

Voice in The “Long 20th Century”: From Mechanical to Electrical Aurality

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The use of microphones in theatre today is so common that it is hard to believe how recent this practice is and, more importantly, that it has provoked such long standing and fierce resistance. The fact is that the theatre, which very quickly integrated the electric lamp (at the end of the 19th century) into its technical arsenal, waited more than a century before resorting to microphones to relay the voices of the actors. Technological imperfections alone are not sufficient to explain this deferment since, between the emergence of the first sound reproduction technologies in the late 1870s (microphone, phonograph, telephone) and the 21st century, four distinct media have enjoyed considerable success on account of these technologies : records, radio, cinema and television. This article argues is that such delay was due to an ideological positioning by which the theatre tried to affirm its ontological superiority over the other media practices by establishing itself as the ultimate refuge of “authenticity” by virtue of the simultaneous – and non-technologically mediated – presence of the actor and the spectator in a single space. In this context, the human voice of theatre took on a highly symbolic value, that of unadulterated authenticity, a value which seemed perverted everywhere else.

Voice in The “Long 20th Century” : From Mechanical to Electrical Aurality¹

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In *Listen : A History of Our Ears*, Peter Szendy recalls the moment when, as a child who had been immersed in music at the family hearth for as long as he could remember, he suddenly began “to *listen to music as music*. With the keen awareness that it was *to be understood* [entendre], deciphered, pierced rather than perceived” (2008 : 1. Italics in original). That two-sided process, piercing/perceiving, is precisely what constitutes aurality – the combination of what we hear and of how we hear it.

Aurality, from the Latin *auris*, meaning “ear”, is a neologism coined in sound studies in recent years to encompass the concepts of sound and listening. In *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne observes that “we can sometimes experience an audible past, but we can do no more than presume the existence of an auditory past” (2006 : 19). Sterne is referring here to recordings from the past that we can listen to today with the same equipment as our predecessors used, which means the reproduced sound that strikes our ears is arguably similar to what was heard in the past by people listening to the same recording on the same device. This is what Sterne calls the “audible past”. But we do not hear in the same way as they did and one of the challenges facing sound studies is precisely to improve our understanding of how people heard; that is, to understand the “auditory past”.

For example, we know that in French a rolled “R” was once the norm and attracted little notice, whereas today the sound is neither neutral nor commonplace. It has taken on various connotations : old-fashioned,

rural, quaint, associated with a particular region, and so forth.

The distinction between “audible” – what we hear – and “auditory” – how we hear it – overlaps with Pierre Schaeffer’s four modes of listening : *écouter* (lending an ear), *ouïr* (perceiving through the ear), *entendre* (listening with intent), and *comprendre* (informed listening) (1966 : 104). Aurality, in our definition, is an amalgamation of the audible and the auditory, of what there is to be heard and the procedures (including the values) that must be observed in order to hear optimally. We can therefore speak of the aurality of an artistic practice (such as theatre), as well as that of a period, a region, a given region in a given period, etc. (Gauthier 2014).

In daily life, what our ears perceive is cacophonous, but the din that we accept in the street would be offensive elsewhere. This applies in particular to spaces governed by mediation, such as theatres and cinemas, where the vast majority of sounds are designed for the spectacle.² Such spaces demand that we acknowledge and observe the mediation protocol by which sounds or combinations of sounds create meaning and affect.

The Talkies and False “De-Acousmatization” : The Acousmatic Voice

The film *Yidl Mitn Fidl* [*Yiddle with his Fiddle*] (1936) by Joseph Green and Jan Nowina-Przybylski opens conventionally enough with scrolling credits accompanied by music performed by a small orchestra. Nothing unusual here. But then, a fiddle and a trumpet emerge, more and more distinctly, from the sound of the ensemble. When the credits finish rolling, the camera plunges us into a bustling, noisy marketplace in a small Ukrainian town. The fiddle and trumpet grow louder, nearly drowning out the rest of the orchestra and overwhelming all other ambient sounds. The two instruments are now in the audio foreground as the camera pushes through the tight crowd, the fiddle growing louder still. The camera tracks in for the last time, floating through the milling throng and coming to rest before a frail, rag-covered boy who turns out to be a woman (played by Molly Picon), furiously playing a fiddle on the street for pennies. The camera zooms in and the fiddler now fills the entire screen, speaking through her fiddle, merging into it, becoming the instrument in what is a very compelling scene. Then the camera turns away and continues in a different direction. The sound of the fiddle fades away. Once again, we hear the buzz of the marketplace and, with increasing clarity, the sound of the trumpet. We never see the trumpeter in this sequence but we sense his presence nearby. The camera moves back to the fiddler and then to the crowd. A desperate dialogue ensues between the fiddle and the trumpet, between the fiddler we can see and the invisible trumpeter. The latter might be one of the countless people seen only from the back, or perhaps he is right beside us, just off-camera.

On the surface, this scene is not about voice or theatre or radio. But metaphorically, it is about all of those things : the place and role

of voice, presence, liveness, all that which becomes mediated on stage and screen.

Much could be said about this shift from non-diegetic to diegetic sound and the characteristics of the two instruments. The fiddle and trumpet produce sound vibrations that function here as human voices – one male, one female – engaged in a heartrending conversation : the tone, timbre, pacing, rhythm and even the grain of the music tell a tragic tale whose contours the audience can readily discern.

Yidl Mitn Fidl dates from the first decade of talking pictures, which saw both the arrival of the voice in movie theatres and the self-celebration of theatre as an art of liveness and presence, by which is meant the simultaneous physical presence of performer and spectator in one place and what this creates, or is supposed to create. Until then, sound and image reproduction technologies had operated separately, each making significant formal strides in their own realms. The highly anticipated and sought after convergence of the two technologies in the form of the sound film was the result of decades of effort and a series of technological breakthroughs, each of which was noisily heralded by the press. It spawned a new medium – talking pictures – that would dramatically reconfigure media practices, a category which, from our intermedial perspective, embraces the performing arts, including theatre. However, talking pictures marked not so much a culmination of the medium as a decisive stage in a process that extended back to the countless “talkers” made starting in 1908 (a form that attempted to combine and synchronize sound and image). This primitive audiovisual incarnation would eventually lead to the perfect media “transparency” that Bolter and Grusin describe in their landmark study *Remediation* (2000 : 21) : the ultimate medium capable of all mediations, which Henry Jenkins ironically calls the “Black Box”.

According to Bolter and Grusin, transparency is the quality that creates the impression that the spectator is in contact with the represented object directly and immediately, that is to say, without perceptible mediation. Transparency produces an immediacy effect. This is not a new concept; it dates back to the dawn of media and belongs to a long mimetic tradition, but here it has assumed a new scope with the electric revolution.

Beginning in the late 19th century, the sound reproduction industry³ touted the merits of its two flagship devices – the phonograph and the gramophone – on mimetic grounds, pointing to their “fidelity” to the “authentic” sound that was the object of reproduction. Today we know this claim to be fallacious : authenticity, like fidelity and the immediacy effect, are constructed by the social and aesthetic conventions of a given period. Rick Altman, an expert on cinematic sound, refers to such statements as the “reproductive fallacy” (1992 : 39), and Jonathan Sterne argues that authenticity is a “stand-in for reality” (2006 : 285)

within the boundaries of a specific spatial and temporal context. That view reflects Jacob Smith's "sonotopic" principle (2008 : 245-247), which binds sound and the space in which it is produced into a fused whole. I shall return to this concept later. Abraham Moles' truism, that fidelity is "l'absence d'infidélité perceptible par le récepteur"/"the absence of infidelity perceivable by the receiver" (quoted in Castant 2010 : 14) should be read in this light.

As Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davies observe in their discussion of theatricality (2004 : 1-39), creating the illusion of "being there" is precisely what the theatre has been seeking to accomplish for 25 centuries and this accounts for its constant attempts to incorporate into its arsenal of illusions all sorts of techniques and technologies, various knowledge, drawn from other fields of human endeavour (*i.e.* the medieval "secrets", the Renaissance *ethos*, gas and electric lighting in the 19th century, etc.). But, as receptive as it was to novelty, the theatre proved surprisingly reluctant to exploit the "reproductive" possibilities of photography, film and sound technologies, and equally unruffled by competition from those quarters.

However, some qualifications are in order here. Recent research on sound in the theatre has shown that less traditional stage shows – *i.e.* revues, *féeries*, vaudeville, variety shows, burlesque – were actually quick to add reproduced sound and incorporate onscreen projection into their productions (Larrue & Pisano 2014). Even on the preeminent modernist stages, loudspeakers and projectors (used for films and slides) were occasionally used. What is more, in the excitement following the advent of sound film, which coincided with the rise of radio, New York City performance halls installed permanent sound systems in a bid to outdo the movie theatres. Those developments did not however become widespread, as electric lighting had 30 years earlier. While all Western theatres switched to electric light in the space of less than 10 years in the late 19th century, electric sound was not installed until 60 years later for non-vocal sound and more than a hundred years later for voice.

Yet it was predictable and indeed inevitable that those technologies would make their way onto the stage and into the creative process. Today, the mediation of voices by microphones is commonplace in the theatre. This begs the question of why there was such a lag: why did the mediation of non-vocal sound and then voice itself take so long to occur? Inadequate technology cannot be dismissed entirely as an explanation but it was not the decisive factor either, since song, cabaret, records, radio and of course sound movies were all propelled to success by the same technology. Clearly, the resistance lay elsewhere: it was ideological in nature⁴ and it crystallized around the human voice.

The coming of talking pictures was no surprise and their triumph, notes Anne Karpf, was rooted in their ability to reunite what technology had torn asunder: body and voice (2006 : 232). Sound reproduction

technologies had created acousmatic sound – sound separated from its source – and accustomed listeners to a new aurality : “blind listening” to records and radio. Sound film did the opposite, however, producing an effect analogous to what Michel Chion calls “de-acousmatization” (1994 : 130-131). The fiddling sequence of *Yidl Mitn Fidl* is a good example : the sound is initially disembodied, separated from the source to which it only gradually returns. The reuniting of the fiddle’s sound with the image of its source symbolically re-enacts the reunification of the actor’s body, which early cinema had silenced, with his voice, restored now by the talking pictures.

But in fact such an event is more complicated than it appears. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar argues against Chion and most film historians that voice is in its very essence irreducibly acousmatic because, simply put, we never see its source, the vocal apparatus that 18th century scientists dreamed of uncovering (2006 : 9-12). According to Dolar, voice, unlike other sounds, is always “in search of an origin, in search of a body, but even when it finds its body, it turns out that this doesn’t quite work, the voice doesn’t stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn’t match the body” (60-61). Let us return to the image of the fiddler. Her words are musical notes. They don’t stick and, in the sublime breach, the dramatic intensity of the moment is heightened. It could be argued that the de-acousmatization accomplished by talking pictures paradoxically highlights the acousmatic irreducibility of voice, which would explain its independence, adaptability, availability and flexibility, as well as its mystery and aura.

Advances in psychoanalysis and neuroscience have shown that in the womb we are literally immersed in what Karpf calls a “sound bath” (2006 : 62) dominated by the mother’s voice, in which our epidermis functions as “an audio-phonetic skin” (*ibid.*). We feel sounds as much as we hear them, and we distinguish them without knowing exactly where they come from. Our first experience of sound is therefore acousmatic. It cannot be denied that sound reproduction technologies have exerted a power of attraction from the outset, but Karpf does not believe they are responsible for the historic break between voice and body that media historians posit; they only extended, exploited and replicated it. Karpf describes a little-known but telling event from the early days of telephone service (*ibid.* : 236) : realizing that the intrusion of an alien, acousmatic voice – that of the operator – was often experienced by the user as an assault, the telephone companies soon replaced all their male operators by women, since their voices, like that of the mother, were considered to have soothing qualities.

It has been suggested that the acousmatic property of voice accounts in part for the speed and ease with which sound reproduction technologies – the telephone, records, radio – became entrenched in Western societies after the late 1880s. While the telephone was never a competitor

