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Intermedial Theatre: ± Technology?

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When you work with [technology] live, when you experience it physically, it's absolutely fantastic because, as an actor, it makes you feel like your bodily capabilities are being enhanced. It is as if you are becoming a kind of cyborg character because you have your human, fleshy capabilities, but suddenly, you also have this machine that adds capacities to your body.

— Marie Brassard¹

Marie Brassard's innovative use of sound technologies to alter her onstage voice raises the stakes for considerations of theatrical mediality in our present situation. Working with sound artist Alexander MacSween in her most recent productions, including her ongoing *Peepshow*, Brassard has employed digital sound and altered voice “as a natural extension of the body,”² transforming herself into the site of multiple voices, multiple identities. In the early the 20th century, new optic technologies took centre stage in conceptual innovations with theatrical practice. Movements as different as Futurism, Dadaism, and Bauhaus each emphasised the importance of visuality and visual space over sonority and acoustic space, largely drowning out human speech along the way. Until well after the Second World War, innovations in acoustic technologies nearly always took the backseat in onstage performance. As Christopher Baugh has noted, early 20th century developments in lighting techniques and filmic projections were perceived by audience members as “real,” as part of the experience of the “live”—after all, light perceived was light itself—but to the ear of a public not yet accustomed to new techniques of *listening*,

¹ Halferty, J. Paul. “The Actor as Sound Cyborg: An Interview with Marie Brassard.” CTR 127: 26.

² From *Peepshow*'s description on the website of Toronto's Harbourfront World Stage “Flying Solo” Festival (2005): <http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/worldstage/media/pshow.php> [accessed 2 May 2007].

early incarnations of sound reproduction seemed mere “imitations” and distinctly artificial (Baugh 2005: 203).

The scene has shifted in our current age. Today, we are not only attuned to the possibilities of digital sound, but lately have also grown aware of its implications for the materiality of the human voice. (Anyone who has wrestled with automated voice assistants such as Bell Canada’s infamous “Emily” will know what I mean.) In Brassard’s creations, sound technology has arguably come into its own; the theme of voice manipulation is the centrepiece to which her otherwise stunning imagery and visual projections are orchestrated. Her simulated voices are continually overlaid against the raw materiality of her natural “real” voice. Intermittently, we catch a snippet of her natural voice protruding through the amplified digital modulation. In these moments, our acoustic sense of *simulated* and *real* are capsized: it is Brassard’s *natural* voice that appears to *interfere* with the “real” voices of the characters she assumes. Unable to distinguish fully what her natural voice is saying, we comprehend the uttered words only by association with the digital recreation, which falls at an almost imperceptible time delay.

Brassard’s inventiveness with sound and visual technologies is wonderfully refreshing. But it is all too easy to label such playfulness as the “hybrid,” “multimedial” or “intermedial” use of technology on the stage. Such labels beg for greater clarity. Most of us who think about theatre on a regular basis have reflected on its ontological relationship to technology and, especially, to “new” media of communication. Certainly, we are all too familiar with the many claims about uses of media for theatrical practice, as we are with assertions about the possibilities of a theatre without, or in resistance to,

technology. CTR 127 took up the thorny issue of theatrical liveness in the current condition of our “mediatized culture.” Several contributions referenced the now well-rehearsed debate between Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan regarding the contemporary notion of liveness as either the product of, or the last vestige of resistance to, technologies of reproduction. As diametrically opposed as their standpoints are, the debate itself is telling of the reaction of Theatre and Performance Studies to the rise of media theory and mounting concern, across the humanities, for so-called *materialities* of communication (see especially Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1994). The turn to media and materialities has represented a shift away from meaning-focused studies, away from the all-pervasiveness of hermeneutics, the conditions of interpretation, and the general “readability” of the world, and towards questions of material culture: the places, modalities and carriers of meaning that are not necessarily meaning themselves (Gumbrecht 2004).

The surge of contemporary debates about intermediality and theatre, fuelled by the seemingly endless possibilities and interplay of (new) media, remains stuck in the tension between studies of meaning and studies of materialities (Chapple and Kappenbelt 2006). Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003) has warned that intermediality may well suffer the fate of other intellectually sharp-sounding jargon—the decline of “intertextuality” his prime example. Peter Boenisch (2003) has similarly remarked on the term’s perplexing vagueness, especially for reflections on art forms such as theatre. In what ways could theatre, as a point of convergence between bodies, tools, buildings, texts, images, voices, sounds, and even smells ever be anything but *intermedial*? The concern, I suppose, is that intermediality is just another link in a chain of *inter—alities*. (And one can only guess

what will succeed it in our posthuman, digitised era! Can *hypermediality* really offer us a significantly different groundbreaking paradigm? or perhaps *intersensuality* would better capture the increasing interplay of the senses that McLuhan anticipated?)

