Performance Problems in Live Music: Presence, Memory, and Fabulation

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Abstract

This article discusses a set of "performance problems" (Madri 2009) in live music in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Beginning with the notion of presence, we recognize liveness as a status with a long tradition in mediatic configurations (Auslander 2008, Pires 2019) and present the aesthetic impasses brought about by their archiving in digital culture. We debate speculative zones between memory, fabulation, and simulation in three experiences created by live music materials: the presence of holograms and music performances, the retransmission of archived shows on digital platforms in the context of the pandemic, and the creation of new sound environments for pre-recorded materials.

KEYWORDS: Performance; Presence; Live Music; Live Transmission; Memory.

Introduction

The proliferation of live-streamed concerts, also known as "lives" (Gutmann & Dalla Vecchia 2022) are a famous cultural format in Brazil and began in March 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. They introduced regimes of presence in which the present time, simultaneousness, and connection between individuals offered the possibility of interaction to break up social isolation. These concerts were, thus, openings on channels for live interactions on digital social networks, in general, to establish regimes of conversation, entertainment, and debate through tacit agreements among participants.

In the wide range of possibilities, live-streamed concerts organized sociabilities through digital social networks and video-sharing platforms and were adopted by the music industry globally. Just as an example, global pop stars such as Dua Lipa ("Studio 2054") and Kylie Minogue ("Infinity Disco") starred in paid live-streamed concerts during the pandemic, raising the possibility that this format could be adopted even after the end of social isolation. In 2021, the Glastonbury festival held a virtual edition with screenings in cinemas and paid access (McFadden 2021).

According to an opinion survey by MindMinders, a technology company specialized in digital research, 76% of the audience that watched at least one live-streamed concert during the pandemic, "would like the format to continue to exist" in a post-pandemic context (Lima 2020). At the same time, the excessive use of the format also called into question an alleged audience decline, coupled with cities' plans to reopen, and resume cultural activities during the pandemic. Even during the period of fewer Covid-19 cases and deaths, numerous live music festivals had already resumed their in-person editions, such as Lollapalooza Brazil, the first entirely held in person, from March 25th to 27th, 2022, in the city of São Paulo, with a 23% increase in attendance compared to the last pre-pandemic edition in 2019 - highlighting the return of the festival and live show segment. The coexistence of digital and in-person music highlights new business models, possibilities for format reconfigurations, audience expansion, and new forms of spectatorship.

Beyond these questions and in the face of a wide range of performances, the purpose of this article is to recognize a set of existing practices in the music industry as central to the understanding, support, and broad logic of commercialization of live-streamed concerts in the context of digital social networks. We will expound on three brief analyses of empirical material the importance that a live music presentation has in entertainment culture insofar as it activates emotional states created by the notion of presence. First, it is important to define the basis of what can be called "liveness" (Auslander 2008): the affective, discursive, and material pacts of the live music experience, removing the idea that there is a "purity" or an ontology of "live" in-person performances: recognizing that even going to a live show is replete with mediated activities (watching the performance on screens, cell phones, sound systems or mediated through innumerable audio-visual and sound technologies).

Secondly, debating live performances implies recognizing the basis of the notion of the presence of the field of communication and media studies. The intersection of these issues with television studies is an important move because it allows us to think about the status of the live event alongside the technical conditions of production and transmission, configuring it as a "text in situation" (which can be read as it is being written) and constructed from effects of presence (Fechine 2008; Gumbrecht 2022; Martins & Cardoso Filho 2010;). Alternatively, we also consider the "senses of simultaneity" that can be produced from pre-recorded programming (Gutmann 2014). We consider the paradoxes surrounding both the idea that being live intensifies the experience of enjoying music and the principle that archiving music performances on digital platforms entails multiple activations from the zones of contact with the archived materials. In other words, our perspective is that within a culture of archiving (Taylor 2003) on digital social networks and faced with the platformization of culture (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck 2020), the regimes of presence are modulated according to different communicational materialities,

opening spaces for fabulations (acts of recreating—or adulterate—reality through fiction), and manipulations of "being live" regarding musical performances.

