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Playing For and Against the Microphone: The Theatrical Soundstage, the Cinematic Meeting Interface

Nenad Jovanović

Abstract

This article argues for an analogy between the early talkies and the video telephony software-based theatre productions that have proliferated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: both the crude sound equipment employed for the late 1920s films and the static streaming and recording devices used to make online theatre/theatre online productions require the performer's close proximity to the microphone. The latter kind of artwork's 'user interface stage' is the site of a paradox, simultaneously fragmenting the spacetime of a written scene and reconstituting the fragments in alternately theatrical and cinematic fashions. I use Mint Theatre's *The Gin Chronicles in New York* (2020) as a source of examples of this innate contradiction's potential to transcend the notion of medium specificity (and its 'betrayal') that surrounded the emergence of the talkie and to help forge a new model for the Foucauldian heterotopia.

Key words

early sound film, online theatre/theatre online, early sound theory, heterotopia, *The Gin Chronicles in New York*

Electric appliances and radios, the foxtrot and jazz, Ford's Model A and the first transatlantic flight, the economic boom and the beginning of the Great Depression – this miniscule and haphazard selection of objects, events, and cultural trends emblematic of the 1920s United States suggest how neatly all three definitions of the adjective 'roaring' provided by the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (2012) apply to the decade: (1) 'making or characterised by a sound resembling a roar'; (2) 'marked by prosperity especially of a temporary nature'; (3) 'great in intensity or degree'. A common denominator for the miscellaneous 1920s phenomena listed above appears to be the greatly increased speed in numerous realms of human activity. The velocity afforded by the then novel technology, predominantly American in origin, inspired the period's flourishing avant-gardes in various European centres, with the politically opposed Italian and Russian Futurists, on the one hand, and the German fellow leftists Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht, on the other, as particularly clear cases in point. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 'First Futurist Manifesto' extolled the beauty of speed as the contemporary age's original contribution to the arsenal of aesthetic categories (MARINETTI 2013: 40), whereas Dziga Vertov proved true to his artistic *nom de plume* (commonly translated as 'spinning top') with the dizzying editing pace of *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929). Meanwhile, in Berlin, Piscator was advocating the 'electrification of theatre' (see BRECHT 1988: 226), whereas his occasional collaborator Brecht – already rebellious and anarchistic, but still in search of a theoretical buttress for his evolving artistic sensibility – was frequently expressing his fascination with the urban United States, and particularly its 'lowbrow' culture and entertainment forms.[1]

A key among those forms, of course, were the movies, which by 1927 reached an attendance that approximated the country's population at the time (COLLINS 2009: 71). Hollywood had established itself as a permanent industry, with an ever-developing array of genres and their associated formal procedures, able to absorb and modify the influences of international talent it attracted to fit the accessible formal idiom on which its universal popularity rested. As a chance corollary amid the widespread acceleration of life witnessed by the period, the industry's transition to sound that began in earnest in the last-mentioned year temporarily slowed down to a near halt the defining technological and aesthetic elements of dramatic film: the camera, editing, and – perhaps most importantly – the performer. All were abruptly rendered subservient to the initially crude sound equipment whereby numerous late silent era's visual storytelling techniques were rendered unviable. If only briefly, the western's cowboy, the melodrama's lovers, and the horror's monster were suddenly transformed into speakers, ushering in the advent of a cultural product whose purported essence and uniqueness was signalled by its distinct name of the 'talkie'.

Why bring up these historical details, well known to everyone who has even superficially explored early sound cinema, in an era imperilled by woes markedly different from the roaring twenties? Because the aesthetic implications of the short-lived pri-

1 Brecht's complex and changing relation with America is explored comprehensively in (PARMALEE 1981).

macy of sound in the films of the late 1920s can be productively compared and contrasted with those of the performance form that, out of necessity, has boomed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: online theatre/theatre online. Just like the insensitive and immobile condenser microphone of the 'talkies' earliest days demanded that the performer speaks their dialogue in the microphone's close proximity, the performers in theatre productions made with videotelephony software such as Zoom or Webex are physically bound to the computer, their playing space predetermined by the technical parameters of the microphone and camera built into the device. In this respect, these productions differ essentially from the TV broadcasts of shows staged at well-known playhouses such as the National Theatre in London or the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, which can be transmitted live or in the form of an edited recording (the latter option allows for combining selected parts of multiple performances).[2] Made on comparatively large budgets and with state-of-the art equipment, they typically utilise a single video-channel. The videotelephony software-based productions that I focus on in what follows, conversely rely on the default layout called 'grid view' (Webex) or 'gallery view' (Zoom), which displays all participants in their individual respective frames. This brings me to the most consequential difference between the two groups of productions. Whereas nothing precludes performers in a shared analogue space to predicate a production on videotelephony software, I am particularly interested in the instances of their use when an actual common playing space does not exist.

The coincidental similarity between the earliest talkies and today's videotelephony software-based theatre productions would be uninteresting if it did not lend itself to diametrically opposite upshots. The advent of sound marked cinema's fleeting return to the narrative and stylistic conventions of theatre from which movies had striven to emancipate themselves since the medium's inception, including a return to the unities attributed to Aristotle and – less frequently but more accurately – to Corneille.[3] The stage (both proscenium and the stage limited to its sonic dimension by the radio broadcasts or original productions) became, once again, a benchmark for affirming, contesting, or negotiating film's phenomenological (as opposed to ontological) identity.

While the prominence of cinema-specific techniques such as editing and mobile framing greatly diminished as a result of the crudeness of the early 'talkies' technology, which tended to translate itself into plots featuring fewer locales and less movement than many among the most artistically accomplished products of the silent era's pinnacle and twilight, some of the most engaging examples of the 'virtual stage' of Zoom and similar platforms frequently employ techniques ordinarily associated with cinema, such as elements of continuity editing techniques and montage (here understood as the former's opposite, as it disrupts the spatiotemporal unity that continuity editing seeks to

2 These theatre productions have received considerable scholarly attention since they emerged in the 2000s partly as a result of the period's transition to digital projection as a technological standard for commercial cinemas. See, for instance, (BARKER 2013; AEBISCHER et al. 2018; SULLIVAN 2020).

3 For more information, consult the primary sources: (ARISTOTLE 1962 [5th century BCE]; CORNEILLE 1960 [1660]).

establish and maintain). The 'virtual stage', thus, shows itself to be the site of a paradox, in its simultaneous fragmenting of a written scene's spacetime and reconstituting the fragments in a shared meeting interface, which is emphatically liminal: the performers share/do not share a playing space (a spatial in-betweenness) and they may/may not share the geographic time of the performance (temporal in-betweenness). More importantly, the productions offer formal reasons for being categorised within various media (theatre, film, radio) if we consider them in the form that I have accessed them in – as YouTube recordings, which is to say, devoid of liveness as a disputed but durable criterion for determining whether an artefact can be safely situated within the context of theatre.[4] My contention is that these productions call for the use and redefinition of heterotopia, a term that – for many years – has dominated the discourses on narrative and performance space, and – concomitantly – time (as reflected in the Foucauldian corollary term of 'heterochronia') (FOUCAULT 1986).

What is sound film?

The Kinetophone, the Chronophone, the Cameraphone, the Cinephone – all four on this selective list of early sound film technologies well predate *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland, 1927), often cited as the inaugural sound film. (In fact, the Kinetophone – patented by Thomas Alva Edison – was presented to the public months before the Lumière Brothers showed their films to paying audiences for the first time.) Those movies were always accompanied by some form of audio – music, narration, sound effects, or various combinations of the three have become a cliché in silent film studies. If 'silent film' is indeed a misnomer, why did the sound technology utilised in the musical melodrama strike the contemporary witnesses as novel, eliciting the 'paean of praise' (Harry Johnson quoted in GEDULD 1975: 176) by the critics? Vitaphone, a technology that combined a film projector and a modified electric phonograph, offered a satisfactory fidelity in addition to solving both problems of all previous film sound technologies – insufficient loudness and unstable synchronism.

Each part of the technological system, however, lacked the flexibility and versatility of today's audio gear. The available microphones and the various components of the sound reproducing chain could handle the range from 50 Hz to 7 kHz (SALT 2009: 206–207) – approximately one third of the audible spectrum. The microphones were large and operated in conjunction with a heavy amplifier and a diaphragm unit. What is more, they indiscriminately picked up sounds from all directions (SALT 2009: 206–207). As no sound-mixing devices existed initially, the only way to establish a hierarchy of volumes among the various sounds perceptible within a setting was through strategically placing sources *vis-à-vis* the immobile microphones. Technically speaking, Vitaphone transformed the singular medium of film into two distinct, albeit connected, media. The sound vibration waveforms would be etched onto wax discs that carried up

4 For influential differing views on the subject, see (PHELAN 1993; AUSLANDER 1999).

to 10 minutes of audio, each corresponding to a scene and recorded continuously. This meant that the variety of shots a scene consisted of needed to be photographed simultaneously, through multiple cameras placed in soundproof booths that only allowed for minimal camera mobility – the maximum of 30 degrees rotation around the horizontal axis. While a device existed for keeping the picture tracks synchronised, the editing technology necessitated losing two frames (a twelfth of a second) whenever a cut was made, thereby providing 'a strong disincentive to the use of fast cutting' (SALT 2009: 208) seen in so many major films of the late silent era. Salt (2009: 208) uses his own calculations to conclude that the average shot length for American films approximately doubled with the advent of sound.

As suggested earlier, the obstacles to adjusting the formal conventions of Hollywood and other major film industries to the reality of sound were soon overcome – the sound-isolating metal blimp replaced the constricting booth and lighter microphones mounted on booms superseded stationary microphones awkwardly concealed by flowerpots. By 1931, it had become possible to record separate audio tracks, whose levels could now be calibrated with precision through mixing (THOMPSON and BORDWELL 2003: 210). I want to linger on this earliest moment of the 'sound era proper' because of its momentous implications for the theoretical understanding of film. While Al Jolson's perfectly lip-synched 'My Mammy' was leaving casual moviegoers in awe,[5] the ontologically-minded film critics tended to eschew the question 'what is sound film?' by variously expressing the view that sound had robbed cinema of the 'purity' the medium had painstakingly achieved.

One such critic was Rudolf Arnheim, whose reservations about the use of dialogue in cinema are reflected in the distinction he makes between sound film (*Tonfilm*) and dialogue film (*Sprechfilm*) (cf. ALTER 2011: 71), focuses almost entirely on the latter in his most frequently cited discussion of the subject, 'A New Laocoön: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film' (ARNHEIM 1957). Arnheim's argument rests largely on a comparison between the stage and the screen. The older art form succeeds in combining speech and visuals by making each group of elements self-sufficient, and maintaining a clear hierarchy among them: 'the visual action is [...] the servant of the dialogue' (ARNHEIM 1957: 218). Mixing of distinct forms can be 'artistic' if their constituents are relatively independent from one another, as is the case with verse and music in songs (ARNHEIM 1957: 209). However, '[o]ne cannot put a sound in a painting' (ARNHEIM 1957: 203) – the balance between the two would inevitably tip in favour of the canvas.

Notwithstanding Arnheim's favourable contrasting of theatre to dialogue film, and his allowing that non-verbal components of a soundtrack may possess creative potential, his view of the medium displays an unmistakably pictorial bias. Consider, as the first instance, a hypothetical example he offers in his earliest essay on sound film:

5 For vivid testimonies of the wonder inspired by the synchronised sound in *The Jazz Singer*, see, among others, (EYMAN 1997: 139; SPADONI 2007: 9; VIEIRA 2010: 81).

> When real sounds are emitted by the filmed virtuoso's violin, the visual picture suddenly becomes three-dimensional and tangible. The acoustics perfect the illusion to such an extent that it becomes complete, and thus the edge of the picture is no longer a frame, but the demarcation of a hole, of a theatrical space: the sound turns the film screen into a spatial stage! (Arnheim quoted in ALTER 2011: 81)

These words suggest a vision of the ideal film image as conveying a sense of completion – a view that runs contrary to the sequential nature of films, and the logic of conventional, 'invisible' editing. From the standpoint of narrative function 'invisible' editing predicates itself on transitioning from one shot to another to both reveal a sight announced by an antecedent shot and announce a new one. This dialectic rests largely on the use of off-screen space – not shown directly but implied to be present within the scene – a dimension unknown to the painting.

To Béla Balázs (1952: 205), sound is 'not space-creating'. '[T]he stage can conjure up visually the magic atmosphere of a forest glade, but it cannot do so acoustically' (BALÁZS 2010a: 190), because sounds acquire the aural qualities of the space of its creation or reproduction, which is to say – those of a concrete theatre venue. The observation is of limited applicability, as it appears to assume realist representational modes, but unsurprising for Balázs as a consistent champion of the close-up as cinema's principal device of revelation and stylisation. Another link in the same argumentative chain is his observation that sound is hard to localise (BALÁZS 1952: 213; 2010a: 196). Anyone who has had difficulties identifying the source of a disturbing noise in an apartment building would agree with the statement. Yet, sophisticated techniques for sculpting spatial relations via film sound existed already at the time when Balázs was theorising on the medium's new iteration.

One such technique, developed by engineer J. P. Maxfield, mandated matching of sound scale to image scale: ensuring that a distant view of a pro-filmic event, for example, is accompanied by its proportionately low-volume sonic equivalent. Parenthetically but appositely, the technique – intended to emulate a 'point of audition' of the immobile viewer, and its eventual abandonment in the 1930s for the sake of the sonic perspective of a 'monstrous spectator' (ALTMAN 1992b: 49) with 'five or six very long ears extending in various directions' (Cass quoted in ALTMAN 1992b: 49) – mirrors the transition from the logic of tableaux of cinema's earliest days to the introduction of analytical editing, crosscutting, and nine-foot line (placing the camera nine feet away from the actors, so that they are cut below the hips when photographed with a normal lens), all of which techniques provide different an instantaneously changeable vantage point onto the pro-filmic event.[6]

To summarise the positions of the theorists with whom I briefly engaged above: according to Arnheim, the dominant element of cinematic soundscapes – dialogue – and the automatic medium vulnerable to chance – photography – are each preventing

6 To support the comparison with but one example concerning the last-mentioned technique, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell mention the complaints by some contemporary reviewers that the shot scale is 'unnatural and inartistic' (THOMPSON and BORDWELL 2003: 45).

cinema from being born in earnest. For the literary-inclined Balázs, in both contrast and similarity, photography and language are indispensable for sound film, but the relationship they form is often artistically fruitless. He opens his late discussion of the subject with a lament that the expressive effects of sound film technology remain slight (BALÁZS 1952: 194), and recommends an aesthetic based on the use of the invisible narrator as the one artistically viable avenue for the medium (BALÁZS 1952: 241). He has abandoned the early position that a film 'must in fact be composed of the unadulterated material of pure visuality' (BALÁZS 2010b: 21), but – in a book completed after numerous highly original sound films spanning from *M* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1931) to *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles, 1941) – surprisingly denies that sound film has realised its creative potential.

The 'talkie' as a retrograde novelty

It is not great artistic achievements that I want to focus on in the following few paragraphs, but run-of-the-mill products that must have been chiefly responsible for Arnheim's and Balázs's negative assessments of film sound. My own selection consists of but a handful of Hollywood films; it must be acknowledged at the outset that analysing a broader sample might lead to conclusions different from those detailed below. Another criterion I have used in choosing the films is thematic: with the exception of *The Jazz Singer*, I tried to avoid a genre that recommends itself for the new technology with particular force, the musical, as it tends to use sound chiefly as an outlet for music fashioned upon popular theatrical forms. My interest lies in the narrative function of sound, which typically involves using audio as a tool to sculpt narrative spacetime alongside with visual film techniques.

Judging by *Canary Murder Case* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair, 1929), *The Great Gabbo* (dir. James Cruze, 1929), *The Jazz Singer*, *In Old Arizona* (dir. Raoul Walsh and Irving Cummings, 1928), *Interference* (dir. Roy J. Pomeroy, 1928), and *The Lights of New York* (dir. Bryan Foy, 1928), the earliest 'talkies' tend to push the technology of their own making to the thematic fore. Before I offer a few concrete examples, I need to qualify the statement by broadening the notion of 'sound film' to include a variety of other contemporary audio technologies. In this, I am – once again – following the indispensable Rick Altman (1992b), who takes up the perennial ontological question 'What is cinema?' only to turn it to its head. Altman accomplishes this by tracing the variety of reference points with other media, artforms, and technological devices that cinema had employed during its prolonged attempt to arrive at an identity. With the exception of the earliest among those, photography, all of them crucially concern sound in one way or another: illustrated music, vaudeville, opera, cartoon, radio, phonography, and telephony – to cite all of them in the chronological order proposed by Altman (1992a).

All final three categories in Altman's comparative lineage concern the contemporary sound technologies of the time. Alexander Graham Bell received a patent for the

telephone in 1876, and the invention so symbolic of the modern era populates a great number of silent films (consider, for instance, D. W. Griffith's *Death's Marathon* (1913) and *The Telephone Girl and the Lady* (1913)). The novelty of the device had surely worn by the year of *Interference*'s release, yet the film features as many as six telephone conversations within the approximately 80 minutes of its runtime. The object's appearance invariably signals a turning point: the telephone is first used to demonstrate that the film's male protagonist, Philip Voaze/Julian Ackroyd (William Powell) has assumed a false identity – a secret that Philip's former lover, Deborah Kane (Evelyn Brent) uses to extract ransom from his wife, Faith (Doris Kenyon). The film's resolution, where what was initially deemed as Deborah's suicide is revealed to have been a murder, likewise involves a communication of the narratively crucial fact over the wire. In *Canary Murder Case*, a phonograph recording is used by the murderer of a titular character – another blackmailer! – to initially trick the witnesses and the viewer into believing that the victim lived longer than she actually did. The pitch and timbre of one's voice thus operate alternately as valid and invalid identity proofs. *In Old Arizona*, another film whose resolution involves mistaking the protagonist's identity, announces the temporal alterity of its storyworld already through its title. Despite the fact (or because of it), the film contains multiple close-ups of a mechanical, cylinder phonograph, the kind that – by the time of the film's release – had been supplanted by the electric record player. Similarly, *Lights of New York*, a film perceived across the eras as exemplary of the 'talkie's' betrayal of cinema's visual and kinetic orientation,[7] opens the first scene with diegetic sound with an image that reads as a feeble attempt to redefine its former identity in the current age of sound transmission, recording, and reproduction: a big shot of a radio. The image at once aligns the film with then state-of-the-art technology that symbolises modernity and cues the viewer to upturn the primacy of sight that had hitherto characterised film spectatorship: in other words, to transform herself from a spectator into an auditor.