to theatre – on the contrary, the theatre used the telephone to increase its reach (Van Drie 2010) – records and especially radio were formidable rivals, drawing away theatre’s audiences and agents (performers and producers alike). Records had a limited impact, lacking the attraction of liveness, of immediate presence – in short : of transparency –, although the recording industry did all it could to make up for that serious shortcoming. Early in the 20th century, it developed the concept of the “live” recording, incorporating the audience’s laughter into comedy recordings and expressive ambient sounds into “blue discs”.⁵ But radio was *the* art of the “live” broadcast and its resounding success was devastating to the theatre. It was the greatest threat that the theatre had ever faced, lamented William Brady, a major Broadway producer, in 1926. Brady had cause for concern, for not only could radio claim to be the medium of what is live and immediate, in the same way as is the theatre, but it enjoyed a decisive advantage : it was, according to Philip Auslander (2008 : 11-72), an *intimate* medium, a quality the theatre could not claim and which matched the values of an age – modernity – centred on the individual and on subjectivity. From its infancy, radio was not shy about asserting such a considerable advantage. It was better than theatre, it was “Home Theatre” : the theatre, but in your home. And audiences quickly became enamoured with those “invisible actors” – as an anonymous writer in the *New York Times* put it in 1926 – who, as we shall see, were more “real” than the ones they saw on the stage and with whom they had a direct relationship of physical copresence.

A survey of studies of the early days of American radio and of *New York Times* columns on the theatre, records, radio and movies published between 1880 and 1940 reveals a very different picture than the one offered by historians of sound film and of drama. It shows that radio – the quintessential voice medium – played a key role in the nascent media revolution, in the development of the critical concept of presence, and in the theatre’s loss of favour with audiences, for which it was largely responsible.

Before turning to this survey, two seminal essays of intermedial history that happened to have a considerable impact on 20th century thinking about theatre should be mentioned. Both were written in the mid-1930s, one year apart and without any apparent connection. They were contemporaneous with the movie *Yidl Mitn Fidl*, released at a time when radio dominated the media landscape. These texts still resonate today, as can be seen from the large number of recent reprints and citations from them.

The Theatre and The Question of “Presence” in the Age of The Triumph of Radio

Theatre is not the main topic of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, written by Walter Benjamin in 1935, but is

nonetheless frequently mentioned. In this essay, Benjamin develops the concept of “aura” (which is closely related to and contemporaneous with the concept of “presence”) that he had proposed four years earlier in his *Little History of Photography*, and that he would later expand in his essay on Baudelaire. The aura of a work of art derives from both its rarity and its uniqueness, from its proximity and inaccessibility, its authenticity, its being-in-the-world and the charismatic power of fascination it exercises over the viewer. Mechanical reproduction deprives a work of art of its aura. Clearly, and this is a point Benjamin stresses at some length, theatre has auratic virtues, it is an art endowed with aura, whereas film, with its technical reproducibility, belongs to the camp which has sparked the decline of aura. Curiously, Benjamin does not deal with sound works in this essay of major importance for the history of theatre and media. This is all the more surprising given that he himself was involved in radio broadcasting between 1927 and 1933 and that the Artwork essay opens with an epigram about a memorable sound experience : Paul Valéry’s response to the first French radio broadcast of a classical concert from New York City. In *Au microphone : Dr. Walter Benjamin*, Philippe Baudouin relates how Valéry wrote *La Conquête de l’ubiquité*, from which the quote in question was taken, after listening to the concert. In that essay, according to Baudouin, Valéry

*s’interroge sur le fait qu’une œuvre d’art peut désormais, grâce à des moyens techniques adéquats, être détachée des conditions de sa performance [...]. La possibilité de reproduction infinie et de diffusion disséminée du sonore correspond à ce qu’il nomme “La Conquête de l’ubiquité”.*⁶ (2009 : 91)

However, Benjamin’s essay makes no reference to this major radio event nor does he include radio in his reflections. Was it because, in his view, radio did not have the same devastating effect on aura as did other means of technical reproduction? Or was it, as Baudouin suggests, because he ascribed no artistic value to radio and simply excluded it from the scope of his analysis? The omission is difficult to understand and underscores the complexity of Benjamin’s thought. As Baudouin notes, Benjamin himself created radio works, including children’s stories for radio stations in Berlin and Frankfurt, and these clearly had auratic qualities. In any event, Benjamin’s baffling silence on this point is yet another instance of the longstanding tendency of researchers and theorists to ignore sound and voice.

A near-contemporary work of Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay, though one diametrically opposed to it ideologically – defending Christian rather than Marxist values –, is Henri Gouhier’s *The Essence of Theatre*, first published in 1936.⁷ It belongs to the series of grand definitional endeavors – What is art? What is literature? What is history? – that peppered the 20th century. In it, Gouhier’s pursues two objectives, the first explicit and the second implicit : to define the specificity of theatre and to demonstrate its ontological superiority over the other

arts, particularly the (talking) pictures. What is theatre? asks Gouhier. It is “l’art de représenter” (1936 : 16).⁸ And what is *représenter*? It is to “rendre présent par des présences”.⁹ The text is a long variation on this one theme : theatre is the art of presence, the presence of the live actor on the stage, the presence of the spectator, also live, who watches the actor perform. Obviously, their contact is direct, meaning that it is not relayed by any technological means of transmission or reproduction.

Gouhier’s essentialist discourse does not stop at this observation, which all things considered is fairly trivial when applied to the dominant theatre of the day. Locked in a binary logic that opposes theatre to cinema, Gouhier casts direct presence and mediation as contradictory, mutually exclusive categories. He allows the movies some merit and recognizes their considerable popularity with the public, but he regards direct, unmediated presence or liveness as the essential characteristic of theatre – the “essence” of theatre – and as the irrefutable proof of its superiority over cinema and other technologically mediated devices and practices that reproduce reality. This was not a new argument. Twenty years earlier, Daniel Frohman, an influential Broadway producer and one of the founders of Famous Players Film, had made the same arguments with equal certitude about silent movies :

The moving picture is now at the zenith of its power. ... [T]he problem of the cinema is not to increase its public, but to hold it. This it will do by perfecting still further its already marvelous art. The synchronization of sound with motion on the screen, a device by which the explanatory matter now printed on the film will not be interrupted, the reproduction of color, and the giving of a stereoscopic quality to the pictures are improvements on which many men are at work. But the moving picture raised to the nth degree of perfection can never completely supplant the spoken drama. This is because, while sound and motion may be synchronized eventually so the figures of the screen will give every appearance of speaking, that human quality we call personality can never be translated by the lens and transmitted to the audience through the medium of screen. Only the presence of the living player can communicate the player’s magnetism to the audience. (“The movie here to make the spoken drama behave”). (1915 : X6)

Frohman’s assertion and Gouhier’s lengthy exposition rest on two powerful assumptions that are never clearly expressed or defended : first, face-to-face communication is superior to any mediated communication, and secondly, the “natural” is more effective than the technological, at least when it comes to human relationships and the arts. There is a whiff here of the anti-mechanical thinking that flourished in the 19th century. (We also find it in Benjamin’s essay, which is more unexpected given his Marxist convictions.) Gouhier therefore holds up the theatre as the last refuge of truth in an artificial world dominated by technology. The promised study of *The Essence of Theatre* turns into a condemnation of any form of technological mediation between actor and audience. Gouhier does not mention or else fails to see that the stage is also a technological device, and that there is nothing “natural”

about it. Most importantly, however, the sway of this type of essentialist thinking delayed the use of sound systems in theatres by decades and the mediated amplification of the voice by more than a century, sound reproduction technology being regarded as unnatural and a desecration. But this discourse, which quickly became hegemonic, and held on to its ascendancy for many decades,¹⁰ could only delay and not prevent the arrival of sound reproduction technologies. Therefore, it mainly discouraged and discredited their use.

Current studies of sound in the theatre show that theatre owners and directors had no compunction about using sound reproduction technology when it was feasible and useful. This was particularly true for music – diegetic and non-diegetic – as well as for some backstage sound effects produced using an ordinary record player. But even the most audacious of them avoided technologically reproducing the voice unless it was required by the plot (a politician speaking into a microphone, a message broadcast over a public address system, etc.). In general, voice would remain live (unmediated) until the advent of digital technology – except on Broadway and West End musicals (Burston 2011) : a testimony to its unique, inviolable and almost “sacred” character.

Philip Auslander points out that the idea of “live” is a product of mediation since without it the concept would be meaningless (2008 : 56). The same could be said of the essentialist concept of presence : without sound and image reproduction technologies, it might simply not exist as it does today. Overall, the essentialist discourse slowed down theatre’s adoption of major advances – technological or not – that could have served it well. Moreover, many of those advances originated with its competitor, radio; a medium totally ignored by Benjamin and Gouhier despite its colossal success. And the most momentous of these advances were related to the voice.

Voice and Liveness : Radio versus (and Better Than) Theatre

In North America and Europe, early radio carried a good deal of live theatre, for radio, like television after it, claimed to be *the* “live” medium *par excellence*, the medium of presence (a claim it still holds on to today). In the live broadcast of plays, radio microphones were placed not only on the stage but also in the orchestra pit and in the hall, so as to give audiences at home the impression of being in attendance and immersed within the theatre space as they listened to the performance. For reasons of efficiency, however, radio producers soon replaced live feeds of theatrical performances with studio productions before an audience, also broadcast live.¹¹ The first radio script-writing contest was held in 1924. The idea was to spatially situate the listener by embedding the dialogue in a soundscape or “sound scenery”. At the same time, radio began developing an impressive array of sound effects, created artificially or recorded in the real world, while manufacturers

of microphones, radio receivers and transmission equipment stepped up their efforts to improve reception quality and enhance the medium's transparency effect.

However, the most impressive progress involved the voice. The radio microphone revolutionized the art of public speaking and sparked a dramatic diversification of vocal styles. With radio, says Jacob Smith (2008 : 99-100), audiences discovered that private speech and everyday conversation could be faithfully reproduced, without exaggeration and without stage effects. Franklin D. Roosevelt saw the change clearly and grasped the new medium's intimate and "live" persuasive power. The future president of the United States broadcast his first "fireside chat" in 1929 and continued the tradition until 1944, talking conversationally to his fellow citizens about the great issues of the day. Radio sounded real. The public was receptive, and when confronted with the unavoidable comparison, it found the mediated voice of radio more "natural" than the live trained voice of the actor present on the stage.

[T]he vocal conventions of the histrionic stage were becoming all too audible as conventions to many listeners. [...] What we find in this shift from the histrionic to the realist stage is a change in the role of the voice and, by extension, the role of vocal training. (Smith 2008 : 94)

While the vast majority of stage actors still followed the precepts laid down by Edmund Shaftesbury in 1891 in his book *Lessons in Voice Culture* – most of which had to do with the power of the voice – radio performers were urged to speak more "casually" to "chat" as it were.

As early as 1925, broadcasters began developing voice technique courses to help radio announcers, who were often actors, adapt to the demands of the microphone (see for instance the 1925 anonymous article of *The New York Times*, "Study of voice technique to aid radio announcers"). The Voice Technique Committee, which was behind the initiative, had realized that theatrical inflections were counterproductive on the radio and had to be resisted. In the same year, RCA and New York University jointly formed another committee to carry out a large-scale project aimed at defining the ideal radio voice by surveying the public. The result was disconcerting : it didn't exist! This finding spelled the end of models centered on power and eloquence, as Warren Dygert concluded in 1939. According to Dygert, "the best voice is the Personality Voice" – the voice that expresses the speaker's personality with the greatest fidelity – and this quality trumps all others (quoted in Smith 2008 : 86-87). It turned out that those unique, personal voices, strident or scratchy, nasal, flawed in any number of ways, which were either corrected or altogether banished by theatre schools, possess "that telepathic power of thought transference which assures the announcer's immediate acceptance by the listening audience" (*ibid.* : 86-87), and what's more in the privacy of their living rooms.

The microphone therefore ushered in an extraordinary diversification

of vocal styles and registers, those that the stage had always banned and which had previously been confined to the realm of private speech. It ended the domination of the “beautiful voice” which, as Giusy Pisano has observed (2008) and as Shaftesbury’s precepts illustrate, was equated with the “strong voice”. According to Karpf, this “marked the beginning of the end of classical oratory : the orotund voice fell out of favour and an anti-oratorical sound became coveted, with the microphone favouring those who didn’t boom into it as if addressing a mass public meeting (2006 : 240).

The “infinitely reproducible” intimacy made possible by radio and the microphone, the truth they revealed and spread, the impression created of being there, together, with the speaker, were bound up with the quest for the modern subject, which was also Stanislavski’s ambitious program. But this was happening in North America, 20 years before the birth of method acting!

The demise of eloquence also left its mark on laughter and crying, other vocal expressions that producers of sound effects set about diversifying endlessly across the gamut from the most stifled to the most unrestrained. But the most remarkable aspect of this aural revolution was the appearance of a new voice hitherto impossible to achieve without a microphone : the whisper. Suddenly, thanks to radio, “a whisper could be heard [...] by millions of people”, notes Michael Jarrett (207). The new forms of vocal utterance reshaped the tastes of listeners and of spectators, who in fact composed the same audience. In the past, the booming voices of Enrico Caruso and Al Jolson had made the seats in the back row of the balcony shudder; now, the frail microphone-relayed inflections of crooners like Jack Smith and Rudy Vallee made hearts flutter. Their soft voices seemed to be speaking to each member of the audience personally, as if he or she were unique and alone. It was the beginning of the fabulous age of crooners. Until then, the radio audience had primarily been male. Now, radio attracted women, the crooner’s sole subject and intended audience. For the first time, the whisper, heretofore seen as a diminished voice, a “half-voice” (1973 : Berry 19) basked in public glory.

The close intimacy created by radio, and the attempts to reproduce it in concert halls – equipped with sound systems – where the crooners would soon triumph, was reinforced by the other amplifying effects of the microphone, which made sounds that had previously been perceptible only in close physical proximity audible at last : the swallowing of saliva, the sound of breathing, the clicking of the tongue against the teeth, the hint of lips closing.

The microphone created transparency and immediacy where the traditional stage had perpetuated the conventions of a bygone era that did not know sound reproduction technologies, an age in which no technological comparisons were possible and the voice had no other way

of exhibiting itself. An aurality that may be called mechanical, which was based on a powerful public voice – the voice of politics, stage and church – and drew on the force of eloquence and projection, gradually gave way to an electrical aurality in which a different public voice, relayed and amplified by microphones and speakers, echoed the intimacy of everyday conversation. While radio, along with records, sound film and then television, secured the victory of electrical aurality and all the new sounds it could embrace, theatre clung stubbornly to a voice from another time, arguing that since it was not mediated it was more real. And theatre did so even as it shifted to a realism that demanded more intimate voices. A more unfortunate strategy could hardly be imagined.

And Then There Was Digital

It was not necessary to await the flexibility and power of digital technology for reproduced sound and image to come to the stage at last. Theatres were equipped with permanent sound systems as early as the 1950s. With the development of tape recorders, the use of soundtracks became widespread, while microphones invaded the stage of musicals after precipitating the popularity of the cabaret. At first, shared fixed microphones on stands were used in musicals; they were then replaced by individual, mobile microphones starting in the 1960s.

Today, these practices have become “naturalized”. At the Festival TransAmériques in Montréal, technicians cannot recall a single show without digital video projection in the past seven years. The claim seems entirely plausible. And when the same technicians are asked whether they can remember a show where no sound system was used, they are dumbfounded by the suggestion. Such a thing has become inconceivable. When was the last show in Paris, New York or Montréal without recorded sound?

Resisting mediation was an historic mistake. And today, given the vastly mediated (or “multi-mediated”) dimension of all artistic practices – including live performances –, theatre history and theory would do well to incorporate some key concepts from new media theory into their heuristic arsenal.

Let us return to the whisper. Taking his cue from both Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope and Rick Altman’s idea that sound has a “spatial signature”, a notion that highlights the spatial dimension of sound in the cinema, Jacob Smith has developed the concept of “sonotope” to categorize sound-space configurations. The ultimate goal here is to model the mutual relationships between types of sound and types of space, taking as many factors as possible into account, for there exists an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal (chrono) and spatial (tope) relationships” that must be properly understood to ensure the quality of the “resulting vocal performance” (2008 : 145). It is clear that the “theatrical” voice of the 1920s was out of place on the radio,

which was listened to in the muted atmosphere of the living room. It was a different sonotope. But there is no medium without remediation and the intermedial dynamic inevitably transforms every sonotope. This effect is faster and more radical when the sonotope is a poor fit, as was indeed the case with the “theatre of presence” and the theatrical voice. They survived only on the stage and no longer matched the aurality of the age or even the needs of the theatre, which since Chekhov and Ibsen has wanted whispers as much as cries.

Smith’s sonotopic model addresses the mediation process, understood in the broadest sense, and bears directly on the question of “mediality”. On the contemporary stage where the whisper has gained currency because of the mobile individual microphone, it produces a curious sonotope, one often encountered in the works of Robert Lepage. On the radio, a whisper creates an immediate confiding effect, greater intimacy, dramatic tension, closeness. In a room, a speaker or storyteller addressing a live audience can produce the same impression by drawing closer to the microphone and whispering into it. In a movie, a whisper, when it is not off-screen, is supported by the image, typically staged, and frequently accompanied by a close-up or zoom-in.

In the theatre, when it is not supported by a perceptible change in the sound environment (apart from the voice) or the visual environment, when it is not addressed directly to the audience, in other words when it is spoken naturally, as in an ordinary conversation, a whisper (almost always relayed by a microphone) has, on the contrary, a distancing or even alienating effect. While a whisper draws people closer in real life, on the radio and in the movies, it can push them further away in the theatre. This curious paradox, which Robert Lepage exploits regularly and effectively, points towards the varied workings and polysemic import of voice, and reminds us that a voice is inseparable from the space-time in which it speaks. It reminds us also that there is no true or false presence; in the theatre, presence is always and necessarily the product of mediation.

Notes

1. This article grew out of research conducted by the international team “Le son du théâtre / Theatre Sound” (2008 – on), directed by Jean-Marc Larrue and Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux. It summarizes and furthers essays published by Jean-Marc Larrue (2010, 2016).
2. These constructed sounds coexist with a multitude of other sounds, perceptible to the audience, that were present before the show : sounds from the external environment, the building itself, etc.
3. This includes both recorded sounds and sounds which are live but heard through a loudspeaker.
4. See Larrue 2010.
5. This is also how erotic records were designated.
6. English translation : “ponders the fact that technology now makes it possible

for a work of art to be detached from the conditions of its performance [...]. The possibility of infinite reproduction and scattered broadcasting of sound is what [he] calls 'the conquest of ubiquity'".

7. Regularly reprinted since, most recently in 2002.
8. English translation : "the art of representing".
9. English translation : "make present through presences".
10. The great debate in the US between Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan in the late 1990s is relevant in this connection (see Larrue 2015 : 50-53).
11. The tradition of live broadcasting of shows and concerts did not entirely disappear and survives to this day (for example, in the weekly radio broadcasts of performances by the Metropolitan Opera in New York), but studio production quickly became the norm.

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Abstract

The use of microphones in theatre today is so common that it is hard to believe how recent this practice is and, more importantly, that it has provoked such long standing and fierce resistance. The fact is that the theatre, which very quickly integrated the electric lamp (at the end of the 19th century) into its technical arsenal, waited more than a century before resorting to microphones to relay the voices of the actors. Technological imperfections alone are not sufficient to explain this deferment since, between the emergence of the first sound reproduction technologies in the late 1870s (microphone, phonograph, telephone) and the 21st century, four distinct media have enjoyed considerable success on account of these technologies : records, radio, cinema and television. This article argues is that such delay was due to an ideological positioning by which the theatre tried to affirm its ontological superiority over the other media practices by establishing itself as the ultimate refuge of “authenticity” by virtue of the simultaneous – and non-technologically mediated – presence of the actor and the spectator in a single space. In this context, the human voice of theatre took on a highly symbolic value, that of unadulterated authenticity, a value which seemed perverted everywhere else.

Keywords : Aurality; Sound; Intermediality; Theatre

Résumé

L'usage des micros sur la scène théâtrale contemporaine est aujourd'hui si courante qu'on a peine à penser qu'il s'agit d'une pratique très récente et, plus encore, que cette utilisation ait pu susciter de longues et féroces résistances. On peut d'ailleurs s'étonner que le théâtre, qui a très rapidement intégré à son arsenal technique la lampe électrique (dès la fin du XIXe siècle), ait attendu plus d'un siècle avant de recourir aux micros pour relayer la voix des acteurs. La question des insuffisances technologiques ne suffit pas à expliquer ce délai puisque, entre l'apparition des premières technologies de reproduction du son à la fin des années 1870 (micro, phonographe, téléphone) et le XXIe siècle (alors que les voix des ac-

teurs sont fréquemment diffusées par haut-parleurs), quatre médias ont connu un succès considérable grâce à ces technologies : le disque, la radio, le cinéma parlant, la télévision. L'hypothèse que défend cet article est que la cause de ce retard est dû à un positionnement idéologique par lequel le théâtre a tenté d'affirmer sa supériorité ontologique sur les autres pratiques médiatiques en s'érigeant comme l'ultime refuge de l'authenticité grâce à la présence simultanée et non technologiquement médiatisée de l'acteur et du spectateur dans un même espace. La voix humaine a pris, dans ce contexte, une valeur symbolique forte, celle de la marque d'une authenticité inaltérée qui partout ailleurs, était pervertie.

Mots-clés : Auralité; son; intermédialité; théâtre

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