth of life itself is only 'attainable' through imagination. We can only grasp it without really grasping it (in codes, language, symbols, etc.). We can only 'read' and feel life – including life in a live performance – between the lines and binary codes and in-between the signifier and the signified.

Beil seems to understand these mechanisms all too well. *Hide to Show* owes its live-ness not primarily to technological ingenuity and digital mediation, but to the public's imagination. The scenography puts the viewer to work. They are pushed to create a personal whole from sometimes incoherent fragments. Moreover, Beil keeps life in the show by ignoring the distinction between real and artificial, body and the image of the body, between life and virtuality. The viewer and listener are sometimes left literally guessing, and that is precisely what activates our imagination. What is real and what is not? The public knows that a game is being played and it must rely continually on interpretation and imagination to guess what is real and what is not real, to fill in the undecided space between signifier and signified, and the ambiguity between 'ones and zeros'. In that imagination we can see, hear, feel, and taste the hidden life itself, the Real, without being able to literally see, hear, feel, and taste it. Was art not precisely the expression of "that about which one cannot speak"? (Wittgenstein 1970) The life of the live performance can only be tasted between the lines, shining through the cracks and fissures in the symbolic order. No logic, codes, or words can comprehend it. Experiencing the Real means an experience that transcends all understanding. True life can only be shown by not showing it. To hold life in a live performance, one hides to show.

Grand Finale

We can conclude that *Hide to Show* makes use of hyperreal 'techniques', but extends beyond the hyperreal itself. Beil subscribes to a (modern) artistic tradition that reflects on our contemporary condition through a game of signs. The scenography suggests how we use codes in our digital culture to signify the world

and ourselves. Summarizing Niklas Luhmann, we could say that the composer establishes a second-order observation by showing us how we look at the world today (Luhmann 2000). *Hide to Show* sets our own looking 'to watch' and our own listening 'to listen'. Our first-order observations are nowadays greatly determined by digital lenses and within an Internet culture that has its own aesthetic. As we clarified above, the latter is characterized by a twofold collapse. First, as with memes, we are cut off from time and space in a so-called 'context collapse' and, secondly, the space of interpretation and imagination collapses between signifier and signified. Moreover, the digital screen culture surrounding us is two-dimensional, not only literally, but also in its sensory capacity. Audio-visual media merely appeals to two senses. Touch and smell are often neglected in the digital sensory palette, leaving us with a disembodied experience of the world. The same applies to relationships we have on social media today. They are also disembodied, and Internet connectivity often leaves us with a feeling of loneliness. Beil offers us this message both implicitly and explicitly throughout his composition. Loneliness is not only literally sung of during the performance, the above-described distant focus of the performers, the separated booths, and the technological fixes also displace human presence and coexistence. In summary, a hyperreal Internet culture leads to social and aesthetic deprivation that clamps down our imagination. As a result, we find it difficult to touch life and the world anymore, and the world cannot seem to touch us either. That appears to be the message of *Hide to Show*.

Still, Beil is not a moral 'preacher', and he is certainly no technophobe. On the contrary, the scenic composition demonstrates how Internet culture and digital technology can enhance our creativity. Beil is certainly inspired by it and quite adept at playing with it as well. This makes *Hide to Show* funny, spectacular, and highly entertaining from start to finish. The gloomy message is more inconspicuous. The proverbial hangover only comes after the performance. Here is where we reach the limits of digital technology. It can function as an extension of human creation, but as yet cannot replace it. After all, Beil only achieves this 'under the skin' feeling by reopening our digitized aesthetic horizon. He does this, among other ways, by stretching the space between the signifier and the signified on the one hand, and by putting real bodies to work on stage on the other. That approach becomes most apparent during the *grand finale*. Perhaps not coincidentally, Beil lowers the digital veil just before the metaphorical curtain falls on the performance. The last leek-dance is anything but a pre-programmed copy. Moreover, unlike the voice or instrument, one cannot easily 'fix' this dance. In the finale, perfectionism is no longer guaranteed. Every performer has their own body-idiom with their own possibilities and limitations. It is impossible to fully synchronize this scene. That certainly applies to the musicians on stage here who do not have trained dancers' bodies. At any time, any one

of them could fall out of this meme's mold. A leek could slip out of a hand, and the musicians-come-dancers can and do fall out step. However firm Beil maintains the harmony and synchrony, the viewer cannot fail to notice how exposed the players have become. The dance could fall apart at any moment. It is precisely this fragility that makes the grand finale touchingly beautiful. We are using the slightly sentimental 'touching' here deliberately. With the Leek-Dance, affection breaks the pre-programmed codes. Human emotions suddenly shimmer through the meme and the tight choreography. With this vulnerability, Beil shows exactly where life is in live performance. It is the momentum and force that pushes *Hide to Show* to touch the Real. This performance gains a soul. The audience immediately comes to grips with a reality that every perfectionism conceals failure, that behind our hyper-visual culture an endless void is hiding, and that behind music there is nothing more than eternal silence.

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HIDE TO SHOW: 'MEMEFYING' LIVE MUSIC (summary)

Michael Beil's scenic composition for Nadar Ensemble, *Hide to Show,* was ready for its premiere in the spring of 2020, though ironically and perhaps symbolic for its content, it was not able to be performed until late 2021. The piece skirts the lines of hyperreality and immediacy, using memefication and technological feedback and fixes to explore questions that became relevant and inescapable during the COVID-pandemic. How does live music sound and perhaps especially how does live music 'feel' when the staging simulates reality and it takes the form of a simulacrum? Is *Hide to Show* merely a mimesis of our current Internet culture or is it rather an artistic reflection of our lived and experienced social (media) reality? To answer these questions, we delve into the concept of hyperreality and confront it with another theoretical concept that illuminates our perception of reality, namely the psychoanalytic notion of the Real as established by Jacques Lacan (1991) and further elaborated upon for culture and politics by Slavoj Žižek (2002).

In *Hide to Show*, memes that circulate the Internet are copied and put live on stage. In this article we will explore their etymological roots found in the Greek word 'mimētḗs' which means both 'imitator' and 'feigner'. We will also follow two particular memes throughout the piece, one based on the Beach Boys hit "In my Room" and the other Hatsune Miku's "Levan Polka" leek-dance. Each meme seems to float, disconnected from the other, above the performance. However, in retrospect, their interconnectedness we discover is very much present, but only readable 'between the lines'. Meme etymologically also refers to 'mimeme', which is ancient Greek for 'root'. In *Hide to Show* there is a melancholic atmosphere in which precisely that desire for roots and being able to take root grows ever more present and palpable.

We can conclude that *Hide to Show* makes use of hyperreal 'techniques', but extends beyond the hyperreal itself. Beil subscribes to a (modern) artistic tradition that reflects on our contemporary condition through a game of signs. The unique analog and digital scenography (described in the full text) suggests how we use codes in our digital culture to signify the world and ourselves. Summarizing Niklas Luhmann, we could say that the composer establishes a second-order observation by showing us how we look at the world today (Luhmann 2000). In other words, *Hide to Show* sets our own looking 'to watch' and our own listening 'to listen'. Our first-order observations, as are our relationships, are nowadays more greatly determined by digital lenses and within an Internet culture that has its own aesthetic. They are also disembodied, and Internet connectivity often leaves us with a feeling of loneliness. Beil offers us this message both implicitly and explicitly throughout his composition.

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