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## Unravelling the Visiophonic Knot: Audiovisual Incongruence and Perceptual Glitch in Intermedial Performance

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This article examines the convergence and divergence of sound and image in intermedial performance. Intermedial performance has the capacity to deconstruct perceptual integration by presenting sound and image via different media modalities. This article draws on perspectives within film and audiovisual studies in theorising incongruity and develops the notion of 'perceptual incongruity'. The concept of 'perceptual glitch' is offered for application to those moments in which audiovisual stimuli simply "do not compute" (Leszczynski and Elwood). Finally, the article argues that perceptual incongruency and the intentional divergence of audio and visual media in intermedial performance, when recognised within a postdigital framework, can challenge dominant narratives of convergence and totality in the design and analysis of digital and aesthetic experience.

Keywords: incongruence, perception, glitch, headphone theatre, intermedial performance

### Introduction – The Encounter in the Cafe

This article interrogates the relationship between audio and visual content in intermedial performance, examining the convergence and divergence of sound and image. Intermedial performance has the capacity to deconstruct sensory integration by presenting sound and image via different media modalities. Two key areas of intermedial performance are examined: in the first area, the visuals are mediated (through projection) and sound is performed live; in the second, the audio is mediated (through headphones) and the visuals are performed live. Drawing on perspectives within film and audiovisual studies in theorising incongruity, this article contributes the notion of 'perceptual incongruity' in addition to existing categorisations. It develops the concept of the 'glitch' as articulating experiences of perceptual incongruence and, following Agnieszka Leszczynski and Sarah Elwood's understanding of the glitch as drawing attention to mediation, disorientation, and "interruptions to systemic orderings" (4), the concept of 'perceptual glitch' is proffered for application to those moments in which audiovisual stimuli simply "do not compute" (Leszczynski and Elwood 2). Finally, this article argues that the deployment of audiovisual incongruence and the intentional divergence of audio and visual media in intermedial performance, when recognised within a

postdigital framework, can challenge dominant narratives in the design and analysis of digital and aesthetic experience.

The ideas in this article were initially inspired by my experience of watching and listening to the on-demand distribution of Complicité's *The Encounter*, whilst sitting at a theatre foyer café. Performed at the Barbican in 2016, before a Broadway run and international tour, *The Encounter* delivers live and pre-recorded sounds to an audience via headphones. The production was available online for one week only, based on an initial livestream in partnership with The Space that took weeks of preparation to facilitate the immersive sound experience for an online audience, with over 13,000 views on the night (The Space). Actor Simon McBurney performs a two-hour feat of storytelling using binaural sound, which places each audience member at the centre of the protagonist's world and sonically renders their environment. That environment is the Amazon rainforest, and the story regards the American photographer Loren McIntyre and his encounter in 1969 with the Mayoruna tribe. The show involves evocative descriptions of the Amazonian environment, and the emotional resonances of McBurney's dramaturgy move through fascination with the exotic, to fear of the unknown, surreal dreaming, shared exhilaration and even nostalgia. Academic discussions of the production have focused on the production's 'aurality' (Kendrick), stage materiality (Klich, "Technologies and Intermedial Theatre"), and the scale and temporality enabled by binaural sound (Campos).

As I sonically experienced the Amazon jungle, I was simultaneously aware of my physical location. The theatre was being used for a dance competition, and the surrounding children's energies were chaotically hyperactive. The dissonance between what could be heard and what could be seen was challenging, but not unpleasant. My engagement with the sonic world of McBurney's storytelling created a sense of critical distance from the visual field, a 'making strange', and my feelings towards the children became as if towards exotic jungle animals. This article explores such sensory and audiovisual incongruence, and the strategies within contemporary intermedial theatre for creating critical disorientation and stimulating self-awareness of one's perceptual apparatus. Jean-Paul Thibaud offers the term "visiophonic knot" to refer to the "convergence point between the audible and the visible", which he suggests involves the "discovery of synchronised intersensorial sequences" (337). This article interrogates moments of divergence between the audible and the visible, when the visiophonic knot unties, resulting in incongruous intersensorial sequences that trigger consideration of audiovisual processing.

### Intermedial Performance

Understandings of the 'inter' of intermediality within theatre and performance studies have evolved significantly over the last 15 years, moving from a focus on the 'in-between' of media boundaries to an understanding of mutual dependencies and co-relations. The recognition of a now postdigital context acknowledges the invisible embeddedness of digital technologies and accepts as fundamental, human entanglement with media, technologies, and informational systems. Within this context, Matthew Causey suggests

that “the ontologies of performance and media converge” (430) and as such, “[i]ntermedial theatre, like multimedia before and transmedia briefly after, is a thing of the past” (428). Without insisting on the separability of media, nor challenging the interrelation of the ontologies of media coverage and performance as “a flow, a becoming, and always in process” (Causey 430-1), this article contends that discourses of intermediality and multimodality continue to offer valuable means of understanding audience encounters with audiovisual media within performance.

Mark Crossley asserts that by “stating that all theatre is intermedial, we are at risk of nullifying the significance or particularity of its practice” (28). Rather, he suggests that by drawing on the conceptualisation of media modalities and working with the understanding of media relations as based on a ‘both/and’ approach – originally suggested by Lars Elleström to articulate that media are both similar and different (“Media Borders” 12), and deployed by Robin Nelson to interpret the ‘inter’ of intermediality as manifest in theatre and performance (17), it can become “possible to recognise, celebrate and harness *both* distinction *and* hybridity” (Crossley 28). Andy Lavender in the same book, explores the development and expansion of intermediality in its move towards multimodality. Lavender argues:

If intermediality used to be interested in boundaries and beyond – the things that happened when one medium intersected with another, or when one found oneself ‘in between’ media – we now inhabit a cultural scene that is much more routinely mixed, where boundary crossing has become so commonplace that the boundary is less noticeable than the journey, and the move from one entity to another less pertinent than the *feeling* of being amid transition. (46)

Whilst discussing the conflicting perceptions of media within performance practice, the focus of this article is specifically on the *feeling* of conflict, and on the perception of media modalities as activated by certain sensory encounters with intermedial performance environments, rather than on the inherent qualities of, or boundaries between, media themselves.

Lars Elleström reminds us that a recurring problem within studies of intermediality has been, “the failure to distinguish between inherent media traits and the perceptions of those traits” (“The Modalities of Media II” 7). Elleström recognises that making this distinction in practice is a “slippery business”. Nevertheless, he argues, “it is crucial to discriminate theoretically between the modes of existence of media and the perception of these modes in order to apprehend media differences and similarities” (“The Modalities of Media II” 7). Before explaining media modalities and manifestations of media integration, media transformation, and media translation, Elleström explains the model for communication on which these notions are premised. The model for communication involves four essential interrelations:

An act of production ‘between’ the producer’s mind and media product

An act of perception 'between' the media product and the perceiver's mind

Cognitive import 'inside' the producer's mind and the perceiver's mind

A transfer of cognitive import 'through' the media product ("The Modalities of Media II" 17).

Whilst Elleström's focus is largely on the fourth interrelation, the focus of this article is primarily on the second; on the "act of perception 'between' the media product and the perceiver's mind."

Intermedial performance may disrupt the process of communication between the media product (theatre) and the perceiver (audience member). Rather than establishing a process of clear communication that leads to a transfer of "cognitive import 'through' the media product", where perception of the product becomes "opaque" (Grønstad), this unsettling of perception itself becomes the performance text. The perceptual encounter with the media content becomes the destination, rather than a point in the journey of medial interpretation. Though some intermedial productions strive towards the filmic synchronicity of sound and image, others may strategically disrupt the process of communication and play with audiovisual strategies for creating critical distance and perceptual disturbance, drawing attention to the "act of perception 'between' the media product and the perceiver's mind". Such strategies may include abstraction and ambiguity of image or sound, and the counterpointing or incongruence of audio and visual content.

### Audiovisual Congruence and Incongruence

At the 2017 Edinburgh Festival, Vox Motus' production *Flight* placed participants in individual booths before a revolving diorama. Model boxes were lit-up in sequence showing tiny characters presenting moments from a story told via headphones. The images created inside these model-boxes were crafted in minute detail and offered a variety of perspectives on the subjects depicted using close-ups, panoramas, telescoping, and overhead shots. The production's sounds and imagery were carefully complimentary so as to create a unified dynamic and consistency. In *Flight*, as we see a model-box scene of a boy in a boat, we hear the sounds of lapping water; we see a street scene and hear the warbling of pigeons. The experience is one of sensory synthesis.

The aesthetic is filmic; the model boxes provide interesting angles of perspective for each scene like the camera angles in a film, and the diegetic and non-diegetic audio are aesthetically integrated and work harmoniously. This kind of audiovisual aesthetic is shaped by what Michel Chion calls 'points of synchronisation'. For Chion, the audiovisual relationship is a contract: there is no natural and pre-existing harmony between sound and image (xxvii). The extent to which sound and image activate each other, depends

on how points of synchronization are introduced (Chion 59). Synchronisation between audio and image is crucial in facilitating audience immersion in media content. Synchronisation points make prominent what Chion labels “synchresis”, which involves the “spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time. This join results independently of any rational logic” (Chion 63). In *Flight*, the sounds heard may not exactly correspond with the model-box scene (e.g. we may hear ‘off stage’ sounds such as a door shutting, weather, birds) but through synchresis, the listener is able to easily weld the auditory and visual phenomena to render a consistent, detailed environment.

As a production of intermedial theatre, *Flight* epitomises what Mark Crossley refers to as a mode of ‘convergence’. Convergence is one of three concepts that Crossley proffers to elucidate the key processes within intermedial theatre. Crossley explains, “[s]ometimes, media are required to coalesce into a seamless event, but in certain contexts the disparity between them is purposely exposed” (28), and, drawing on Elleström’s vocabulary, Crossley proposes convergence, contrast, and transformation as notable aspects of intermediality manifest in performance (28). Crossley suggests that the concept of ‘contrast’ works as an intermedial technique where there is over media hybridity: “the collision and contrast of diverse media ‘theatricalised’ within the hypermedium of theatre” (32). The technique of contrast within an intermedial set-up has many purposes:

it may be designed to find wit and comedy, to seek delight and celebration in the discrepancies, [...]. On other occasions, it may be constructed to bring attention to the co-relationships of media and, by exploiting their diverse modes and the qualifying aspects that we expect from each one, focus our critical attention on to the ‘message’ of each medium (Crossley 33).

The focus of my discussion here is not on the ‘message’ of the media per se but the capacity for audiovisual strategies to disrupt sense-making, thereby exposing usually taken for granted perceptual processes. However, the use of contrast to “bring attention”, not so much to the relationships of media, but to the perceptual processing of such stimuli, and the potential for contrasting media to “focus our critical attention”, explains the means by which moments of audiovisual disruption are triggered.

Audiovisual incongruence has been recognised and analysed within sound studies and music theory, visual studies, and audiovisual studies. However, the contrast of audiovisual content has been most robustly theorised in relation to film. In film, audio can be placed in a less consistent, less integrated relationship with the visual. Chion asserts that the effect of audiovisual counterpoint is to set up an opposition between sound and image (39) and sever synchresis, enforcing a more critical perspective towards media content. Such an opposition could be rhythmic, temporal, or tonal, and ‘soundtrack dissonance’ has become a well-established trope within filmmaking used as a distancing device. A much-discussed example of this trope is the portrayal of violence

accompanied by contrastingly light-hearted music in Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, where graphic violence is counterpointed with a light-hearted pop song (*Stuck in the Middle With You*). As Agnes Pethó explains in *The Cinema of Sensation*, while audiovisual incongruence such as that presented in *Reservoir Dogs* can create disturbance, Pethó notes "that it does so within our immersive experience of the narrative world, and not by wholly disrupting it in some Brechtian fashion" (174).

David Ireland offers a comprehensive response to the question 'what is incongruent film music?' Ireland also refers to the *Reservoir Dogs* scene, offering a survey of its theoretical discussion and suggesting that the Stealers Wheel song is far more than simply an auditory source of ironic commentary; the music "cannot easily be described as fitting or misfitting, nor appropriate nor inappropriate for the images and narrative content" (7). Through an examination of others' analysis of the scene, Ireland demonstrates how identifying a moment as either congruent or incongruent can depend on subjective responses and personal expectations. As such, Ireland offers the expansive definition of incongruence as "a lack of shared properties in the audiovisual relationship" (9). Ireland's definition deliberately avoids the implications of terms such as 'misfit' or 'inappropriate'. Rather, Ireland explains, "[j]udgments of incongruence in the film music relationship can occur on a range of structural, semantic, and conceptual levels" (7).

Ireland examines the perceptual processing of film music and draws on research in the psychology of music in multimedia, outlining how existing studies demonstrate the influence of incongruence on the direction of attention, interpretation of action and characters, emotional response and memory (41). Regarding the impact of incongruence on memory, he draws on Marilyn Boltz's work to explain how the lack of shared properties in incongruent audiovisual pairing challenges the automatic process of perceptual encoding that takes place with more congruent audiovisuals (Ireland 13): "empirical research (e.g. Boltz, 2004) suggests that incongruent film music can result in separate encoding and memory representations of the auditory and visual information rather than the joint encoding that is facilitated by incongruent information" (Ireland 10). When audiovisual pairings violate expectations and result in separate encoding of audio and visuals, Ireland argues that this opens up "a perceptual space to evaluate this challenge to transparent cinematic discourse" (114). This understanding of a perceptual space for contemplation of the film-music relationship, chimes with my previous deployment of Adorno's phrase 'contemplative immersion' to describe the experience of the perceptually immersed headphone theatre audience member contemplating their engagement with the medium facilitating immersion (Klich, "Of Unsound Mind and Body"). In the case of the headphone theatre listener, the reflection is on one's somatosensory processing of binaural sound. In the case of the film viewer, reflection is on engagement with the varying congruence of the audiovisual stimuli.

Ireland introduces the ideas of "aesthetic", "conceptual", and "intradomain" incongruence. Aesthetic incongruence occurs when the 'values and ideologies' of the film music are philosophically mismatched with the visuals (43). Conceptual incongruence describes when a composer or director deploys audiovisual mismatch as an element of filmic construction, or when the mismatched music complements the

theme or narrative of the film (43). Intradomain incongruence refers to incongruity within the soundtrack only (44). These categories of audiovisual incongruence are useful in analysing audience experience of audiovisual counterpoint in intermedial performance. However, in line with Pethő's observation, Ireland's understanding of incongruence creates disturbance "within our immersive experience of the narrative word" only; it does not examine the perceptual disturbance that wholly disrupts immersion itself. The dramaturgical deployment of audiovisual incongruence in intermedial performance, particularly in examples of headphone theatre, has the potential to create perceptual discombobulation that is more than emotional, rhythmic, or structural incongruence; it moves beyond aesthetic or conceptual incongruence to pit sensory systems against each other for viability, simultaneously offering mutually exclusive information through audio and visual channels. For example, the audio insists a person is standing in front of me, but my eyes conclude there is no-one there. Further, while Ireland's aim is to understand the implications of incongruity for the purposes of developing the interpretation of filmic meaning (10), moments of *perceptual* incongruence do not necessarily lend themselves to the interpretation of meaning per se. Rather, perceptual mismatch adds texture, dimension and complexity to the audience member's experience, an experience that relies on immediate and unprocessed perceptual response.

### **Incongruence in Intermedial Theatre**

Intermedial performance can explore the friction between audio and visuals, making us question the very processes by which we encounter and process sensory material. Megan Stevens in *Music and Image in Concert* explores the relationship of sound and image in a musical concert, focusing on the effects of the visual elements upon musical salience. Stevens explains that sounds and vision are interdependent; with reference to Kathryn Kalinak, Stevens suggests that in film, music and image will have mutual affect with the result that "when one cannot be 'squared' with the other, credibility itself is threatened" (Kalinak qtd. in Stevens 33). Stevens argues:

When this occurs it may no longer be possible to maintain the suspension of disbelief that is necessary for fiction. Art films often create a conflict between music and image to produce an unusual or startling effect. Attempting to create difference and originality in the music-image relationship may create a number of unintentional results. When music and image contain a high degree of contradiction, they risk not being understood...the effect may be unintentionally comic. The uncertainty created by contradiction may also minimise seriousness and may cause cognitive unease (33).

In intermedial theatre, however, conflict between music and image may also be used as a mechanism to deliberately create cognitive unease through 'unusual or startling effects', to deliberately confuse, and to disrupt spectators' suspension of belief.



A key example discussed by Stevens is *Luminous*, a collaboration between the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) led by Richard Tognetti and photographer Bill Hensen, performed in the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall, firstly in 2005 with singer Paul Kapsis, in 2009 with singer Katie Noonan, and again in 2019 with singer Lior. In the 2019 iteration, Hensen's moody, atmospheric photographs are presented on a large screen hanging over the stage, while the ACO play a carefully curated mix including Purcell, Britten, REM and Paul Healy's evocative Sound Sculptures commissioned for the production opening both acts. Lior's haunting voice adds modalities of voice and text (lyrics), to those of music and image. Hensen's photographs are presented not as static, but as filmed, with each photograph revealed through slow wipes and zooms, the camera always moving. A trope throughout involves a photograph initially introduced in high zoom, abstract in closeup, only a small square of blurred colour, before the camera slowly zooms out revealing the full photograph. The work is described in the programme as "a harmonious marriage of music and image", though it is the tensions in this marriage that are most interesting.

Stevens explores the relation of image and music in the 2005 *Luminous* with particular focus on the impact of images on the 'accuracy' of music perception. Stevens praises many aspects of the production as "new and exciting" (92) but laments the "issues with ambiguity and excessively slow long-takes" (90). On leaving the concert Stevens was frustrated, suggesting that the "potentially rich partnership of music and image should be greater than the sum of the parts but was not" (2). Stevens argues that, in order for a production to do justice to both the music and the photography, the music-image relationship must be congruous (11), a factor she felt *Luminous* lacked. A key issue with incongruity, argues Stevens is that it can cause the music to be "incorrectly received":

Research shows that when sound and image diverge, audience judgement falls between the ratings for the visual and the audio, even if the audience are asked to focus on one particular medium. While image and music are processed separately by the brain, this result suggests that the final meaning is additive and the result is a combination of the total associations generated, which is much like a compromise. The result is that when music and image are incongruent neither are perceived accurately (33).

However, this separate processing of music and image by the brain, and the potential combinations, compromises, and contradictions in the music-image relationship this separate processing produces, are key in the form-becoming-content and particularly engaging aspects of *Luminous*. The production overtly plays with the perception of both congruent and incongruent audiovisuals.

The moments of disjuncture between the music and image work in a variety of ways including aesthetic, conceptual and intradomain incongruence as defined by Ireland. