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# After Brecht: the Impact (Effects, Affects) of Intermedial Theatre

ROBIN NELSON

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This essay arises from continuing discussions in the Theatre and Intermediality, Working Group of the *Fédération Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale*. Having been struck by claims made by commentators such as Boenisch<sup>1</sup> about the “effect” of intermedial theatre, I began to wonder what the impact of such theatre and performance was generally assumed to be. I say “assumed” because, to the best of my knowledge, substantial audience research on the impact of deploying new media technologies in otherwise live theatre events is yet to be undertaken. Nevertheless, there appears to be a widely held assumption—on the part of those who engage in intermedial theatre practices and those who experience them—that intermedial theatre has assumed the mantle of radicalism. This mantle may have become a little threadbare as the aspirations of historically utopian conceptions of theatre have failed to live up to their promise, and audiences, at least for building-based theatre, appear to be in decline worldwide. But it may be that the engagement of live theatre with new media technologies, which has certainly produced interesting new modes of presentation, may revive interest in theatre and breathe new life into a venerable project: that theatre might make a difference in the world by means of social intervention in matters aesthetic, ethical and political.

I must acknowledge at the outset that I am no more in a position to offer hard data on the impact of intermedial theatre than other commentators, and that this essay remains largely conceptual. The aim of the essay is to unravel knots of complexity and to share some of my own experiences rather than to offer

1. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, (ed.), *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2006.

hard data. But, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I believe anecdotal evidence based in experience can be insightful in respect of arts encounters. My guiding questions are: “does intermedial theatre dispose some impacts/effects/affects rather than others?” and, taking up the references to Brecht, “does intermedial theatre have an inherently radical disposition and, if so, what kind of radicalism?” But before these questions are directly addressed, it will be helpful to specify which artefacts and experiences are under discussion.

In an otherwise positive review of *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*,<sup>3</sup> Sarah Gorman observes that the definitions of “intermediality” the book contains are “numerous and all-encompassing”.<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I am centrally concerned with “intermedial theatre” defined in the traditionally established sense of theatre practices consciously performed “live” before an aware audience but which overtly deploy digital media technologies. Guy Cassiers’ *Rouge Décanté*, experienced by many delegates as part of the *Festival TransAmériques* at *Usine C* in Montreal, 2007, would afford an appropriate instance. However, some of my examples involve engagement with internet devices in allegedly “interactive” performances because I am concerned to explore the aesthetics and politics of works which demand that “experiencers” actively negotiate “live” the play between mediums.

Immediately I am aware that, in aiming to clarify terms in as neutral a discourse as possible, I have begged an important question. I have implicitly loaded the concept of “intermedial theatre” with a disposition towards disjunctive principles of composition. That is to say in bringing together separate elements—or media, if you will—the disposition is to avoid harmonising them into a coherent whole (cf. Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>5</sup>) but rather to leave them in play, related to each other merely by articulation and juxtaposition. It is evident from Dixon’s encyclopaedic review of digital performance,<sup>6</sup> however, that a significant amount of practice in this domain aims—to use Bolter and Grusin’s sem-

2. Robin Nelson, “Practice as Research and the Problem of Knowledge,” *Performance Research*, vol. 11, n° 4, December, 2006, p. 105-116.

3. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, (dir.), *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*.

4. Sarah Gorman, “Review of Chapple F & Kattenbelt, C, eds, *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*. Amsterdam & New York, Rodopi,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 16, n° 4, November 2006, p. 517-518.

5. Richard Wagner, “*Die Kunst und der Revolution*” in William Ashton Ellis (trans.) “*The Art-Work of the Future*” and *Other Works*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1993, p. 21-57.

6. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2007.

inal distinction—at “immediacy” rather than “hypermediacy”.<sup>7</sup> For this reason alone, it seems to me unhelpful to talk of digital practices as if they were all aesthetically disjunctive, let alone politically radical in the wake of Brecht. My concern in this essay, however, is primarily with examples of those many digital works which do draw attention to the devices in their principles of composition. For it is the lack of seamless connectedness, the gaps in the play between two elements juxtaposed rather than fused, which typically requires the experiencer to be active in engaging with the work. If the work is bound in a sense-making frame, the (“enculturated”) human disposition to understand, to make sense of things, is satisfied by closures and the drive to negotiate meanings and pleasures is not mobilised.

“Parataxis”, the grammatical term used to signify a lack of joining words between nouns, verbs and other components of a sentence, might usefully be adopted to describe the principle of disjunctive composition. A “paratactical” approach to making work would be one in which, to a greater or lesser extent, the media, though structured in relation to each other, are consciously left in play rather than fused together or harmonised. Theatre scholars familiar with Brecht’s seminal critique of the “dramatic theatre” and advocacy of the “epic theatre” will recognise in his comparative table<sup>8</sup> the roots of such a distinction between conjunctive and paratactical principles of composition. The plot and linear development, with an eye on the finish, of “dramatic theatre”, its creation of the illusion of a real (though fictional) world to draw the spectator into an emotional empathy are set by Brecht in contrast with the “radical *separation of the elements*” in the “epic theatre” (his emphasis). The aim is to bring the spectator through critical thought to “the point of recognition” that change is possible that “man is a process”, that “he is alterable or able to alter”. Though things have moved on in the theatre and in culture since Brecht, as we shall see, his seminal essay is the point of reference in the numerous allusions to him in the context of debate on intermedial theatre.

Boenisch, for example, proposes to define “intermediality” in terms of its “intermedial effects”.<sup>9</sup> In placing different media (actors, pictures, tape) on-stage, Boenisch argues, they are “*theatrically reproduced* into something beyond their

7. See Jay David Bolter and Richard Arthur Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000, p. 20 sq.

8. See John Willett (ed. and trans.), *Brecht on Theatre*, London, Methuen, 1987.

9. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” in Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (ed.), *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, p. 116 sq.

mere (even less: *pure*) original presence.”<sup>10</sup> The mediums are doubled, becoming both the sign and the thing itself and a gap of the kind described above as paratactical remains perceptible between the sign and the thing. Thus, for Boenisch, intermediality is an “effect of performance [...] created in the perception of observers,”<sup>11</sup> because the relational aspect between thing and sign is a matter of experiencing. As Boenisch summarises:

Theatre multiplies its objects in a remarkable way into objects on stage that are present and representations at the same time, and—above all—they are presented to someone who is perceiving and observing them.<sup>12</sup>

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Whilst this account is broadly persuasive, I am not convinced, as noted, that such disjunction is a necessary condition, inherent in all intermedial theatre. Indeed, I would emphasise the importance when speaking of “intermedial theatre” of distinguishing different principles of composition precisely because much work tends to immediacy.

The political effects envisaged by Brecht are another matter. The assumption of the experience of dislocation arising from semiotic disjunctions does not, in my view, justify Boenisch’s second claim that “intermediality offers a perspective of disruption and resistance [...] and creates effects of *alienation* and *dys-referential* un-realities.”<sup>13</sup> For, if theatre in its three inherent layers of “presence, presentation, and representation”<sup>14</sup> always produces a gap between sign and thing, intermedial theatre cannot be distinguished from other modes. Boenisch, to some extent anticipates the objection that not all theatre disposes alienation. He points out that:

According to the standard hegemonic logic of representation, all these simultaneous, alternative layers, levels and perspectives offered en-route would be homogenized again into a single, closed and coherent final product of representation: in the

10. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 114 (his emphases).

11. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 113.

12. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 114.

13. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 115 (his emphases).

14. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 114.

destination of the ideal viewpoint, the single sharp focused picture of the reading camera-eye, or the one defined meaning of the text.<sup>15</sup>

This account evokes immediacy, the “dramatic theatre” decried by Brecht involving principles of composition recognised above as conjunctive rather than paratactical. But Boenisch proceeds to argue that:

[t]he plurality of the perspectives might also spill over, crack and produce an untidy mess of meaning—either as a calculated result or somewhat subversive side effect. It is at this busy multi-dimensional junction of perspectives that intermediality and theatrical performance meet on the same platform.<sup>16</sup>

The keyword here is “might”. But what is there to prevent the “standard hegemonic logic of representation” from operating? It partly depends on the disposition of the experiencer, itself culturally positioned. If it is a matter of perception, and that perception is ossified through enculturation into making sense of things, then something is needed in the principles of composition of the text to mobilise the possibility of a shift in perception.

My argument is that such an interruptus or disjunction is not inherent in intermediality but arises from particular principles of composition disposed towards—they cannot guarantee it—a dislocation in perception. The potential lies in any kind of disjunctive mix of media, or mediated presentation with actual experience, wherein juxtaposition creates a *frisson*. I do accept, however, that the strategic deployment of new technologies in live theatre events has considerable potential to produce experiential dislocations at this historical moment because, in themselves, digital media have the capacity to create new viewpoints and dynamics. The examples in the following discussion will bear this out. But such dislocations and disorientations do not necessarily entail “a perspective of disruption and resistance”<sup>17</sup> as Boenisch claims. To justify such an inference about human experience, it is important to locate that experience historically in respect of both theatre and politics.

In humanist, dramatic theatre, linear narrative and renaissance perspective organised time and space to make sense of the world in a particular way. The conventions of Western theatre, as they emerged and developed from the

15. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 114.

16. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 114.

