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# Digital Multivocality and Embodied Language in Theatrical Space

Michael Darroch

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### Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine la variation du rapport entre la voix humaine et l'espace théâtral. Les progrès quant aux technologies du son numérique modifient la matérialité de la voix, et donc la médialité du théâtre contemporain. Le théâtre occidental — qui s'est développé en parallèle avec le passage d'une société orale à une société de l'écrit influencée par l'image — est demeuré un médium principalement visuel qui ravale sans cesse l'oralité. Les nouveaux médias des 19<sup>e</sup> et 20<sup>e</sup> siècles ont suscité plusieurs essais de « théâtre total », dans lequel on cherchait généralement à retirer la voix et le langage de l'environnement théâtral. En considérant les récentes oeuvres multivocales de l'artiste québécoise Marie Brassard, l'auteur montre comment les technologies sonores contemporaines redéfinissent les possibilités de la voix au théâtre, laquelle permet, comme l'affirme McLuhan, « de faire interagir les sens » au sein d'un nouvel espace acoustique.

# Digital Multivocality and Embodied Language in Theatrical Space

MICHAEL DARROCH

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*What is theatre? A sort of cybernetic machine. When not working, this machine is hidden behind a curtain; but as soon as it is revealed it begins to transmit a certain number of messages in your direction. These messages are distinctive in that they are simultaneous and yet have different rhythms. At every point in a performance you are receiving (at the same second) six or seven items of information (from the scenery, the costuming, the lighting, the position of the actors, their gestures, their mode of playing, their language), but some of these items remain fixed (this is true of the scenery) while others change (speech, gestures).*

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of Marie Brassard's first solo performance, *Jimmy, créature de rêve* (2001), the actress' digitally manipulated voice suddenly drops out:

I'm really sorry... In a normal show, I would improvise something and just go on, but here...

Without this voice I cannot do anything...<sup>2</sup>

The microphonic dropout marks an interruption in an acoustic circuit that Brassard has slowly fostered between her and her audience. Visibly carrying the microphone that enables her to alter her voice and play multiple roles, Brassard tells the story of Jimmy, a homosexual hairdresser born in the dream of an American army general in 1950. Just as Jimmy was about to kiss his lover, a soldier

1. Roland Barthes, "Theatre and Signification" in "Barthes on Theatre," trans. Peter W. Mathers, *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 9, n° 33, Spring 1979, p. 29.

2. Marie Brassard, *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, Script. English version. Montreal: Infra-rouge Théâtre, 2001. Unpublished, p. 21.

named Mitchell, the general died, leaving Jimmy trapped in an oneiric limbo. Fifty years later, Jimmy is revived only to discover, to his despair, that he has been reborn in the dreams of a Montreal actress who makes him her fantasy. *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, like Brassard's subsequent productions, *La noirceur* (2003), *Peep-show* (2005), *The Glass Eye* (2007), and *L'invisible* (2008) all build a synaesthetic theatrical space where sound technologies underlie the relations between language, voice, sounds, body, gesture and imagery. As the microphonic dropout in *Jimmy* ruptures our sustained acoustic action, we are starkly reminded that the raw materiality of Brassard's voice is coupled with the gestic action made possible by her vocal prosthesis. What we spectator-hearers have known all along but forgotten, that the microphone is filtering her natural voice, is suddenly driven home by its very loss.

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This paper investigates the relation of the human voice to theatrical space. I question how innovations in digital sound technology are reconfiguring the materiality of the human voice and, consequently, the mediality of contemporary theatre. Ever since the earliest technologies of sound recording, the human voice has been displaced from the inner soul of the human subject. No longer the lone conduit for a transcendental universal spirit, today's voice can not only be recorded, cut up and spliced together again, but also modulated, reconfigured or simply generated via modern speech technologies. Far from understanding the human voice as the output of an Author, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries recording technologies revealed it to be a medium with its own material conditions and constraints.<sup>3</sup> Today, speech recognition systems, automated voice assistants, text-to-speech synthesis applications and VoiceXML platforms (Voice eXtensible Markup Languages) have ruptured these material constraints, presenting the voice as a dematerialised construct. In an era of perceived virtuality, these new voices appear independent of any body or mind and hence external to embodied experience or cultural identity. As new capacities for generating and altering voices have affected our perceptions of the materiality of the human voice, they have accordingly reconfigured theatrical conceptions of embodiment and space.

I first outline arguments that place alphabetisation and textuality at centre of the theatrical medium, from Greek antiquity to early modernity. These scholars

3. See for example Friedrich Adolf Kittler, *Aufschreibesysteme 1800-1900*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 2003. English translation: *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer, with Chris Cullens, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990; N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

firmly situate theatre as a principally visual medium, which has continually subsumed oral culture. I further consider these theses in light of new media in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially proposals for a “total theatre,” a theatre of synaesthesia, which again tended to erase the specificities of the human voice, or even strove to eradicate language from the theatrical environment. Finally, drawing upon the multivocality of Marie Brassard’s creations, I propose that today’s digital sound technologies are redrawing the possibilities for voice in a theatre that enables, in McLuhan’s terms, the constant “interplay of the senses”<sup>4</sup> within a new acoustic space. Brassard’s work, I will argue, reinvigorates a discussion of the embodiment of vocality and the production of theatrical presence in the current era.

Theatre has long embraced technologies of change, and theatrical invention has always reacted to shifts in media history. Yet according to Derrick de Kerckhove, the very origins of Western theatre in Ancient Greece can be attributed to a specific technology: the development of the phonetic alphabet. Greek tragedy emerged some 200 years after the phonetic alphabet originated, *circa* 800 BC, as an externalisation of thought, a linearisation and sequentialisation of symbolic information then inaccessible to the non-literate audiences of Athens.<sup>5</sup> In the shift from oral to literate society, “drama was [...] borne out of the various physical techniques of memory evolved for the oral epic but which were broken loose and rearranged by the phonetic alphabet.” Greek theatre “was to the oral epic what writing was to speech; it was a revolution of sensory relationships pertaining to the major modes of transmitting and exchanging information on a personal and a social level.”<sup>6</sup>

For de Kerckhove, then, theatre is by definition a “media aesthetics of the alphabet.”<sup>7</sup> Theatre was and remains above all a process of externalisation, an

4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1964, p. 67.

5. Derrick de Kerckhove, “Eine Mediengeschichte des Theaters. Vom Schrifttheater zum globalen Theater,” in Martina Leeker (ed.), *Maschinen, Medien, Performances: Theater an der Schnittstelle zu digitalen Welten*, Berlin, Alexander Verlag, 2001, p. 502.

6. Derrick de Kerckhove, “A Theory of Greek Tragedy,” *SubStance*, n° 29, May 1981, p. 24-25. See also Derrick de Kerckhove, “Theatre as a Model for Information-Processing Patterns in Western Cultures,” *Modern Drama*, vol. 25, n° 1, 1982, p. 143-153.

7. Derrick de Kerckhove, “Hellauer Gespräche: Theater als Medienästhetik oder Ästhetik mit Medien und Theater?” Round Table discussion in Martina Leeker (ed.), *Maschinen, Medien, Performances: Theater an der Schnittstelle zu digitalen Welten*, p. 415 (our translation).

extension of consciousness into the space of spectacle. Ancient theatre fragmented oral stories into the smaller units suitable for the stage, removing the processes of storage and memorisation from the minds of epic storytellers. At the same time, ancient theatre accelerated the processes of alphabetisation or literacy, as the mental structures required for this process were gradually internalised by spectators. For this reason, theatre is constructed both from texts and as a text, both from the process of writing and as the process of writing. Theatre worked as a medium of communicative exchange: cognition and memorisation were projected onto the stage (externalisation), but theatre also ushered in a new form of cognition, alphabetisation, in the minds of spectators (internalisation). Alphabetisation and drama functioned as reciprocal systems of storage and transmission.

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In language that echoes McLuhan, de Kerckhove argues that “the major shift effected by the combination of theatre and the alphabet was to play down the audio-tactile involvement and promote a new sensorial synthesis under the governing of the eye.”<sup>8</sup> This sensorial synthesis was visual, its effect a reorganisation of spatiality. Physical space had previously been experienced immediately, through participatory action and oral speech. Under the spectator’s new gaze, physical space coincided with the theoretical space of a “container for programmed experience,”<sup>9</sup> an empty stage for spectacle. Greek theatre was above all information-processing: a stage of visual and semantic exteriorisation and synthesis, the projection or extension of the eye for “centralized and sustained visual aiming.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the actors, in memorizing and pronouncing a text that was invisible to the spectators, took its place. “They transposed [the text] into a kind of ‘vocal writing.’ They did not read it, but rather produced a vocal copy of it.”<sup>11</sup> Actors themselves did not “possess knowledge” to be transmitted on the stage; rather, the written word and the actor were interchangeable parts of the theatrical structure.<sup>12</sup>

By the same token, spectators were not expected to intervene in the stage action; nor did they read the text that determined this action. Bound to their seats like Prometheus to his rock, spectators consequently underwent training as silent readers: just as a silent reader was “‘listening’ to a writing”—written words

8. Derrick de Kerckhove, “A Theory of Greek Tragedy,” p. 26-27.

9. Derrick de Kerckhove, “A Theory of Greek Tragedy,” p. 27.

10. Derrick de Kerckhove, “A Theory of Greek Tragedy,” p. 28.

11. Jesper Svenbro, “The Inner Voice: On the Invention of Silent Reading,” in *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, coll. “Myth and Poetics”, 1993, p. 169.

12. Jesper Svenbro, “The Inner Voice: On the Invention of Silent Reading,” p. 178.

that now seemed “to speak to him” within his consciousness—a “spectator in the theatre [...] ‘listen[ed]’ to the vocal writing of the actors.”<sup>13</sup> In line with Derrida, these theses challenge the logocentric bias of Western history and philosophy by equating the detached visual framework of theatrical spectacle to the technological development of the alphabet and to the spread of literacy. As Jesper Svenbro proposes, “if mental space may be externalized in alphabetical space, writing may also be externalized—in theatrical space.”<sup>14</sup> Writing in Greek antiquity thus had an effect on theatrical presence that recalls Philip Auslander’s thesis of “liveness” as constituted by modern recording technologies.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, these arguments suggest that theatre required new cognitive strategies by training spectators to process information in a sequentially and visually centralised manner. A public thus trained was a public primed for literacy. The Greek stage was a preliterate inscriptive form on consciousness through its focused arrangements of visual imagery, speaking bodies, and alphabetic information. If print media would later give rise to “typographic man,” in McLuhan’s terms, it was theatre that first produced “alphabetic human beings.”

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This view of Greek theatre invites us to reconsider Friedrich Kittler’s concept of *Aufschreibesystem*, translated as “discourse networks” but closer to “notation systems”: a “network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data.”<sup>16</sup> For de Kerckhove, Svenbro and others, theatre was the central inscriptive system of the *Aufschreibesystem* of antiquity, underpinned by the technology of the alphabet. Consequently, theatre was a medium with its own material (alphabetic and bodily) restrictions for processing, storing and retransmitting data; within its contingent exteriority it was a primary channel for carrying information.<sup>17</sup>

The fundamental quality of theatre as an alphabetic medium persisted across time. In *The Production of Presence* (2004), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht claims that it was in early modern thought that the material surface of the world

13. Jesper Svenbro, “The Inner Voice: On the Invention of Silent Reading,” p. 171.

14. Jesper Svenbro, “The Inner Voice: On the Invention of Silent Reading,” p. 182.

15. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

16. Friedrich Adolf Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, p. 369.

17. See also Hans-Christian von Hermann, “Das Theater der Polis,” in Lorenz Engell, Bernhard Siegert and Joseph Vogl (ed.), *Archiv für Mediengeschichte* n° 3: *Medien der Antike*, Weimar, Universitätsverlag, 2003, p. 27–39 and Jennifer Wise, *Dionysus Writes: The Invention of Theatre in Ancient Greece*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1998.

first became the target of interpretational penetration: the search for meaning beyond the physical characteristics of things themselves. Theatre provided one such avenue for undertaking “the act of world-interpretation through which the subject penetrates the surface of the world in order to extract knowledge and truth as its underlying meanings.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, theatrical practice no longer even conjured up the substantial presence of actors as speaking bodies in theatrical space, but rather generated “meaning effects” that were merely transmitted by the literary characters they embodied. Gumbrecht identifies this shift from “presence effects” to “meaning effects” as having emerged most markedly in French classical theatre, under the unmistakable influence of Descartes. “The actors in Corneille’s or Racine’s tragedies stood on the stage in a half-circle, reciting often highly abstract texts in the heavy verse form of the Alexandrine. No Western theater style either before or afterward was more ‘Cartesian’ than French classical drama.”<sup>19</sup> In this era, the predominance of the *cogito* in modern Western culture was mirrored in theatrical form: the stage was now viewed as signifying no more than the inner workings of a writing Author’s mind. As alphabetisation became ingrained and phonetic literacy reached a high degree of cultural saturation, the authorial text eventually consumed the power of theatrical presence. By the onset of French classicism, theatrical texts had become more important than even their performance. For Derrick de Kerckhove, it is not surprising that “in the prefaces to the plays by Corneille, Racine and Molière, these authors clearly express their angst that a performance of their plays could tarnish their literary quality.”<sup>20</sup> At perhaps no other time was theatre more immersed in the effects of McLuhan’s Gutenberg galaxy.<sup>21</sup>

The alphabetic monopoly of the theatre, at its pinnacle in French classicism, was slowly dismantled by emergent optic and acoustic media in succeeding centuries. Histories of technology in theatre generally point to innovations in lighting and optic media since the *laterna magica*, yet sound technologies have notably played a role in theatre and performance: from the masks of Ancient Greek actors that distorted and amplified the human voice to the mechanically

18. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 27-28.

19. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, p. 32-33.

20. Derrick de Kerckhove, “Eine Mediengeschichte des Theaters. Vom Schriftheater zum globalen Theater,” p. 509 (my translation).

21. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962.

produced sound effects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (including thunder-sheets and thunder-runs, rain boxes and wind machines). Nevertheless, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, acoustic media were rarely a central feature of theatrical productions. As acoustic media began to assume a more central position within cultural production, the distinction between the presence effects of the human voice and the meaning effects of human language became ever more apparent. From Brecht's onstage radio experiments in his early *Lehrstücke* (1929-1930), to Cocteau's telephone in *La voix humaine* (1930), to Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), technologies of sound recording, reproduction and transmission became a focus of select theatrical experimentations, extending the realm of the material voice for the production of space and the production of presence. But for other radical 20<sup>th</sup> century theatrical programmes, breaking the seemingly inviolable bond between voice and language was central: Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, Bauhaus synaesthetic projects for a "total theatre," and even Robert Wilson's *Theatre of Images* are predicated on the need to eradicate language from the theatrical environment. The presence of the human voice itself, and its authentic relationship to the body from which it emanated, was increasingly either subsumed within early experiments in onstage sound amplification and reproduction, or utterly displaced by overpowering visual media. Arguably, only the disembodied voices of radio dramas (or more accurately *Hörspiele* or "listening plays" in German) recalled the place of language as a core theatrical materiality.

Kittler has traced how technologies of reproduction fractured media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century into individual streams: acoustics (gramophone), optics (cinema), and typography (typewriter). The digital computer promised to be their point of reunification. In the computer "everything becomes a number: quantity without image, sound or voice. And once optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digital numbers, any medium can be translated into any other."<sup>22</sup> For Kittler, a key predecessor to the effects of digitisation was the aesthetic of Richard Wagner's music-dramas. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art, represented the first intermedium in which optics and acoustics were fundamentally re-fused, anticipating the interface effect or synaesthesia of new media that so intrigued McLuhan. Music-dramas were the harbingers

22. Friedrich Adolf Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter*, Berlin, Brinkmann & Bose, 1986. English translation: *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 1-2.



of sound film *avant la lettre*.<sup>23</sup> Yet after Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, numerous proposals for a "total theatre" as an intermedial art form, in movements as varied as Futurism and Bauhaus, emphasised visuality and visual space at the expense of sonority and acoustic space, largely drowning out human speech along the way. As theatre historian Christopher Baugh notes, although new "technologies of stage lighting had made a steady progress from the beginning of the century, those technologies associated with sound and sound reproduction did not have significant effects within theatre and performance until after the Second World War."<sup>24</sup> One reason for this discrepancy is related to questions of "mediatized liveness" and theatrical reproducibility as put forward by Philip Auslander. While lighting and other visual technologies were perceived as "real" and thus part of the experience of the "live," early technologies of electronic, analogue sound reproduction (as distinct from mechanically generated sound effects that generally lay outside the spectator's view) only produced imitations. To a public's ear not yet accustomed to new techniques of listening, these new sound technologies seemed distinctly artificial. In his Bauhaus proposal for a "theatre of totality," László Moholy-Nagy wrote:

only in the future will SOUND EFFECTS [...] make use of various acoustical equipment driven electronically or by some other mechanical means. Sound waves issuing from unexpected sources—for example, a speaking or singing arc lamp, loud-speakers under the seats or beneath the floor of the auditorium, the use of new amplifying systems—will raise the audience's acoustic surprise-threshold so much that unequal effects in other areas will be disappointing.<sup>25</sup>

23. Friedrich Adolf Kittler, "Weltatem: Über Wagners Medientechnologie," in Friedrich Adolf Kittler, Manfred Schneider and Samuel Weber (ed.), *Diskursanalysen I: Medien*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987, p. 94-107. English translation: "World-Breath: On Wagner's Media Technology," in David J. Levin (ed.), *Opera Through Other Eyes*, trans. Friedrich Kittler and David J. Levin, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 215-235. See also Friedrich Adolf Kittler, "Theater als Medienästhetik, exemplifiziert am Fall Richard Wagner," in Martina Leeker (ed.), *Maschinen, Medien, Performances: Theater an der Schnittstelle zu digitalen Welten*, p. 562-571, and Friedrich Adolf Kittler, "Illusion versus Simulation. Techniken des Theaters und der Maschinen," in Martina Leeker (ed.), *Maschinen, Medien, Performances: Theater an der Schnittstelle zu digitalen Welten*, p. 718-731.

24. Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, coll. "Theatre and performance practices," 2005, p. 203.

25. László Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety," in Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger (ed.), *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961, p. 64.

Enrico Prampolini's Futurist agenda for the 1920s called for a "polydimensional scenospace," a stage composed of vertical, oblique and multidimensional elements set in motion electromechanically.<sup>26</sup> Prampolini's conception shares resonances with Walter Gropius' vision of a Synthetic Total Theatre, an unrealised project designed for Erwin Piscator in 1926 to coordinate complex arrangements of projections and light sequences. In these endeavours, "there was a consistent desire to rid the theatre of domination by dramatic literature and to consider the actor as just one among many of the potential ingredients within the overall plasticity of the theatrical event."<sup>27</sup> In these projects, as technologies of projection and amplification took the stage, voice and speech receded to the background.

This is the scene of Samuel Beckett's short play *Not I* (1972). The text of *Not I* is carried in short spurts by an anonymous voice:

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...when suddenly...gradually...she realiz—...what?...the buzzing?...yes...all dead still but for the buzzing...when suddenly she realized...words were—...what?...who?...no!...she!...[pause and movement 2]...realized...words were coming...imagine!...words were coming...a voice she did not recognize...at first...so long since it had sounded...then finally had to admit...could be none other...than her own...certain vowel sounds...she had never heard...

[...]

...not catching the half of it...not the quarter...no idea...what she was saying!...till she began trying to...delude herself...it was not hers at all...not her voice at all...and no doubt would have...vital she should...was on the point...after long efforts...when suddenly she felt...gradually she felt...her lips moving...imagine!...her lips moving!...as of course till then she had not...and not alone the lips...the cheeks...the jaws...the whole face...all those—...what?...the tongue?...yes...the tongue in the mouth...all those contortions without which...no speech possible...<sup>28</sup>

In fact, this voice occupies a figure that is nothing but a Mouth. Beckett's stage directions are succinct:

26. Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, coll. "Leonardo", 2003, p. 144-145.

27. Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century*, p. 123.

28. Samuel Beckett, "Not I," in Paul Auster (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, vol. 3, *Dramatic Works*, New York, Grove Press, 2006, p. 408-409.