Thirdly, we propose the analysis of different music materials to discuss the speculative zones between memory, fabulation, and simulation in three experiences produced from live music materials. First, we argue that the presence of holograms at music performances foregrounds the overlap of memory and fabulation in music culture, in which gestures, actions, and expectations operate on behaviors and restored bodies (Schechner 1988). Second, we consider how the retransmission of archived performances on digital platforms in the context of the pandemic functions to narrativize memory and activate a presence that is made through the regimes of presence around simultaneousness. Third, we see the possibility of fabulations in a live performance, through inserting sound layers like applause, noises, and sound environments, as a strategy for the production of presence at a historical moment of fracture in an in-person culture. From this set of examples, we can think about the articulations of music, its live segment, and its materialities in the recreations of experiences with the audience.

The issues presented in this article arise from the Brazilian academic context and from a group of non-Anglophone authors. The perspective is to recognize academic production about live music and its intersections with different fields of knowledge, produced in Brazil, in dialogue with concepts derived from studies on live music of Anglophone tradition, performance studies, and communicational approaches to music. In this sense, a set of theories from various traditions is combined with a methodological approach originated in studies on audio-visual consumption in socio-technical networks.

From a methodological point of view, the perspective suggested by Gutmann (2021) for understanding audio-visual networks is adopted, that is, a set of audio-visual productions that, together, provide different perspectives on our hypothesis. The author's perspective is to recognize case studies that form a set (an interpretive network) capable of problematizing aspects of spectatorship, platformization, and cultural and market specificities. In the case of this article, the empirical material of three music concerts puts into perspective the notion of presence even in the face of pre-recorded files, simulated bodies through digital technologies, and also the creation of new layers of meaning in re-displayed shows, and points to a set of performance problems.

Live-streamed Concerts and Performance Problems

Discussing live-streamed concerts means addressing the interconnections of research problems in the fields of music and communication, and more specifically the ties between live music performances and their innumerable processes of mediatization. It is necessary to recognize a set of "performance problems" (Madrid 2009) regarding the execution of live music on digital platforms. In the academic production on music culture, the study of performance means "a wide variety of paradigms of making music, from the orthodox views that separate composition and performance to the questioning of this dichotomy, to the practical and philosophical speculations brought up by the practice of the performance movement of the 1970s and '80s in the western and non-western traditions"

(Madrid 2009: 1). Thus, according to Madrid, the questions of performance approached by studies in the field of musicology revolve around an interpretation of musical texts, the listeners' access to music, and musical performances as textualities and improvisation. For example, "Performance does not exist to present musical works; rather, musical works exist to give the performer something to play," attests Madrid (2009).

Planning musical performances, techniques, and executions, show scripts, technical devices, repertoires, etc., are aspects that help us to understand how musical performances are conceived to be shown on online platforms. From the field of communication and more precisely from the processes of mediatization, debating live-streamed concerts entails recognizing the platformization of culture, the interferences of the materialities of the means of communication as important regulators of performances, and questions that revolve around media conglomerates and their marketing actions in digital contexts. The issues of investigating live music converge on the recognition of what is involved in the development of live music, a new level of the platformization of music, and the formation of socio-technical networks from music genres.

Live music has a broad and productive field of study in the areas of communication and music, highlighting the potentials and limits of interdisciplinary approaches. Beyond the musicological aspects of live performances, Phillip Auslander (2008) coined the term "liveness" to refute any binary approach that demands "purity," essentialism, or ontology in live music performance. For the author, studies on the fruition and consumption of live music at shows are already experiences that are mediated by innumerable devices; jumbotrons, cell phones, and the distribution of speakers, among others. These make up, according to the author, a continuum of simultaneous actions in the act of experiencing music, pointing to a fraying of the idea of being present at a music performance. In other words, being live at an in-person performance would not mean being "more present" in its relation to the music since there would be a series of human and non-human technological mediators that would occur throughout the show. Auslander's proposal is to remove the argument that the archived, registered, recorded media experience is "less" than the live experience. In the author's view, they are experiences of the production of meaning and distinct feelings, pointing towards complex frameworks that fall on individuals' agencies in their relations with sonorous materials.