The lack of certainty around intermediality is, I believe, tied to the term's historical emergence. It is noteworthy that in Germany (where academic interest in materialities has been most prominent) the concept of intermediality emerged most saliently in the late 1980s—at precisely the moment when the ubiquity of the digital computer became the focus of discussions of the possible transposition of all media into a single code (Schröter 2004: 401). As recently as 2001, the German theatre scholar Christopher B. Balme suggested that a concern with intermediality has gained little traction in the Anglo-American world: “English-language research does not even have a noun as a translation for ‘intermediality,’ although the adjective ‘intermedial,’ admittedly without clear terminological contours, is slowly establishing itself” (Balme 2001: 682, note 8; my translation). This may well have been true on a large scale, yet it was the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins who, in 1965, first brought up the idea of “intermedia” to refer to the *fusion* or blending of artistic media. Higgins would explain in a later commentary that *intermedia* are distinguishable from *mixed media*, works that are merely executed in more than one medium, but which are not fused at a conceptual level (see Higgins 2001). Moreover, in English, intermediality has etymological precedents in “intermediate” and “intermediary”—everyday terms that aptly describe the state of in-between-ness and the schema of transmission around which theories of media and materialities revolve.

My argument is that to understand theatre as an intermedial form requires delving into theatre's long relationship to technology. Perhaps it seems too generalised to say

that, historically and today, theatre is a place and carrier of cultural information, consisting of variously shifting materialities of communication. Yet this is where we must start. Derrick de Kerckhove first proposed the compelling thesis that Western theatre emerged in ancient Greece as an extension of the phonetic alphabet, a literacy training mechanism for the as yet illiterate public of Athens. Theatre, he argued, developed as cultural information-processing: a linearisation and sequencing of sensory information and visual-aiming, not merely because it *used* a technology, but rather because it was, in and of itself, a technological extension and invention. In Greek theatre, Prometheus represented the archetypal spectator, “bound” to his seat and thus bound to watch the sequence of events unfold (see de Kerckhove 1981, 1982, 2001). Greek theatre became “a neutral, abstract container for a programmed experience, a spectacle” (1981: 27).

Western theatre, throughout all its transpositions and transmutations, has arguably never shifted off this technological a priori. Nineteenth and early 20th century advances in media merely served to bring the theatre’s technological essence back into focus: Brecht drew on it and exposed it while Artaud railed against it, each with varying degrees of shock. The citability of gestures in Brecht’s epic theater, as Benjamin well understood, derived from photographic and filmic montage. At the same time, neither Benjamin nor Brecht failed to recognise the persistent correspondences between theatre and print media: for while “the spectator is required to take a stance that corresponds to the comparable way a reader turns the pages of a book”—as Brecht wrote in 1931 regarding his production of *Mann ist Mann*—(Brecht 1967: 981) “an actor,” for Benjamin, “must

be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type” (Benjamin 1968: 151).

Friedrich Kittler has traced how technologies of reproduction fractured media in the 19th century into individual streams: acoustic (gramophone), optic (film) and typographic (typewriter) technologies (Kittler 1999). The digital computer promised to be their point of reconvergence. In the computer, he prognosticated, “everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound or voice. And once optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digital numbers, any medium can be translated into any other” (1999: 1-2). Kittler viewed a key predecessor to the effects of digitisation in the music-dramas of Richard Wagner. The aesthetic of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, represented the first intermedia when optics and acoustics were fundamentally re-fused, anticipating the interface effect of new media. For Kittler, music-dramas were the harbingers of sound film *avant la lettre* (see Kittler 1994). Following this train of thought, it is little surprise, as Baugh points out, that the rebirth of large-scale musical theatre in the late 20th century “coincided with IBM’s invention of the Personal Computer” (2005: 209). Our contemporary notion of multimedia, as media philosopher Norbert Bolz has remarked, “is the continuation of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* with electronic tools” (Bolz 1994: 279). The possibility of carefully coordinated, computer-controlled lighting and sound sequences, in combination with the automated control of scenic elements—for Baugh a “newly endowed *Gesamtkunstwerk*”—so effectively translated the folk-tale simplicity of musical-theatrical themes into a new emotional intensity “propelled by technical effect” (209-210). “The possibilities for the creation and manipulation of the stage image that the computer

provides is becoming, essentially, a new source of spectacle that may well prove to be analogous to the Renaissance discovery of the perspective scene” (Baugh 2005: 215). But if mass musical events are slowly exhausting the potentials of *total* computer-controlled theatricality, the technical possibilities of today’s digital media have equally generated the new poetics of performance for which Hans-Thies Lehmann first coined the term “postdramatic theatre” (1999). This is the case with Marie Brassard’s theatre creations. Her focused experimentations with technical media within the realm of voice stem, on the one hand, from the possibilities of digital media but, on the other hand, challenge the ubiquity of computer control that has characterised musical theatre.

Voice alteration in theatre conjures up the etymology of *audience* from the Latin *audire*, “to hear.” As in de Kerckhove’s analysis of Greek theatre, Brassard’s audience undergoes training in the sense of “visual-aiming,” but this visual-aiming takes place in strict accord with sustained *acoustic perception*. The stage is transformed into a sonorous environment reinforced by stunning visual projections, textured lighting sequences and set design. In Brassard, optics and acoustics are reorganised in a live performance that is *par excellence* audiovisual. The microphone, distinctly visible, is the focus of this audiovisual overlaying. Yet Brassard and MacSween reject the use of pre-recorded sound sequences; the digital manipulation takes place in real time, as the performance unfolds. As she notes, they rely on omni-directional microphones which can lead to accidents, such as feedback noise, on stage.

Marie Brassard’s “intermedial” sound theatre highlights not only the technological possibilities of our current age, but also a *material self-awareness* that has been central to the relationship between theatre and technology all along. To my mind,

the question we must consistently pose is not whether theatre is conceivable *with* or *without* technology, but rather: *How* does theatre react to shifts in the materialities of communication?

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