*Stage in darkness but for Mouth, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible Microphone.*

*Auditor, downstage left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, fully faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on Mouth, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated. [...] As house lights down Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds. With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required leading when curtain fully up and attention sufficient into:*

MOUTH [...] <sup>29</sup>

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When the curtain is finally dropped, the Mouth's mutterings continue unintelligibly in the background for 10 more seconds and only cease when the house lights are raised. This sequence, according to Hans-Christian von Hermann, is "a treatment of stage and actor as a communications' system in the message-technical sense of Claude E. Shannon, that is, as an interstitial space battling against forgetting, noise or entropy."<sup>30</sup> In Beckett's scenario, the relation of language to voice as the organising principle of theatre has come to an end: it is merely the theatre's software, composed of interchangeable, denumerable elements. The podium, as such, has simply become a processor for the "fading in and out of a foreign, disembodied voice that emerges from a permanent sough or background hissing."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the muttering Mouth is shocked by the discovery of its own ridiculous anatomical hardware: lips, cheeks, jaws, tongue. In this way, we are faced with the "end of theatrical history" that is announced by Kittler's analysis of Wagner. The recombination of optics and acoustics that drowns out the human voice seems to stand diametrically opposite the emergence of Western theatre in Ancient Greece. The origin of Attic theatre as an enactment of the phonetic alphabet was, quite in contrast, the articulation of rational, soulful speech—Aristotle's distinction between life and the lifeless in his treatise *On the Soul*. This is the distinction between meaningful sounds and meaningless noise.

29. Samuel Beckett, "Not I," in Paul Auster (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*, vol. 3, *Dramatic Works*, p. 405.

30. Hans Christian von Herrmann, "Stimmbildung. Zum Verhältnis von Theater—und Mediengeschichte," *MLN*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, vol. 120, n° 3, April 2005 (German Issue), p. 622 (my translation).

31. Hans Christian von Herrmann, "Stimmbildung. Zum Verhältnis von Theater- und Mediengeschichte," (my translation).



Fig. 1: Marie Brassard in *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, 2001. © Marie Brassard and Simon Guilbault.

With the recent work of Marie Brassard, however, advances in digital speech and voice manipulation may today be reinstating the centrality of “live” voice in contemporary stage theatre, extending once again the possibilities of voice and/as technology in theatre. With the advent of digital storage and transmission systems, the problems of distortion and noise that had been encountered with the conversion processes of analogue sound were diminished. Digital sound has introduced new avenues of theatrical experience. In multiple productions created through her company Infrarouge Théâtre, Brassard innovated with digital sound and altered voice technologies to explore the fractured subjectivities of urban life. Through digital speech manipulation, the human body is revealed as a site of inscription, coupling vocality with variable identities, and weaving between genders and age groups.

In *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, Brassard experimented with Yamaha SPX processor technology stemming from the 1980s. These early processors, which used relatively low digital sampling rates, were generally intended for musical compositions. When applied to the human voice, the sound reproduced by the Yamaha SPX creates an especially “artificial” sound quality. For the productions of *La noirceur*, *Peepshow*, and *L’invisible*, Brassard collaborated with sound artist Alexander MacSween, experimenting with more sophisticated equipment such as the Eventide Eclipse event processor for sound modulation and transformation and the TC Helicon Voice One, especially intended for reshaping human voices.

For Brassard, in accordance with McLuhan's thesis of media "as a natural extension of the human body,"<sup>32</sup> working with sound technology live "makes you feel like your bodily capabilities are being enhanced. It's as if you're becoming a kind of cyborg character because you have your human, fleshy capabilities, but suddenly, you also have this machine that adds capacities to your body."<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 1)

We can note a progression in Brassard's work from *Jimmy, créature de rêve* through *Peepshow*. In *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, relying on early Yamaha technology, Brassard mutated into only a handful of characters. In *La noirceur* and to an even greater degree in *Peepshow*, Brassard rotates through a whole cast of characters. These transformations are extensions of identities through "disembodied" voices: "By using sound machines, I can have the body of a small woman and play a big man, or an older lady, or a little kid. And I think it's very troubling when an audience sees that—when the voices don't relate to the body."<sup>34</sup> In *Peepshow*, Brassard and MacSween made "greater use of the human voice used as a sound." In addition, portions of the background musical score "have been created with voice as a raw material [...] being transformed live, in real time."<sup>35</sup>

The manipulative process of Brassard's voice is itself translation in the sense of transposition, from one medial state to another. In this way, Brassard's theatre is highly evocative of McLuhan's notion of the "interplay of the senses"—a continual state of synaesthesia made possible by the simultaneity of media in the electric age. In accordance with Kittler's analysis of Wagner, Norbert Bolz has commented that the

*Gesamtkunstwerk* is meant to achieve everything that McLuhan had called the interplay of the senses: continual translation work between sense and media—the optical should be intensified as hearing, the tone an opening to a new visuality. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is thus an interface between the "world as radio play" and the "world

32. From *Peepshow*'s description on the website of Toronto's Harbourfront World Stage Festival (2005): <http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/worldstage/media/pshow.php> [accessed 24 April 2006].

33. Marie Brassard, in J. Paul Halferty: "The Actor as Sound Cyborg: An Interview with Marie Brassard", *Canadian Theatre Review*, n° 127, Summer 2006, p. 26.

34. Marie Brassard, in J. Paul Halferty: "The Actor as Sound Cyborg: An Interview with Marie Brassard", p. 26.

35. Marie Brassard, Entrevue pour le magazine du CeCN: Centre des Écritures Contemporaines et Numériques, English version, Mons, CeCN, 2005, p. 3.

as spectacle,” enhanced by intoxicated senses, and formed in the hallucinations of dream.<sup>36</sup>

Jimmy’s dream-state encapsulates the possibilities of instant and total translation that McLuhan anticipated. Brassard’s digitally-enhanced multivocality places the human voice on a sonorous plane that differentiates it from the meanings of human speech. In “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Derrida comments on this materiality of language and the possibility of translation:

If we consider first verbal expression, as it is circumscribed in the dream, we observe that its sonority, the materiality of the expression, does not disappear before the signified, or at least cannot be traversed and transgressed as it is in conscious speech. It acts as such, with the efficacy Artaud assigned it on the stage of cruelty. The materiality of a word cannot be translated or carried over into another language. Materiality is precisely that which translation relinquishes. To relinquish materiality: such is the driving force of translation. And when that materiality is reinstated, translation becomes poetry.<sup>37</sup>

If “materiality is that which translation relinquishes,” then in the midst of translative action “meaning” is detached from the “sonority” of word, language detached from voice. These considerations can be extended to the metaphor

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Fig. 2: Marie Brassard in *Peepshow*, 2005. © Marie Brassard and Simon Guilbault.

36. Norbert Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien*, Munich, Raben, 1990, p. 33 (my translation).

37. Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 210.

of translating between media. The same technological process that allows MacSween and Brassard to manipulate voice also allows them to convert the sonority of voice into other sounds. Jimmy recounts how he ran away from the actress after she tried to kiss him, turning to see her “standing on the nose of a locomotive”. The actress calls to him, and as he “shouts his own name, his voice turns into the siren of a train, louder and louder, then into the engine of a locomotive slowly vanishing.”<sup>38</sup> In *La noirceur*, Brassard plays “an actress,” the occupant of an old warehouse loft in Montreal’s rue Ontario, where tenants are slowly being evicted by the encroaching interests of property developers. Playing alongside actor/dancer Guy Trifiro, multiple voices of different characters cross and intermingle. At one point, the voice of Trifiro, playing a “man in a picture” that the actress has discovered in an empty loft, transforms into an electric guitar. Brassard assumes the voice of the man’s little sister, layered on top of the guitar. In *Peepshow*, music played an even greater role than in the previous productions: voices transform into elements of the musical score, blurring the boundaries of language and sound. At specific moments, as the sonorous environment of Brassard’s productions re-establishes the audio-tactile involvement of the audience, the detachment of voice from language recalls the kind of “presence effects” that Gumbrecht identified as lost in early modernity. Jimmy’s voice-train, as Paul Halferty recalled in an interview with Brassard, “transformed from being an aural sense to a tactile one.” In the Backspace of Toronto’s Theatre Passe Muraille, Halferty “could feel the vibrations through the seats; sound became a physical sensation.”<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, as language is revealed to be composed merely of sounds and sound is transformed into tactile perceptions, Brassard’s theatre places the human voice at the centre of a synaesthetic experience. Far from drowning voice and language from the stage, Brassard’s work resituates their relationship and distinctiveness at the centre of the theatrical space. (Fig. 2)

It is interesting to compare Marie Brassard’s multivocal overlaying to the work of multimedia artist David Tomas. Tomas’ photodigital art entails a constant interplay between mechanical-chemical photography, digital scanning and re-scanning, and manual graphic drawing. Brassard’s performance work could similarly be described as an overlaying of live voice by what we could call phonodigital technology. In Tomas’ creations, “the digital manipulation” of images “does not add elements or modify forms” but rather “is an activity of high-

38. Marie Brassard, *Jimmy, créature de rêve*, p. 17.

39. Marie Brassard, in J. Paul Halferty: “The Actor as Sound Cyborg: An Interview with Marie Brassard”, p. 27.

lighting that renders visible, in the final form, that which risks being lost in the transfer.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Brassard’s simulated voices create a feedback loop with her “real” voice. The transmission-modulation of her voice through digital technology is highlighted in unexpected, intermittent moments when we, as spectator-hearers, catch a glimpse of her natural voice protruding through the amplified digital manipulation. Like Glenn Gould’s notorious humming that intervenes in the background of his piano recordings, we cannot necessarily discern what precisely emanates from Brassard’s vocal apparatus. We know what words were uttered only by association with the digital recreation, which we perceive in these moments as occurring in the briefest time delay from the original. In these moments, our acoustic perception of simulated and real are reversed: Brassard’s natural voice appears to interfere with the real voices of the various characters she plays. In this way, voice alteration in the theatre conjures up the etymology of audience from the Latin *audire*, “to hear.” As in de Kerckhove’s analysis of Greek theatre, this audience undergoes training in the sense of sustained visual-aiming, but this visual-aiming takes place in strict accordance with sustained acoustic perception. With the projection technology of the *laterna magica*, the theatre stage was transformed into a type of peepshow itself. In Marie Brassard’s *Peep-show*, the stage is transformed into a principally sonorous environment reinforced by stunning visual projections, textured lighting sequences and set design. In Brassard’s productions, optics and acoustics are reorganised in a live performance that is *par excellence* audiovisual.

Michèle Thériault has suggested that David Tomas’ translational activity between medial forms always entails an element of error. In any medial transposition, even in analogue to digital conversion, there is distortion, noise, or loss. Tomas makes this loss into an aspect of his reflection. “Since each drawing is produced in terms of a photographic condition of existence, the draughtsman is always conscious of a potential loss of information that must be compensated for through displacement and augmentation.”<sup>41</sup> Brassard and MacSween reject the use of pre-recorded sound sequences; the digital manipulation takes place in real time, as the performance unfolds. Brassard notes that her reliance on omnidirectional microphones can lead to accidents, such as feedback noise, on stage.

40. Michèle Thériault, “Transduction of Knowledge, Psychasthenia of Media,” in Michèle Thériault and David Tomas, with the collaboration of Lucie Chevalier, Brian Holmes and Emmelyne Pornillos, *Duction*, Montreal, Éditions Carapace, 2001, p. 69.

41. Michèle Thériault and David Tomas, with the collaboration of Lucie Chevalier, Brian Holmes and Emmelyne Pornillos, *Duction*, p. 16.



The intentional microphonic dropout in *Jimmy, créature de rêve* refocuses the audience's attention to the possibilities of loss:

"Without this voice I cannot do anything..."

*Jimmy gets kind of hysterical*

But... Me too I am scared of falling into a hole.

Oh! Horrific vision! I am so terrified of emptiness.

The microphone, a distinctly visible element of Brassard's performance, is the central organising object of this audiovisual overlaying: a technological link between voice and body. It is, as Philip Auslander might argue, a visible "incur-sion of the mediatized into the live."<sup>42</sup> Brassard's sound theatre thus reopens the thorny issue of authenticity and artificiality, which, in any discussion of (medial) translation, have direct import for the notions of equivalence or fidelity and transposition. Jonathan Sterne, in his work on the cultural origins of sound reproduction, echoes Philip Auslander's thesis that liveness is a result of media-tization: "The possibility of sound reproduction reorients the practices of sound production; insofar as it is a possibility at all, reproduction precedes originality. Nowhere is this more clear than in our anachronistic use of the word *live* to describe performances that are not reproduced."<sup>43</sup> Sterne unravels the social genesis of sound fidelity to show that "the idea of 'better' sound reproduction was itself a changing standard over time."<sup>44</sup> Thus, he disturbs conventional understandings of mediation to show, for example using an early depiction of how radio technology works, that

the medium does not mediate the relation between singer and listener, original and copy. It is the nature of their connection. Without the medium, there would be no connection, no copy, but also no original, or at least no original in the same form. The performance is for the medium itself. The singer sings to the microphone, *to the network*, not to the woman listening at the other end.<sup>45</sup>

42. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, p. 158.

43. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 221.

44. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 223.

45. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 226, original emphasis.

Sterne's point is that "any medium of sound reproduction is an apparatus, a network" in the sense of "a whole set of relations, practices, people, and technologies."<sup>46</sup> In this way, "both copy and original are products of the process of reproducibility."<sup>47</sup> In early examples of sound reproduction technologies, "the goal of reproducing live events was not reproducing reality but producing a particular kind of listening experience."<sup>48</sup> In the case of Brassard, these considerations come to the fore: after all, voice manipulation is by no means reproduction. Unlike overdubbing in film or television, we know—because we *see* her on stage—that these distorted "copies" of Brassard's voice remain at some level authentic or *fidèles*. Thus, by purposely forgoing auditory realism in terms of some perfect fidelity, technological voice alteration produces a new kind of live stage presence. And in an era of burgeoning speech recognition systems and automated voice assistants, altered voice may indeed resonate with the audience's listening experience.

"Artists in various fields," perceived McLuhan, "are always the first to discover how to enable one medium to use or to release the power of another."<sup>49</sup> In accordance with his belief that new media will engender a new form of orality, thereby rupturing the predominance of visual media since the advent of print, sound media have reinstated orality into the theatrical process, as practiced by Brassard. "J'écris d'abord en parlant, en enregistrant ce que je dis. Ça explique le caractère naturel de ce langage. Après, je transforme la matière première en 'littérature' en récrivant."<sup>50</sup> This point is crucial, for it demonstrates the secondary relationship of writing to Brassard's theatrical inventiveness. This space of theatrical experimentation is arranged acoustically, where orality precedes textuality. If the ancient stage was an externalisation of alphabet and writing, according to de Kerckhove and Svenbro, then Brassard's stage is first and foremost an externalisation of voice:

We make tests in processing my voice by changing its parameters. With the voices we find, I imagine possible characters. We can sometimes lose ourselves improvising together for hours, with people talking and music coming in and out. I try to bring those potential persons to life, to guess who these people are and what happens to

46. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 225.

47. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 241.

48. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 246.

49. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media, The Extensions of Man*, p. 62.

50. Marie Brassard in Christian Saint-Pierre, "Une œuvre d'art en soi: Entretien avec Marie Brassard," *Cahiers de théâtre Jeu*, n° 111 "La tentation autobiographique", 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2004, p. 107.

them. *So it is from technology that they are being brought to existence and not the other way around. The shape inspires the content.*<sup>51</sup>

Yet in juxtaposition to McLuhan's sense that technology is extending or enhancing the body's capabilities, the human voice is now detached from its bodily constraints, the body constructed through these external forces. "Sometimes the voice does not necessarily come from the body," suggests Brassard. "It is as if I speak, but the spirit is not in my body but in the air. As if I were a vehicle, or a machine, that the spirit is passing through but not necessarily using."<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, Marie Brassard's digital multivocality confronts us with a tension between two competing understandings of the relation of voice to body. Is a manipulated voice an extension of the body, as McLuhan proposed? Is the body a construct of many vocal inscriptions, as Kittler might argue? Katherine Hayles, in her book *How We Became Posthuman* reminds us that "long after writing dissociated presence from inscription, voice continued to imply a subject who was present in the moment and in the flesh." Telephone and radiophonic technologies first broke the spatial link between physical presence and voice, yet retained nonetheless the connection of time, that is, dialogue took place in the present. For this reason, despite physical separation, they "participated in the phenomenology of presence through the simultaneity that they produced and that produced them." Phonograph and later audiotape, as Kittler has shown, finally splintered the voice away from the material base of the body.<sup>53</sup> Hayles is interested in two intersecting polarities: on the one hand, "the interplay between the body as a cultural construct and the experiences of embodiment that individual people within a culture feel and articulate;" and on the other hand, the interaction between what she terms "practices of inscription" and "practices of incorporation."<sup>54</sup> The body, she argues, is a normative construct relative to a set of criteria in a given epoch (as, for example, in medical discourse). By contrast, "embodiment is contextual, enmeshed with the specifics of place, time, physio-

51. Marie Brassard, *Entrevue pour le magazine du CeCN: Centre des Écritures Contemporaines et Numériques*, p. 4-5 (our emphasis).

52. Marie Brassard, in J. Paul Halferty: "The Actor as Sound Cyborg: An Interview with Marie Brassard", p. 27.

53. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, p. 208-209.

54. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, p. 193.

logy, and culture, which together compose enactment.”<sup>55</sup> Similar to the body, inscriptive practices are “normalized and abstract,” “a system of signs operating independently of any particular manifestation.” On the other hand, “an incorporating practice such as a good-bye wave cannot be separated from its embodied medium.”<sup>56</sup>

Hayles describes the second polarity as a “dance between inscribing and incorporating practices,” a metaphor, I believe, that aptly describes the multivocal theatrical work of Marie Brassard. In one of the final sequences of *Peepshow*, entitled “The woman with a scar,” two women—“Beautiful” and “Teacher”—engage in a discussion about marking the body. Teacher shows Beautiful a scar that she constantly reopens and asks Beautiful to make a new wound on her. Beautiful refuses, but Teacher’s point is not lost on her: “Every time you meet someone you are being transformed.”

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The moment I began to talk to you, when I sat next to you, and I started this conversation, I was transforming you. You can’t be the same anymore because I’ve talked to you. And this is something, even though maybe in a few days you’ll forget about me. I gave you something. Just by being close to you I’ve transformed something inside your flesh.”

Beautiful reflects: “People would look amazing if when they met other people it would leave marks on their bodies.” Is the body an inscriptive surface and a recorder of experience, including the practice of speaking and every instantiation of vocality? In Marie Brassard’s sound theatre, the human voice, as the material carrier of language, is an inscribing practice or normative framework for (re-)producing meanings, but simultaneously an incorporating practice embedded in the specific, embodied context and spatiotemporal sphere of her onstage performances. Brassard thus presents both sides of the coin: her voices are indeed disembodied but at the same time they cannot exist without a body. For it is precisely through the process of disembodiment the voice from the speaker, feeding it through a machine, and reconnecting it to the speaker that the relation of voice to body is simultaneously ruptured but re-established.

Marie Brassard’s multimedia productions challenge us to rethink theatrical conceptions of embodiment and space in light of contemporary digital sound and voice technologies. Her inventiveness with sound technologies serves to refocus

55. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, p. 196.

56. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, p. 198.

our attention on the history of the relationship between the human voice and its live performance. Western theatre developed alongside the gradual shift from a predominantly oral to a visually-oriented, literate society. The medium of the human voice originally provided a crucial link between the phonetic alphabet and its depiction on stage. Yet from early Greek theatre to the foremost theatrical programmes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theatre has principally been understood as a visual medium. Throughout its history, theatre has arguably required spectators to develop new cognitive strategies by training them to process information in predominantly visually oriented forms. Whether in the alphabetic monopoly of French classicism or Bauhaus proposals for a total theatre, acoustic media have largely remained behind the scenes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the embodied presence of the human voice was displaced either by experiments in sound amplification and reproduction or by overpowering visual media. Whereas the unity of voice and body was not previously challenged, innovations in sound technologies have finally fractured the materiality of the human voice in today's digital environment. No longer subject only to the medial conditions of sound recording and reproduction, the voice can now be altered, modulated or even generated. As the materiality of the human voice has transformed, so have the spatial parameters of live theatre. Brassard's work imagines the stage as an externalisation of voice and follows a theatrical process where orality precedes textuality. In stark contrast to the alphabetic and textual origins of the theatrical medium, and the predominance of visuality throughout theatrical history, Brassard's voices—at once embodied and disembodied—embrace the digital age as a new acoustic environment. Her theatre places the human voice at the centre of a synaesthetic experience, where digitally-enhanced voices operate on a sonorous plane that mingles the meanings of human speech with other sounds, images and tactile sensations. Through her creations, Brassard has re-established the centrality of the human voice for the production of theatrical presence.