By translating the term "liveness" to Portuguese ("aovivismo"), Pires (2019) incorporates a dynamic of intimacy and production of presence into the term in music performances in the Brazilian context. Independent music events that use private spaces like houses and living rooms and adapt the domestic environment to put on a live music show, as is the case with the platform *Sofar Sounds*, join the debate about the production of live music through the rubric of the poetics of the quotidian—the production of intimate space is also "artistic" and musical. "Liveness" is a condition of experience that transforms the private space into something "spectacular" (in the sense of a spectacle), an assemblage of regimes of presence regulated by conventions of music genres, performances, and values constructed within music cultures—whether in more enshrined spaces like arenas and music venues (as Auslander thinks), or in the domesticity of the home (as Pires highlights).

Continuing with the notion of "liveness," Pires articulates the construction of complex temporalities of performance documented from a constant presentification, a feeling of "nowness" (Taylor 2003), produced by the archives of performances in reactivation processes (Auslander 2018). In other words, thinking about what "live" is not only considers the condition of the production of the media product—in real time without editing, i.e., "direct", but also the relations with audiences, consumption practices, and dissemination strategies. Live-streamed concerts are constructed in a heterogeneous way, articulating various supports, platforms, formats, production practices, consumption practices, recording techniques, territorialities, and sonorities. Thus, we believe that a music show recorded in 2018, transmitted during the pandemic on a digital platform in 2020, and presented as a "music live" would introduce a new condition of "live" insofar as it would demand a new production of presence.

If the dimensions of spatiality (the difference between public and private spaces) act on the production of meaning and presence in live music performances, temporalities also need to be thought of in this context. Questioning the mediatization of live musical experiences in the live-streamed concerts in digital culture entails recognizing the existence and the potency of a shared experienced time. The simultaneousness and concomitance of the mediatized actions point to what Yvana Fechine (2008) calls the semiotization of presence, something that occurs mainly in live television transmissions and has also spread to the audio-visual experiences of digital culture. We recognize that understanding live music involves recognizing features of studies about the condition of "live" in the field of music and its relations with the idea of media techniques and devices as well as a history of live transmissions on other audio-visual devices, e.g. the television in this case specifically. From the point of view of musical performance:

> One of the main functions of television when mediating events is to reinforce the meaning of the performance and, at the same time, create its own form of representing it, and this is perfectly understood by the actors at the event: the artists and the audience; this is understood both by the people who went to see the event in situ and by those who watched via television at any place and any time
>
> (Pereira De Sá & Holzbach 2010: 151).

Here we recognize that "a musical performance supposes gestures both highly studied and stylized and others appropriated to translate the emotion of that moment, revealing to the audience an intimate dimension of the music/performer" (Pereira De Sá & Holzbach 2010). It thus addresses, according to the authors, a situation in which thinking and doing are together, combining the gesture of spontaneity and the enactment of an artist in the same scene. This dynamic is a central element of the experience of enjoying a show by the audience and evaluating its quality from parameters such as adequacy, authenticity, technique, and emotion.

Beyond the semiotization of presence through a temporal regime of concomitance, the live-streamed concerts on digital social networks present the "archive problem" (Taylor 2003). Live music performances are archived on digital platforms and made accessible immediately after they end, promoting new regimes

of presence from the activation and intervention of these archives with viewers' comments that can interfere, react, or enjoy the effects of presence in the situation. This set of questions allows for a gesture to be made regarding the reflection on the trajectory of live music culture in times of the platformization of culture.

The Platformization of Music

To this set of postulations another is added by Micael Herschmann (2007, 2010) regarding the marketing potential of live music. Since the beginning of the 2000s, with the recording industry crisis created by the environment of digital music consumption, the live music business has economically sustained artists, show producers, and the entire chain of production in different cultural contexts. The crisis of music sales formats fed the idea that it would be possible to fuse the recording industry with show producers, creating a favourable environment for mergers, incorporations, and stratification in this chain of production.

Live-streamed concerts during the Coronavirus pandemic assimilated a new phase of what can be called the platformization of music. Before discussing the platformization of music, it is important to highlight the extensive range of studies about "platformization" that mainly discuss institutional dimensions, data infrastructures, markets, and governance through digital platforms (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck 2019). According to the authors, it is notable that there is an absence of analyses of how platforms transform cultural practices and vice versa, how the practices in evolution transform platforms into specific sociotechnical constructions. The different perspectives on platformization, which derive from various research traditions, suggest that this process develops in three institutional dimensions: governance, market, and data infrastructures. "And we observed that, from a cultural studies perspective, platformization leads to the (re-)organization of cultural practices around platforms, while these practices simultaneously shape a platform's institutional dimensions" (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck 2019: 6).

Understanding live-streamed concerts on the spectrum of the platformization of culture entails understanding the data infrastructures that govern internet access, the software dynamics implied in these processes, how the markets act and regulate these practices, and how political and market regulations occur in this context. It is necessary, thus, to understand the trajectory of studies about the relations between music and digital culture in different environments. In this sense, it is fitting to return to the idea that music has hit various obstacles in digital practices, from the lack of regulation, piracy, illegal downloads and the existence of platforms for pirating content, to the taxonomies and organizations around music products in digital environments (Amaral & Aquino 2009), and the organization around audio and video platforms like YouTube (Pereira De Sá & Holzbach 2010) and the market sanctioning of streaming (Vicente, Kischinhevsky & Marchi 2016), the reconfiguration of sound media markets and challenges to musical diversity.

It is important to emphasize that platforms, like YouTube or Twitch for example, are central to the possibility of live transmissions—since they have become routine during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though it is a platform for the storage and sharing of pre-recorded audio-visual materials, YouTube has hosted various live transmission experiences that enshrined it as the principal environment for live-streamed concerts. In 2009 the group U2 transmitted a live show that reached over

10 million viewers, making it a milestone in the history of music show transmissions on content-sharing platforms (Pereira De Sá & Holzbach 2010). This experience mobilized different digital social networks to share comments, temporalities, and storytelling that resembled the viewing practices of live music in the context of social isolation.

During the Irish group U2's show in 2009, the conversation focused on the difference between internet and televisual transmission, throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, the debate turned to live music being broadcast on YouTube and Instagram. While YouTube was a global player in live music broadcasting, Instagram, a digital social network for sharing photographs and video fragments in the private sphere, appeared as a new platform for the possibilities of music performances. Questions about the technical qualities of the streaming mainly revolving around sound fidelity, in addition to the recognition of the possibility of easier monetization, enshrined YouTube as the principal platform for live music.

We would like to emphasize the set of aesthetic devices that order the formation of sociotechnical networks with these performances. We assert the premise that music genres are important mediators of engagement in live music, especially from the perspective of expectations present in the music genres with audio-visual devices (Soares 2005). In this sense, we recognize that different music genres generate particular regulatory, performative, and, thus, aesthetic references during the transmissions of the concerts.

Next, we will discuss three distinctive experiences of live music performance during the pandemic that cause a reflection on a set of performance and presence problems at these performances: the presence of holograms at music performances that points to the overlap between memory and the fabulation of culture in music live-streamed concerts, allowing for fiction about the presence of an already-dead artist on stage; the retransmission of archived performances on digital platforms in the context of the pandemic as an activation of a regime of presence around simultaneousness; and the possibility of speculation about a live music presentation being pre-recorded, through the insertion of sound layers like applause, noises, and environmental sounds as a strategy of the production of presence.

Memory and Fabulation in Music Holograms

Chorão, the vocalist for the Brazilian band Charlie Brown Jr, passed away in 2013; he would have been 50 years old in 2020. To commemorate the occasion, the singer's son and part of the band that accompanied him during its active years organized a celebration tour that was going to start in April 2020 and include another vocalist, Egípcio from the band Tihuana. When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March and preventative measures like quarantine and the prohibition of public gatherings were enacted, the tour was delayed.

The alternative decided on by the organizers during this period was a live concert hosted on YouTube. The transmission of the show was held on May 30, 2020. When the performance started, the band played "Te levar," a song that is well-known for being the theme song of the teen TV soap opera *Malhação* on Rede Globo during the 1990s and 2000s. The stage was dark, the musicians started the

show, and a microphone placed in the centre of the stage was without a vocalist. Suddenly, Chorão's voice was heard: "Jump around!" The band continued playing the song while images of the singer started to appear on the Jumbotron behind the stage.