The most positive comment on *Lights of New York* made by Harry M. Geduld (1975) in *The Birth of the Talkies*, a vivid study of the advent of sound in Hollywood, is that '[w]ith all its absurdities of motivation, plot, and character, [the film] is no worse than the average crook melodrama of the late twenties' (GEDULD 1975: 203). The case of the first 'all-talkie' prompts Geduld to note that early Vitaphone films severely limited the possibilities of editing (GEDULD 1975: 205), an observation that is amply confirmed by an analysis of the opening five minutes of *Lights of New York*. Of the merely fourteen shots that comprise this portion of the film, two are medium shots featuring the principal characters in a dialogue. The length of the first is seventy seconds, while the other one is a whole minute and thirty-three seconds long – large parts of a film that is less than an hour long. Two of the only four matches on action (a key continuity editing technique involving transitioning from one shot of a scene to another during a prominent motion within the pro-filmic event) would be considered awkward by any contemporary editor worth their salt, as some of the shots joined together include in-

7 See, for instance, Jeffrey P. Smith's (1991: 47) concise assessment of the film.

complete – and for that reason distracting – panoramic camera movements. (The latter can be accounted for by the film's multi-camera shoot, and the difficulties in coordinating the various cameras that initially plagued the method.) At least as significant was the shackling of the performer by the technology. Geduld writes:

> There were at most two hidden microphone placements on any given set for *Lights of New York,* and the actors were directed to keep as near to them as possible whenever they spoke. The results were frequently ludicrous. Characters who were standing up while making long speeches seemed inexplicably rooted to the same spot; characters who were engaged in conversation often seemed to be huddled ridiculously close together. In one scene, a microphone concealed in a headrest explains Eddie's [Cullen Landis. – N.J.] curious fondness for speaking only when he is standing behind an empty barber chair. (GEDULD 1975: 205)

It is not a stretch to hypothesise that the enormous popular success of the film's 'part-talkie' precedent, *The Jazz Singer*, stemmed in part from Al Jolson's daring circumvention of the rigid technological standard of the time through his celebrated improvisation. Geduld shares this supposition when he compares the effect on the audiences of an earlier film featuring synchronised speech, a short where the then President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Will H. Hays, introduced Vitaphone to the public:

> [The] Hays film had presented a formal, prepared speech, whereas Jolson's ad-libbing was exactly that: unexpected, informal, spontaneous. [...] The earlier uses of Vitaphone had, at best, succeeded in recreating other synthetic experiences – opera, vaudeville, sound effects – but here, suddenly, inadvertently, it was creating realism. (GEDULD 1975: 185)

In the context of a live vaudeville performance, the improvisation would have fallen entirely within the typical spectator's horizon of expectations, and likely failed to inspire the enthusiastic response that so many contemporary viewers of *The Jazz Singer* bestowed upon its 'talking' scenes. Jolson's extemporised dialogue and music in them allowed permanence to what would, on the stage, be doomed to be transitory and ephemeral. In the era when the term 'documentary' was still only acquiring critical traction, the festival of fakery that is *The Jazz Singer* – a film where a non-Jewish performer plays a Jew who pretends to be Black when performing – offered counterintuitive, surprising moments of factual truth: the mentioned scenes, where unique examples of Jolson's talent as they manifested themselves during an actual stretch of time are presented with accuracy. The theatricality lent to the film largely by the performance-themed story blends with its scarce, but for that reason all the more distinct, medium-specific documentariness. Whereas the combination might seem counterintuitive at first, it can be traced back as early as George Méliès, whose stop-trick based films combine unabashed staginess with a technique unique to cinema. It is this kind of medium-ambiguous, bifurcating moments that I trace in my analysis of Mint Theatre's *The Gin Chronicles in New York* (Liz Daley, 2020).

Online theatre/theatre online: the medium (non-)specificity in *The Gin Chronicles in New York*

In a concise yet comprehensive survey of theatre forms that have arisen due to the pandemic, Christina Papagiannouli and Verónica Rodríguez define online theatre as 'live-cast theatre for remote audiences experienced through the Internet' (PAPAGIANNOULI and RODRÍGUEZ 2021: 117), with liveness and interaction as their frequently employed elements. In contrast, theatre online is 'fully or partially pre-recorded theatre experienced through the Internet' (PAPAGIANNOULI and RODRÍGUEZ 2021: 117). The production I have chosen to discuss belongs to the latter category. I use a slash in reference to the otherwise distinct forms to indicate that the formal devices discussed can be utilised also in a live performance environment. Papagiannouli and Rodríguez rightly focus on Robert Myles' *The Show Must Go Online* (2020–2021) and Forced Entertainment's *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare* (2015) as ambitious pioneer projects, both of which consist primarily of multiple productions of Shakespeare's plays. As of this writing, the first one is still online, whereas only selected fragments of *Table Top Shakespeare* can be seen on the company's website. Although the artistic achievement of contemporary British playwright Robert Blackwood's *The Gin Chronicles in New York* can hardly be compared with the Bard's dramas, the production possesses an admirable stylistic coherence, and combines the conventions of cinema and the stage in a way that speaks to my argument.

Founded in 2016 and based in England's West Midlands, Mint Theatre Society is a company whose Facebook page describes them as '[a] happy band of actors whose passion is producing high-quality, fresh and exciting amateur theatre' (MINT THEATRE SOCIETY n.d.). From the information I have gleaned on the web, this appears to be a second production of the play, which had been staged in Edinburgh in 2015 by Robert Blackwood and Nick Cowell, under the auspices of their company Interrupt the Routine. A spoof on mystery radio serials, *The Gin Chronicles* consists of multiple instalments that feature the 'dim-witted toff Job Jobling and his plucky housemaid Doris Golightly' (DALEY 2020), as an introductory title card in the New York episode describes them. In this episode, we follow the protagonists on their quest to destroy the bootleggers threatening to flood the island with a fake version of its favourite bevvy, one made from distilled alcohol, lavender, and pine needles. When Doris discovers the scheme and gets kidnapped by the bootleggers, her parrot Englebird provides a cue to her whereabouts by repeating their words. (Notably, this narrative element appears to be an equivalent of *Canary Murder Case*'s revealing phonograph record – smartly adjusted to an artform that, unlike cinema, often defines itself by its liveness.) A still of Blackwood and Cowell's production of the play[8] shows performers standing in front of microphones seemingly from the 1940s – the era where the narrative is set – with a foley artist to their side. The arrangement allows for the assumption that the visual display of the sound effects creator – hindering the Coleridgean 'suspension of disbe-

8 See (KENNEDY 2018).

lief' that much of conventional theatre still seeks to elicit – was a powerful source of humour to those who witnessed the performance on stage. As I will demonstrate in the following few paragraphs, Mint Theatre's production of the play adds a third, cinematic dimension to the already foregrounded intermediality of the stage production.

What is *the* playing space of a production predicated on using multiple ones? What is *the* frame that the variety of playing spaces used by actors in a videotelephony software-based production are 'forced' into – the rectangular meeting interface, or the frame(s) of a platform such as Zoom or Webex? How does a performance whose players are each in a space with a different set of visual and sonic properties, maintain a necessary degree of spatial – and, concomitantly, stylistic – unity? There are no universal answers to these important questions, but *The Gin Chronicles in New York* provides effective specific ones. Let me start with the titular object that constitutes the most conspicuous element of the various settings: the microphone.

Even though the frequency response of the microphones used with modern-day laptops exceeds by far that of their 1920s counterparts, the fixed position of both it and the cameras used to capture the production is every bit as restricting as that of the sound and image recording apparatus used to make the earliest 'talkies'. Ingeniously, this production draws our attention to the sources of the performers' confinement by having their eyelines oriented in the direction of the cameras, and by including drawings of microphones larger than the actual objects in the production's (dis)connected settings. This latter metatheatrical device doubles for an iteration of the production's own stylistic tenets, predicated on bold oscillations between verisimilitude and overt stylisation.

The production emphasises its pseudo-filmic nature through a visual effect that simulates flicker – the added 'hum' of the apparatus – perhaps serving as a distraction from the limitations innate to the internet and the videotelephony software employed. Whereas the fixed spatial configuration between each actor and her computer does not allow for much diversity in terms of shot scales, two scenes that combine realistic (tentatively cinematic) and non-realistic (tentatively theatrical) techniques offer alternatives to the medium shot that dominates this and other productions based on a videotelephony software. One of them is the shot of the New York sewer system, where a rat – grateful for Jobling's earlier favour – mobilises his friends and relatives to help the protagonists flee from their pursuing enemies. Depicted through moving drawings on transparent sheets, the scene evokes at once puppet theatre and long shots of an animated film. Another example of stylisation that borrows equally from theatre and film is the brief scene where Mister Big, the mastermind of the criminal operation, gets dropped from a great height to his death by Englebird and his relatives. Featuring an actual parrot with a papercut doll-style photograph of Mister Big in its beak, the scene briefly confuses the viewer's sense of space, as the relative sizes of the animal and the human suggest sharply different camera distances. These two scenes, along with an instantaneous transition from David Daley as a foley artist to the same actor in the role of Mr. Big, unmistakably reveal the production's use of editing – a technique that distances *The Gin Chronicles in New York* from theatre and liveness as its defining trait.

The production also makes repeated use of off-screen space to forge an impression of proximity among the players. Objects such as keys or bills get 'passed' from one performer to another outside of their individual videotelephony platform frames, a trick based on the Kuleshov effect (understood as our cognitive predilection for assuming spatiotemporal proximity even among pro-filmic events that can be distant in both respects). Throughout its duration, the production switches from the gallery view video layout – where the participants' individual displays are arranged in a grid pattern – to a layout where an individual performer occupies the entire screen. Whereas the showing of the foley artist independently from the other performers might lead one to suppose that the highlighted separation of playing spaces attached to the choice contributes to the production's frequently cinematic feel, it is actually otherwise. The emphasis received by the meta-character through what is effectively film editing emphasises the theatricality of his action, whose visual dimension would be attenuated by the play's innate meta-aspect as a pseudo-radio broadcast, if *The Gin Chronicles in New York* were produced on a conventional stage.[9]

This playful blending of elements makes for an occasionally labyrinthine space-time, one that is suspended between the extremes of emulating everyday perception, and subverting the logic of the senses through overtly estranging strategies. Thus, every appearance of the foley artist prompts the questions of 'where' and 'when': the room he occupies is apart from the play's storyworld, and his sonic illustrations of the actions referred to in the dialogue always come with a delay. This formal choice, reminiscent of Brecht's separation of elements,[10] contrasts the previously described attempt to create a sense of spatiotemporal coherence through the use of off-screen space.

Another concept that can be productively invoked to illustrate the estranging impact of showing the actors and the foley artist alternately and discretely is imaginary action space, introduced by the structuralist Karel Brušák (2016). The concept refers to the space that is implied to belong to the dramatic world through signs in various modalities – aural, visual, and possibly also olfactory and tactile – but typically off-stage (albeit not necessarily, as in the case under discussion). In the context of in-person theatre, the experienced spectator would perceive the foley artist's occupying a central place on the stage as merely an amusing modification of a familiar slapstick convention. As such, the figure would likely and immediately be ranked as subordinate to the dramatic personae proper. The pseudo-cinematic procedures of this online theatre/theatre online production of the play, however, preclude that process. Placed on equal footing with the characters through framing and editing, the foley artist repeatedly invites the question of whether he belongs to the diegesis, and thus whether the space that he is shown in belongs to the dramatic space – built of the stage, the scene, and the action space (BRUŠÁK 2016: 305) – or to the imaginary one. Thereby, the film-specific elements of

9 I am delighted to admit that the examples provided practically challenge the opposition between montage and theatricality that I posit in an earlier study (JOVANOVIC 2017).

10 See (BRECHT 2014: 65).

the videotelephony software-based version of the play enhance its defamiliarising effect. The resulting tension between the spatial and temporal positioning and displacement brings me to the related notions of heterotopia and heterochronia, which I take up in the concluding section.

Conclusion: toward/away from heterotopias

In her succinct yet wide-ranging survey of the various and historically changing understandings of space in theatre, Kim Solga (2019) mobilises the notion of heterotopia to explore the potential of theatre to be

> an *active* – not merely a *representative* – agent in social justice by inviting audiences to inhabit quotidian spaces directly, to uncover some of the hidden things about those spaces that normative occupation of them masks, and thereby to enact the potential for 'heterotopia' [...] necessary for lasting political change. (SOLGA 2019: 75–76)

Since Foucault's seemingly tentative list of heterotopias includes theatres (in addition to spaces as different as are prisons, brothels, and gardens), it is unsurprising that the concept has gained considerable traction in theatre studies.[11]

Foucault defines heterotopia only obliquely, as a subcategory of utopia – an emplacement devoid of a real place, directly or inversely analogous with the real place of society (FOUCAULT 2005: 178). Whereas utopias are 'no places', heterotopias possess actual geographic loci, but inherently appear 'outside all places', intrinsically off-kilter and bizarre (FOUCAULT 2005: 178). Foucault's examples for the twin-notion of 'heterochronias' – places that complicate our sense of time passage – are museums and libraries. Despite the ability of an immersive stage show to confuse one's temporal coordinates ('time flew' or 'time dragged' in the theatre), it is a work of visual art and a work of literature (as perceived in the contexts of the mentioned spaces) that Foucault singles out as able to provide one with an impression of being transposed in an alternative, parallel time zone. In the provisory system of principles attributed to heterotopia, he mentions theatre when discussing the category of different spaces that 'juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves' (FOUCAULT 2005: 181). Theatre clearly interests Foucault as a compound of separate spaces where the activities of display and observation of human bodies take place in an organised and legally sanctioned manner. It is a lack of interest in the artistic aspect of the stage that allows him to perceive the institution as outlandish. The film scholar Annette Kuhn (2004) acknowledges this in applying the term to conventional movie houses – places of escapism from the viewer's living circumstances to the story worlds of Hollywood and similar 'dream' industries.

11 For examples of book-length studies where 'heterotopia' operates as a central term, see (FISCHER-LICHTE and WIHSTUTZ 2012; TOMPKINS 2014).

I agree with Solga (2019), however, that Foucault's cryptic concept can be useful to those involved in the production and consumption of theatre. Heterotopias render together spaces that, according to prevailing social and cultural beliefs, are incompatible, thereby implicitly questioning that view (SOLGA 2019: 83). Immanently 'foreign' and 'different', heterotopias are 'spaces where difference can be framed, recognized, and reckoned with' (SOLGA 2019: 83). Equally convincing is Solga's (2019: 86–92) view that site-specific theatre and stage productions that entail radical altering of a given theatre venue's architectural configuration lend themselves to the task. I hasten to point out, though, that theatre can foreground the fact that it is a product of 'complex social *interrelations*' (SOLGA 2019: 87) without dispensing with the traditional, proscenium stage. Theatre's relative independence from the realism that, according to Arnheim (1957), burdens lens-based cinema, enables each and every performance space a high degree of transformational latitude: with appropriate adjustments, most could stand for a dining room and for a kingdom alike.

Another limit of the politically emancipatory potential of the heterotopias discussed by Solga concerns the financial aspect of theatre. It should be self-evident that the ability to employ a mountain landscape as one's stage, as Robert Wilson did in *Ka Mountain and Guardenia Terrace* (1972), or to flood the orchestra pit of a theatre house, as Robert Lepage did in the production of Stravinsky's *The Nightingale and Other Short Fables* (2009), suggests one is not in dire need of political enlightenment and empowerment. Today, decades after cinema has dislodged theatre from its former position of primacy as a popular performing art, this applies to a large extent also to the spectator sufficiently affluent to be able to afford access to ambitious and costly projects such as the two mentioned ones – Brecht's injunctions now better apply to the typical Netflix fare than to the output of the least adventurous theatre playhouses. This is why the affordable internet as an outlet for creative expression, and online theatre/theatre online productions (with their decidedly hybrid, multimedia nature) such as *The Gin Chronicles in New York*, are sources of hope. Unrestricted by financial barriers that initially kept sound unavailable to practitioners interested in taking cinema away from the path of transparent verisimilitude followed by Hollywood and similar industries, and unencumbered by concerns over medium 'purity' and 'identity' that surrounded the technology, web-based productions might become an arena for both artistically and politically productive explorations of space. The multiplicity of co-existing techniques in *The Gin Chronicles in New York* that I have described, whereby the continuities and discontinuities among the depicted spacetimes are alternately emphasised, could be harnessed in an infinite number of ways toward complicating the relation between the performers and their respective roles, and between the performer and performer.

Leaving the question of 'whereness' outside of the thematic preoccupations of a production made by intimately connected English West Midlanders seems inconspicuous and unproblematic, but a similar collaboration between practitioners from a wider range of geographic and cultural contexts would demand engaging with the charged question of 'where is here', for instance, in a manner that might point to the political

horizon indicated by Solga and other critics who have applied Foucauldian 'heterotopia' in Theatre Studies. This could come about not merely because the internet's virtual stage, screen, canvas, and page (to list but a few available metaphors for the non-medium of the web) is increasingly available to artists everywhere, but also because it still encourages a rather inflexible configuration between the performer and the combination of camera and microphone built into their computer: limitation is still the mother of creativity. Mint Theatre's *The Gin Chronicles in New York* blends theatrical and cinematic techniques to alternately expand and contract dramatic spacetime, thus negotiating the tension between it and the relatively fixed positions of the performers. Additionally, this and other recent online theatre/theatre online productions invite reflecting on the fissure between the continued acceleration of human endeavours brought about by the internet on one hand, and, on the other, the stasis imposed upon us by the pandemic. Unassuming yet imaginative, the show is one among numerous available hybrid productions that hold a promise of exciting things to come. As Al Jolson's Jakie Rabinowitz would put it, we 'ain't heard nothing yet'.

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