17. Peter Boenisch, “Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance,” p. 105.

early 17<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, constructed an eye-mind relationship privileging the perspective of the rational individual from a fixed, though unacknowledged, Eurocentric standpoint. The illusionistic representations of real life at the height of late 19<sup>th</sup> century realism demanded an empathetic emotional engagement with individual character which Brecht denounced in the essay cited above. Indeed, when Brecht is evoked, it must be recalled that, for all his avowed radicalism, his practice was ultimately logocentric, aimed at rational persuasion.<sup>18</sup> In the experience of intermedial theatre practice, some of the dislocations may be at the level of rational cognition but many are effected through embodiment. I will return to the range of intermedial theatre experiences and body-mind relationships below.

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To make an historical comparison with the context of contemporary theatre as distinct from the European tradition prior to Brecht, digital technologies contribute to shifting experiences in their capacity to afford a range of new perspectives and dynamics. Established conceptions of time and space, in particular, have been roundly challenged through time-space compressions. Telematic theatre practices, for example, might bring into a theatre space in “the here and now” spaces on other continents and in different time zones. To some, networked cyberspace affords an entirely new spatial dimension, and time has been fundamentally destabilised. As Dixon summarises, “the juxtaposition of different ‘simultaneous’ temporalities (live and recorded/computer rendered) can complicate the audience’s perceptions of time and space to the extent that rather than simply “suspending disbelief” and experiencing performance time according to traditional protocols of live theatre, a different perception of extratemporality is experienced.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, the body has been digitally fragmented and, more than ever, extended through digital devices into that accent of “the posthuman” which sees the capacities of digital technologies as adjuncts to human capabilities.<sup>20</sup> To take a very simple example from *Rouge Décanté*, the highly skilled and physically present actor, Dirk Roofthoof, constructs a range of consciously performed playful but intimate relations with the audience as his voice is mediated by microphone whilst he is facing up-stage but able to see himself in close-up

18. Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 34 sq.

19. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 524.

20. See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 84, for Gregory Bateson’s taking up Alan Turing’s question of whether a blind man’s stick is part of the man.

projected on a big screen “venetian blind”. Cyborg practices and virtual theatres pose even greater challenges to normative perceptual assumptions when, as Foucault puts it, “our experience of living in the world is less of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.”<sup>21</sup>

My point in marking a very significant shift in culture—and, in specific, theatre culture—between Brecht’s time and the rise of digital intermedial theatre is to probe the implications of the unquestionable opportunities for Boenisch’s “effects of *alienation* and *dys-referential* un-realities”. I doubt if he—or any other commentator who evokes Brecht in the intermediality and theatre debate—has Marxist revolution in mind as a potential effect. If the reference to alienation echoes a Marxist sense of alienation through false consciousness, I would observe that such politics in the context of theatre practice died out with the agit-prop and subsequent political theatres of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and the ensuing sense of victory of the capitalist West over the Eastern communist bloc as even China embraces free market economics, any address of inequalities in the social process are more likely to be figured in terms of the politics of the personal than in the raising of collective consciousness mobilised into action. Indeed some modes of digital intermedial theatre afford an individual, rather than a shared, experience

In a keynote address, Chiel Kattenbelt related his own experience of a piece called *U Right Standing*.<sup>23</sup> This intermedial performance event involved an individual experience through a virtual reality head-set combined with a sense of substantial physical dislocation. Having seemingly ascended an escalator and been backed against a wall, the experiencer senses that wall slowly, almost imperceptibly, but palpably, inclining forward until he is laid flat out on his stomach before being returned to the vertical. This example instances a mix of digital media and physical performance juxtaposed in a playful but, at the time for the experiencer, significantly disorientating way being disposed towards

21. Cited in Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 518.

22. For an account of such political theatre primarily in the United Kingdom, see Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*, London, Methuen, 1980.

23. Chiel Kattenbelt, *U Right Standing*, conference presented in Montreal during the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the CRI: *Intermédialité, théâtralité, (re)-présentation et nouveaux médias/Intermediality, Theatricality, Performance, (Re)-presentation and the New Media*, Neuvième colloque international du CRI et du LANTISS/An International Conference of CRI and LANTISS, Montreal and Quebec City, 24-29 May 2007.



a new perception. The question I wish to pursue is the nature and impact of this new perception. Though it might have the effect of Boenisch's "*alienation* and *dys-referential* un-realities" does it produce his "perspective of disruption and resistance"?

Prior to Brecht developing his theory of epic theatre, the Russian Formalists theorised an artistic process of making strange. As Duyfhuizen relates:

When Victor Shlovsky recognised the concept of estrangement (*ostraneniye*, sometimes translated as "defamiliarization") in literary texts, he and his fellow Russian Formalists momentarily redirected perception away from representation and towards the "literariness" of literary devices.<sup>24</sup>

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In short, Formalist theory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century worked with a notion of defamiliarisation which did not entail the radical politics of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Claims made for intermedial effect may sit more happily in this tradition which entails a politics of aesthetics rather than a politics of action and resonates with Rancière's account of the contemporary as we shall see.