With the editing of images displayed on the Jumbotron and the playback of Chorão's singing from live recordings, the band played in sync with Chorão's voice. The recreation of the singer's performance though the audio-visual and sound editing together with a live band and how this editing is based on an attempt to recreate Chorão's mannerisms are impressive. Known for talking in the middle of songs, the editing cut in a greeting during an instrumental riff after the first verse: "Hey yo, Charlie Brown family!"

These intersections between media, technology and live performance are not novelties in the pop culture universe. If we think back on the history of pop music, many debates have been had on the legitimacy or authenticity of using tools and software for playback. Examples of bands that make use of pre-recorded instrument tracks or "samples" in their concerts or singers who dub or make use of autotune in their performances have already put into play what fans and critics of certain music genres understand as the limits of "liveness." From viewers' comments on YouTube, it can be seen that, to the detriment of the spectral apparition of Chorão in audio and visual, there is no mention of the pre-recorded character of that apparition. Emotion from hearing his voice (Fig. 1), praise of the technology (Fig. 2), and the emotional appeal of his presence (Fig. 3) are reactions from the viewers.
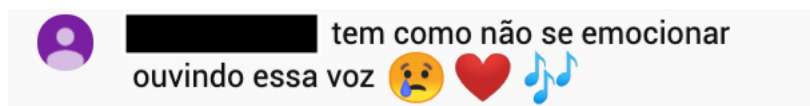

FIGURE 1. Comment from a Charlie Brown Jr fan on YouTube (YouTube 2020a). It reads, "You can't not get emotional hearing that voice."
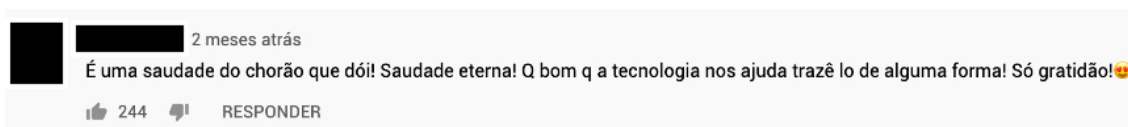

FIGURE 2. Comment from a Charlie Brown Jr fan on YouTube (*ibid*.). It reads, "I miss Chorão so much it hurts! I'll miss him forever! It's great that technology helps us bring him back in some way. So grateful!"

FIGURE 3. Comment from a Charlie Brown Jr fan on YouTube (YouTube 2020a). It
reads, "#ChorãoLives"

The network reactions to the show of a deceased artist who "comes to life"
through hologram highlight the possibilities of restoring the body through digital
technology. It is in this context of interaction – between fan and hologram – that
new performance issues are constructed, as questions about the memory of other
shows by the artist and biographical dimensions are present in the contact zone
between individuals and media. Thinking about presence, memory, and fabulation
has occupied writers on image and memory theories, notably from the writings of
Henri Bergson (1988). By dealing with the notion of fabulation, the author suggests
that images have the capacity to "survive" in fiction once activated by spectatorship.
Emphasizing the importance of image theories in the interpretation of this case
study, we highlight the conjunction of the spectral dimension of images linked to
the affects present in the songs, leading to a cathartic and epiphanic dimension
(Hesmondhalgh 2013) that is also specific to musical aesthetic experiences.

Rewatching the Archive, Playing in the Present

On April 8 2020, the English band Radiohead announced on its social networks
that beginning that week they would start to transmit a series of live shows recorded
throughout their career. They would be transmitted on the band's YouTube channel
and, contrary to the on-demand characteristic of the platform, the presentations
would have a starting time: 10:00 PM (London time) or 6:00 PM (in Brasilia). The
first transmitted show was originally performed in October 2000 in Dublin.
Between April and July, there were 13 concerts in total broadcast by the project.

Radiohead's initiative catches our attention not necessarily because the
transmission of previously recorded shows had a set start time, but because they
scheduled presentations that, actually, had already been available on the internet
through a platform created by the band, the Radiohead Public Library. It was as if
the band brought an unedited aura to the unedited available content, through a
transmission with a scheduled time and possibilities of interaction on YouTube,
such as the chat during the live transmission and the comments.

The band was not the only one to propose something of this kind. Large music
festivals, like Lollapalooza for example, also held online editions and used reprised
content (historic shows and best-of moments) organized on consecutive days and
scheduled times as a form of activating their online audiences. The event that began
in Chicago, United States, and held in seven other countries, including Brazil,
revisited their archive of shows and chose shows by artists from various editions of
the festival, such as Paul McCartney, The Cure, Tove Lo, Arcade Fire, Metallica,
Ellie Goulding, and Lorde.

These broadcasts that try to emulate the "liveness" of the recorded show, i.e.,
"live on tape" (Fechine 2002), appear to articulate the idea of reactivation of the
performance from its documentation, as described by Auslander (2018). According
to the author, influenced by McLuhan, the document of the performance—a video,

photograph, or sound recording, for example—would not be the performance itself, but rather an element that reactivated the original performance in current circumstances. In other words, it does not take the spectator to the context of the performance, but rather it brings the performance to the context of the spectator.

Not by chance, it is notable in the viewers' comments how the transmission of past events had a quality of nostalgia or fondness when reactivated. Returning to the Radiohead example, one of the transmitted shows was from the band's last tour through Brazil, in April 2018. The presentation that was held in Allianz Parque in São Paulo was aired on June 11, 2020 and had interventions by Brazilian fans in the real-time chat and in the comments during the transmission, commenting on how it felt to be (re)watching the show online, presenting experiential characteristics from the day of the show (Fig. 4), and sharing memories (Fig. 5) that connected them to the band and the original context of the transmitted performance.
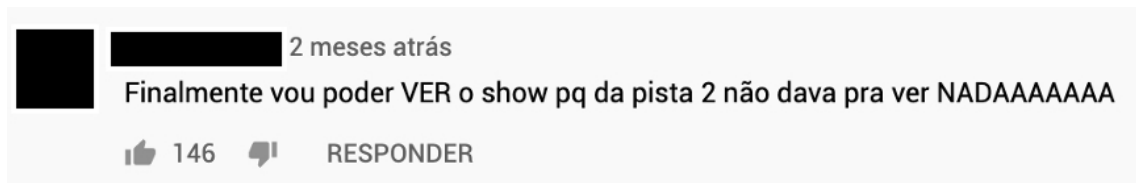

FIGURE 4. Comment by a Brazilian fan on the video of the Radiohead show (YouTube 2020b). It reads, "I'm finally going to be able to see the show because I couldn't see anything from the second level!"
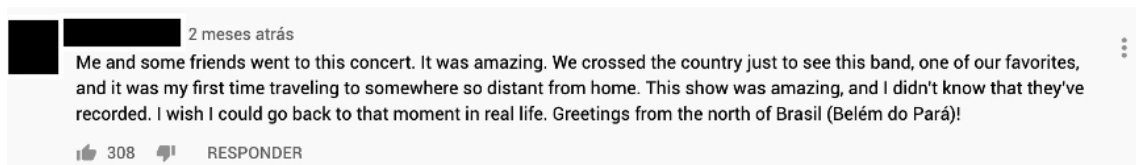

FIGURE 5. Comment by a Brazilian fan on the video of the Radiohead show (*Ibid*.).

Imagined "Live"

On March 30, 2020, the vocalist of the band Tame Impala, Kevin Parker, announced on social networks the publication of a video on the group's YouTube page. *The Slow Rush in an Imaginary Place* is a remix or reinterpretation of the album *The Slow Rush* that had debuted at the start of the year, but it called attention to the circumstances of the "recreation."

The video played the entire album in the original order, but with some differences: there were people talking, the music reverberated longer, there were different echoes in the voice compared to the original mix, and it was possible to hear the sound of distant screams. Parker's recreation of *The Slow Rush* is a remix of the album with the addition of sounds and noises that simulate a live show by the band. putting the listener inside an imagined soundscape, inside of the setting of a concert, with crowds and the form of an in-person musical listening experience.

This launch came in the wake of a series of developments that we have seen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with the prohibition of live shows and social gatherings. With the new album, Tame Impala had already had a tour that was set to start in March with shows in California, United States, followed by shows in Mexico and a summer circuit in Europe. What 'The Slow Rush' remix seems to evoke is the importance of the construction of imagined sound environments that are merged with pre-recorded materials. What Tame Impala calls the "Imaginary Place" takes on the shape of festivals, shows at music venues, and parties with music playing. The utopia and the fabulation from the remix of the album depict the possibilities of these listenings, as can be seen in the comments by fans on YouTube that highlight the connection with the ideals of live shows (Fig. 6), dimensions of imagined spatialities at festivals (Fig. 7), and traces of a memory that connects to the present of the pandemic (Fig. 8).
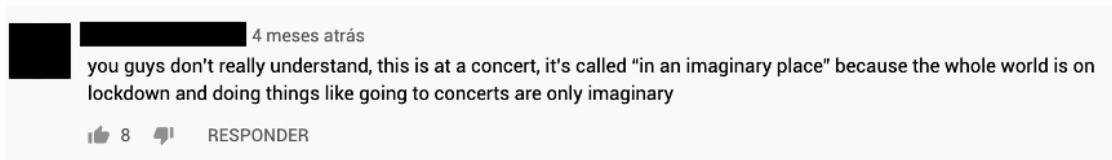

FIGURE 6. Comment from a Tame Impala fan on YouTube (YouTube 2020c).
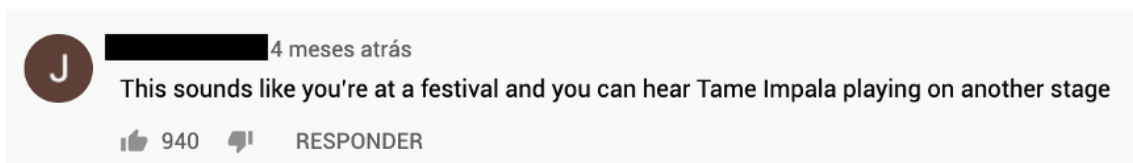

FIGURE 7. Comment from a Tame Impala fan on YouTube (*Ibid.*).
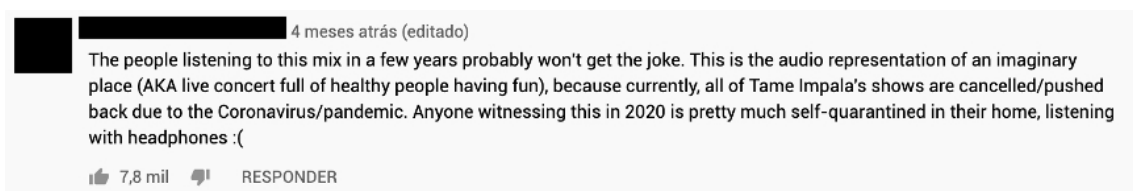

FIGURE 8. Comment from a Tame Impala fan on YouTube (*Ibid.*).

The imagined presence of Tame Impala and the audience at shows, even fanciful ones, dialogues in a certain way with the centrality that live music has in some genres, as Gracyk (1996) points out. "Live" has always been an important marker in rock. In a large part of rock albums, even being recorded using techniques that are based on multi-track and non-simultaneous recording, the goal is still to reach the feeling that the band is playing live.

What Tame Impala's experience puts into discussion is how liveness is a central question for certain music genres present in the universe of contemporary music. And within this context, it is not the condition of production and transmission of the media product that confers this imaginary character of being live; the presence,

even being a fabulation created by mixing techniques, does indeed play a central role.

Final Considerations

Beyond analysing live-streamed concerts as a contemporary phenomenon of media and music cultures, we propose a view that understands the heterogeneity of these products and how they add complexity to the construction of "liveness" in music. Considering the status of presence within these cases opens an interesting field to think of "live" as a condition articulated within a complex sociotechnical network. Here we recognize that liveness is not a given—it is constructed.

We uphold that this situational and discursive construction of "live" emerges from different approaches in music culture, opening gaps in the debate on the speculative zones between memory, fabulation, and simulation. The presence of holograms at music performances operates in the intrinsic relation between memory and fabulation in music culture, questioning values inscribed in music genres and giving new meaning to practices within the spectrum of rock culture. The retransmission of archived performances on digital platforms in the context of the pandemic operates on the narrativization of memory and the experiential dimension that is a part of regimes of presence surrounding simultaneousness. The insertion of sound environments that simulate being "live" create the possibility of fabulation in a live performance. The problems of performance and presence add complexity to the sensorial dimensions, aesthetics, and politics of media in contemporary communication and culture.

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