A play between the cognitive and felt experience might account for the dislocations involved in the experience of *U Right Standing*. In respect of intermedial theatre, however, Boenisch's phrase "dysreferential unrealities" would seem to imply a more radical shift in perception. The question accordingly arises as to whether a new kind of perceptual dislocation is mobilised by the interplay of the live and the digitally mediated brought into one space at a particular time (in the case of building-based intermedial theatre events). The "in the here and now" of live theatre might also be embracing the "then and there" of pre-recorded material (e.g. video, soundtrack, CGI). But there is a substantial history from Piscator onwards of combining mechanical, analogue media such as film with live action to effect such juxtapositions. So the specific question in the digital era is whether the juxtaposition of digital mediums with live action operates differently from earlier mediums, and perhaps radically, in respect of space, time and experienter's perception of them.

Much has been written about the functioning of time in cinema (notably by Deleuze<sup>25</sup>), but attention is increasingly being paid to time in digital media.

24. Bernard Duyfhuizen, "Mimesis, Authority and Belief in Narrative Poetics: Toward a Transmission Theory for a Poetics of Fiction" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Novel Corp., Brown University, vol. 18, n° 3, Spring 1985, p. 217.

25. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London, Athlone Press, 1986, originally published as Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma I: L'image-mouvement*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, coll. "Critique", 1983 and

Sean Cubitt, for example, in a lecture entitled “Cybertime: Ontologies of Digital Perception”<sup>26</sup> reflects upon how digital media have impacted upon notions of time and particularly on the alleged rapidity of digital transference. His view is that, although new digital media may be faster than their analogue predecessors, speed is not the key to any ontological difference. Acknowledging that, “[t]he purpose of most media forms since the invention of the alphabet has been preservation”,<sup>27</sup> Cubitt proceeds to delineate what he takes to be the ontology of digital culture which lies in ephemerality and erasure. Digital culture:

provides us with a compulsory opportunity to erase and start again. It renders every document ephemeral. Where erasure is a constant option, accidental erasure, like unconscious forgetting, is a constant generator of random cultural mutation. The fixed form of textuality is lost in the possibility of erasing.<sup>28</sup>

Recalling Phelan’s much quoted conception of performance as ephemeral, as that which “becomes itself through disappearance”,<sup>29</sup> there might thus appear to be an ontological resonance between theatre and digital media. But, leaving the seminal Phelan-Auslander (see 1993 and 1999 respectively) debate parked, I propose to consider another example of practice taking the perspective and sensual awareness of an experiencer at a building-based intermedial theatre event,

In *peep* (2003), a piece by Sarah O’Brien, a live feed from a camera trained on the seated audience projected its image on to the cyclorama such that the audience appeared to be watching itself watching the on-stage action.<sup>30</sup> However, at an indiscernible point, the projection became a looped recording of the audience which, if noticed, dislocated the spatial bearings of the experiencer. At the

*Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, London, Athlone Press, 1989, originally published as Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, coll. “Critique”, 1985.

26. Sean Cubitt, “Cybertime: Ontologies of Digital Perception” paper for the Society for Cinema Studies, Chicago, March 2000, published online at [http://dtl.unimelb.edu.au/R/M55P4H74ABARG1AGSJIGJ4GE2L3C67NS3FH7NASL9C5F3BGTNP-01004?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=67228&pds\\_handle=GUEST](http://dtl.unimelb.edu.au/R/M55P4H74ABARG1AGSJIGJ4GE2L3C67NS3FH7NASL9C5F3BGTNP-01004?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=67228&pds_handle=GUEST) (last accessed: 4<sup>th</sup> of November, 2009).

27. Sean Cubitt, “Cybertime: Ontologies of Digital Perception”.

28. Sean Cubitt, “Cybertime: Ontologies of Digital Perception”.

29. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked; The Politics of Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 146.

30. *peep* was made and shown initially as part of a practice as research PhD project by Sarah O’Brien at Lancaster University, 2003.

same time in the on-stage action, pre-recorded video images of performers were projected on to actual performers masked from head to toe in a light-coloured cloth to take the life-size image. As the actual performers moved in pre-rehearsed choreography, the video projection mapped closely, but inexactly, on to the bodies creating another disjunction, temporal as well as spatial. The overall impact, I can report, was one not only of a *frisson* of dislocation of time and space but an awareness of a disjunction which could not readily be accommodated in the moment by any attempt at rational analysis of how the effects were achieved. The phenomenological impact was similar to what I understand to be Kattenbelt's experience of *U Right Standing*, though mobilised by a very different kind of intermedial theatre as a shared experience. "Normative" sense-perception is disrupted in a way which demands that the experiencers, in trying to make sense of what is happening to them, become aware of "dysreferential unrealities", namely that human perception is not fixed but capable of alteration.

Once again, we may seem to hear a resonance with Brecht's account of epic theatre. But there is a significant difference between the dislocations described and Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Shifts in perception may open up possibilities of political change in the sense that things may be otherwise than they are and that the "human condition" may be seen to be mutable. But such a perception does not necessarily entail political action to change things. And it is in this aspect of accounts of intermedial theatre that I sense some serious slippage between notions of agency, action and interactivity.

It was an integral part of Brecht's epic theatre strategy to activate the audience rather than render it passive. One of the distinctive features of digital media is their capacity for interactivity in respect of a wireless, two-way communicative manipulation of the os and is from which digital sounds and images are rendered. Indeed this aspect strongly informs digital culture. Different media historically have been seen to have different distinguishing features in respect of time, space and phenomenology. In Vivian Sobchack's account, for example, the still photograph:

exists for us as never engaged in the activity of becoming . . . it never presents itself as the coming into being of being . . . when we experience the "timelessness" that a photograph confers on its subject matter, we are experiencing the photograph's compelling emptiness; it exists as the possibility of temporality but is a vacancy within it.<sup>31</sup>

31. Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 59.

Film, by contrast, Sobchack argues,

does not transcend our lived-experience of temporality but rather it seems to partake of it, to share it. Unlike the still photograph, the film exists for us as always in the act of becoming.<sup>32</sup>

If Sobchack's account allows for an experience of becoming in the viewing of a film, through the fluidity of its treatment of time, Cubitt recognises *a fortiori* an additional temporal fluidity in the experience of digital media:

The filmic "fullness" constructed in the congruence of film time with subjective time is broken in the digital media through the constant flickering of the digital file between existence, erasure and permutation. Though still not absence, this is not presence in the phenomenological sense. It is a subjunctive mood of being, a moment in which subject and object are as like as not to go their separate ways.<sup>33</sup>

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Such accounts of the experience of digital time and space place emphasis on process, a subjunctive becoming which, fluid and fragmentary, resists materialisation into being. In intermedial theatre events, a dislocating impact may arise phenomenologically from a simultaneous sense of both absence and presence, an experience of processual becoming, in tension with an affirmation of being "live" in a theatre space. In the first instance, however, it is a matter of individual felt experience, an (aesthetic) affect rather than a (political) effect and presupposes a collaborative engagement. But such theoretical insights into process are all too often applied wholesale when, in practice, variable levels of agency of the experiencer need to be taken into account. Indeed, levels of interactivity required by texts range from a merely reactive engagement (what Yamashita has dubbed "dumb" interactivity<sup>34</sup>) to genuine opportunities for the experiencer to alter a work in process. Two examples of digital internet dance projects will illustrate the point: *dad.project* (David Corbet and Simon Ellis, 2006), and ICI (Interactive Choreography Installation) from the 2005 TISCH ITP Spring Show.

The *dad.project* website offers a range of what the creative archivists, Corbet and Ellis call "digital flickbooks". By moving the mouse around the image, the stick figure of the dancer is minimally animated in much the same way as stick people drawn in different positions on the corners of the pages of a notebook appear to be in motion when the pages are flicked. I have enjoyed inter-acting

32. Vivian Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, p. 60.

33. Sean Cubitt, "Cybertime: Ontologies of Digital Perception".

34. Allen Yamashita is Creative Director of Chimera, an entertainment industry partnership making interactive media facilities.

with the twenty or so dancers on the site but I have to say I do not feel that I have danced with them. The *dad.project* purports to lend agency to the spectator, affording:

an opportunity for viewers to breathe life into “static” embodied images: to make them move to contribute to their liveness, and to imagine performativity inbetween (*sic*) traditional theatrical contexts.<sup>35</sup>

But the engagement is, in my view not interactive but merely reactive, physically constrained to a contact only between hand and mouse.<sup>36</sup> Indeed it is less corporeally interactive than the physical flickbook from which it is derived since, with this, a certain amount of “touch” is required to control the paper flow and keep the animation rolling. Though Corbet and Ellis reiterate “the dissolution of any performance hierarchy” between the “live” and the “mediatised”,<sup>37</sup> in moving the mouse I do not “see it feelingly”, to borrow the words of King Lear, in the way I “feel” it when I dance with an embodied presence in actual space.

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The ICI project seems to have foreseen some of these objections. In this project, the actual movement of the experiencer in her personal space triggers the movement in virtual space. A camera hung at the top centre of the room and connected to a fast Mac/PC running a Jitter patch, senses her movement, speed and position. The patch is connected to the existing sound system in the room. An infrared light source used with filter on the camera blocks out all changes in light that come from the projector. The interface is the viewer’s body and the space within which it moves:

**User Scenario:** As you walk into the space a projection of a video-dance turns on. The rate at which the video-dance plays depends on your velocity. When you slow down the video-dance slows and darkens, as you speed up it becomes clearer. Depending on where you are in the room small loops will fade in onto the primary continuous video layer. These short loops will address you directly asking you to stay in place, move in a certain direction, change speed etc. When you stand still the video either fades out or loops in a way which encourages you to keep moving, thus making the experience a choreography between you and the projected dance-situations.<sup>38</sup>

35. [http://www.skellis.net/dad.project/flickbook.php?fb\\_id=29](http://www.skellis.net/dad.project/flickbook.php?fb_id=29), (last accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 2009).

36. Dixon distinguishes the interactive from the merely reactive. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 561.

37. <http://www.skellis.net/dad.project/past.htm> (last accessed the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 2006).

38. [http://itp.nyu.edu/show/spring2005/detail.php?project\\_id=245](http://itp.nyu.edu/show/spring2005/detail.php?project_id=245) (last accessed the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, 2009).

Both these projects take up the digital age's celebrated disposition to be "interactive" in a process. Where the first is in my view limited to the reactive, the second affords considerably more interaction in that the experiencer's movements impact on the projection, even though the video-dance is pre-recorded. Both pieces locate themselves, however, in the contemporary tendency to valorise the "interactive" capacity which digital technologies offer as if it is self-evidently preferable, more democratic even, to be interactively, processually, engaged rather than passive. Once again we may discern an echo of Brecht's strategies but its faintness derives perhaps from a fundamental shift in historical context from a humanist to a posthumanist paradigm.

I used the term "posthuman" above with the accent which takes digital technologies to be an extension of human capacities. But there is another accent of "posthumanism" which displaces "Man" from the centre stage of history and, in its more apocalyptic version, suggests a collapse of any difference from (digital) machines.<sup>39</sup> Amongst performance artists, Stelarc is perhaps the practitioner most committed to the advocacy of Cyborg culture, arguing that the body is obsolete.<sup>40</sup> Thus when agency is under consideration, it matters in which paradigm it is located. Paralleling the displacement from centre stage of "Man as the measure of all things", the actor's agency and centrality is diminished in intermedial theatre by demotion from the apex of the hierarchy of stage signs. The performer today is just one of many signifiers in a complex, multi-layered event. In intermedial theatre, "embodied man" as represented by the actor in Brook's seminal empty space has been displaced by microphones, cameras, TV monitors, laptop PCs, projection screens, motion sensors and related technologies. But such digital paraphernalia does not entail the abandonment of a human paradigm and much practice continues to explore the human condition in an Enlightenment tradition. However, in the assumptions made about interactivity, impact and effect, an uneasy slippage between paradigms is evident with a frequent assumption, posited by poststructuralism, of the experiencer as a conflicted, non-self-identical subject who might perpetually perform her several identities in an endless process.

A Brechtian rational appeal through an epic theatre to such a subject is patently inappropriate since Brecht's theatre was conceived in the context of the Hegelian-Marxist Grand Narrative of human progress. But, if we now inhabit a

39. For a discussion of the posthuman condition see, N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*.

40. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 312-321.

posthuman condition under the second of the two accents, not only has linear narrative trajectory been abandoned but also the sense of agency of human beings in determining history. And thus the question arises as to how perspectives of disruption and resistance in respect of politics and ethics might be theorised in a posthuman performance context. Is the intermedial affect mobilised through the dislocations described in some of the pieces discussed above merely a *frisson* experienced in playful collisions, or, in affording an experience of being simultaneously both in actual and virtual worlds, is it something more profound and radically disturbing of a sense of self that new modes of perception are inevitably entailed, and perhaps cognitively realised?

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Thus far this article has taken a sceptical stance not so much on intermedial practices but on the sometimes extravagant and unwarrantable claims for their efficacy and particularly their potential to engender political change such as Brecht sought. To sound a more positive note, I propose briefly to review what intermedial practices in a digital culture have to offer. It is important to take both the practices and the context in which they are experienced into account since, following Benjamin, I take the view that paradigm shifts gradually change cultural perception. Where computer usage is an everyday facility it has become an extension of human capacity of the kind nominated “posthuman” (first accent), and, as Katherine Hayles famously remarks, “people become posthuman when they think they are posthuman”.<sup>41</sup> The almost instant access today almost anywhere to a vast range of information with the capacity to juxtapose information from disparate sources in multiple windows on a single screen (desktop, laptop, PC, Black Berry, cellphone) disposes experiencers afresh to accessing and processing information, and even to an understanding of what “knowledge” is. My concern in what follows is the role of digital intermedial practices in promoting this perceptual shift.

At one end of a putative spectrum between sensual indulgence and cognitive knowledge, some digital intermedial practices appear in the first instance merely to offer an enjoyable experience of creative play (and there’s nothing wrong with that). Sarah Rubidge’s *Sensuous Geographies* (2003), for example, invites participants to follow some simple instructions to explore a wired environment barefoot and blindfold after donning a veiled and brightly coloured silk robe.<sup>42</sup>

41. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, p. 6.

42. Alistair MacDonald, Maggie Moffat and Maria Verdicchio are acknowledged collaborators on *Sensuous Geographies*.

The space is shaped by suspended materials hanging from ceiling to floor which also serve as projection screens visible to spectators awaiting their turn to join in. Experiencers explore a floor comprised of a range of sensuous materials and, as they move, collectively activate (through a colour recognition camera) an immersive sonic environment. Each experiencer discovers, however, that a particular sound strand is attached to her and thus, individually and collectively, they can “play” the space and play with each other. Treated live-feed video projections of the “dancers” everyday movements come and go like coloured ghosts on the hangings for the pleasure of the spectators. From within and without, the “sensuous” pleasure of a fluid and mobile sonic architectural environment is foremost. But that is not necessarily all. As Dixon has reflected:

Participating and immersing oneself in the subtle and exquisite performance of *Sensuous Geographies* is to experience how the space and music feels through the body’s intimate “knowledge” (in Bergson’s and Merleau Ponty’s sense of the word).<sup>43</sup>

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In recent years, “practice as research” in the performing arts has overtly explored forms of “embodied knowledge” in the phenomenological tradition<sup>44</sup> and, perhaps ironically given its digital frame, Rubidge’s *Sensuous Geographies* instances the possibilities. However, in having an outer ring of spectators as well as experiencers within the inner ring, it places emphasis also on a more overtly cognitive knowledge through an invited contemplation. As Dixon summarises, “*Sensuous Geographies* is, in a very real sense, a ‘sensational’ space, a space where in Deleuzian terms ‘every sensation is a question,’ but a question without an answer—a space of becoming which never becomes.”<sup>45</sup> On this reflection, *Sensuous Geographies* offers radical thinking through a delicately pleasurable experience.

As my illustrative examples in this essay have also shown, normative human perception may be significantly discomfited and dislocated by a digital performance experience. *U Right Standing*, as recounted above, is a case in point. Initially it might seem no more than agreeable creative play but, besides shaking her up literally, *U Right Standing* makes the experiencer aware in the first instance that normative human perception is not an absolute. Subsequent reflection, as perhaps demanded by the dislocations of the experience, might emphasise a strong body-mind relation rather than re-enforcing a traditional Cartesian split since, on reflection, it becomes evident that the rational mind

43. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 404.

44. Robin Nelson, “Practice-as Research and the Problem of Knowledge”.

45. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 406.



can be deceived by a spatially dislocated experience of embodied knowledge feeding back to the mind. *U Right Standing* might thus bear out Susan Broadhurst's claim that "[digital] technology's most important contribution to art may well be the enhancement and reconfiguration of an aesthetic creative potential which consists of interacting with and reacting to a physical body not an abandonment of the body".<sup>46</sup> Indeed, new modes of perception and consciousness may well emerge from such experiences very differently structured from the eye-mind observation at a distance demanded by a theatre configuration in which the audience is spatially separated from the stage action. New modes of perception and consciousness, whilst they do not, of course, directly dispose experiencers to socio-political change, do open up fresh possibilities of all kinds and thus resist a passive adherence to hegemonic social norms allegedly reinforced by earlier mass media.

An example of digital performance which is more overtly confrontational politically and retains a more traditional relation of theatre spectatorship is Dumb Type's *S/N* (1992-96). The piece is undoubtedly digital high-tech, involving multiple projections onto four screens which make up a wall which forms the lower level of a two-tiered stage. The projections mix written text and visual images relating to HIV-AIDS, the theme of the piece. The performers operating either downstage of the screens (the narrator) on the lower level but mainly above juxtaposing abstract machinic or animalistic movement with the projections. The direct address of the "talk-show-host" narrator along with the projected words (singly or in phrases) confront spectators with the problematic of distinguishing those with AIDS from those not HIV-positive. The dynamics of the presentation, building to a frenetic climax of writhing, screaming and shouting, directly disturbs and challenges primarily the mind, impacting much less on the body (though there is a kind of assault on the senses) than *Sensuous Geographies* or indeed other Dumb Type projects addressing AIDS such as *Lovers: Dying Pictures, Loving Pictures* (1994). The non-immersive theatre form and the content of the piece conjoin to evoke a primarily cognitive consideration of the AIDS-HIV pandemic and thus mark the other end of my putative spectrum between sensual indulgence and cognitive knowledge.

All the above examples involve the posthuman performer defined as an actor who engages with digital technologies, interacting with screen projections, telematics, motion sensors, VR headsets and gloves. If they are taken to function in a posthuman (first accent) context, collectively the performances have

46. Cited in Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance*, p. 56.

contributed to a recognition that we inhabit times in which for many (though, of course, not all) digital technologies have become “naturalised” as extensions of human capacities of a distinctive (digital) kind that might amount to a new posthuman condition (second accent). Such a move is perceptually and phenomenologically—though not necessarily politically—radical. If the practices are politically radical, it is more in terms of the politics of aesthetic process, as expounded for example by Deleuze or Rancière, than in terms of the Marxist politics adhered to by Brecht. Rancière proposes a “distribution of the sensible”<sup>47</sup> which is re-negotiated when a social fraction becomes aware of inequities in that distribution. Rancière, according to Röttger’s account, envisages, like Boenisch, the mobilisation of political response by “an intermedial event [that] opens up and stages perspectives on media by revealing their mediality”.<sup>48</sup> As he puts it, “the clash of these heterogeneous elements is supposed to provoke a break in our perception, to disclose some secret connection hidden behind everyday reality”.<sup>49</sup> This does indeed appear to map onto Brecht’s notion of a radical separation of the elements to expose underlying realities but experiencers are not mobilised into a politics of action but remain in a politics of aesthetics.<sup>50</sup>

There is no reason why digital intermedial theatre should be committed to a politics of action other than that the repeated evocations of Brecht in this context might suggest it. Rancière’s re-formulation of Brecht, in moving politics from action to aesthetics, by way of the poststructuralist realm of discourse, however, leaves inequities of wealth and power precisely untouched. Any re-distributions of the sensible are matters of experiencers’ perceptions in a post-democratic context which, according to Röttger, “simulates a re-negotiation of the distribution of the sensible by way of a mimetic dramaturgy, thus precluding disagreement and/or preventing politics from taking place in reality”.<sup>51</sup> This is not politics as Brecht

47. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 12.

48. Kati Röttger, “Media/Politics in Performance. *Bambiland* by Elfriede Jelinek and Christoph Schlingensiefel” in Meike Wagner and Wolf-Dieter Ernst, *Performing the Matrix: Mediating Cultural Performances*, München: epodium Verlag, 2008, p. 355.

49. Cited in Kati Röttger, “Media/Politics in Performance. *Bambiland* by Elfriede Jelinek and Christoph Schlingensiefel”, p. 341.

50. For a discussion of Rancière and an application of his theory to an example of intermedial work, see Kati Röttger, “Media/Politics in Performance. *Bambiland* by Elfriede Jelinek and Christoph Schlingensiefel”.

51. Kati Röttger, “Media/Politics in Performance. *Bambiland* by Elfriede Jelinek and Christoph Schlingensiefel”, p. 340.

knew it. Of course, Brecht's epic theatre no more achieved its aims of redistributing wealth and power in reality than "distribution of the sensible" promises. But to associate him with a politics divorced from relations of authority and power in the actual world would certainly be to take his name in vain.

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to tease out the implications of claims and assumptions made about the impact, affect or effect of intermedial theatre, after Brecht. By pointing to a range of examples from different kinds of practice sheltering under the umbrella of "intermedial theatre", I have aimed to illustrate first that any general assumption about the effect of such practices may be unhelpful since they function in different ways in respect of different intentions. Following others, I have argued that new digital media would appear to have properties different from their mechanical and analogue predecessors. Particularly when brought into play in a space with actual performers, these properties afford opportunities for dislocations through radical juxtapositions, specifically at this historical moment when devices and combinations are new. But it cannot be assumed that all intermedial theatre practices are aimed at "dysreferential unrealities".

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A sense of agency, particularly in the context of genuine interactivity facilitated by certain kinds of digital practice, might well be encouraged by digital technologies and the related mindsets of a digital culture. What precisely may be the impact of any new awareness is shaped, however, by the context of reception and by the broader cultural circumstances at the time of the experience. Some practices may draw attention to new modes of consciousness and ways of being in a digital world, whilst others would appear to invite abandon to a sensual process of becoming with arrival endlessly deferred. Both primarily function within a politics of aesthetics but, at best, it may even be that a politics of aesthetics might lead to a positive social intervention. But this will always be a matter of negotiation of text in context, not a matter of textual determinism.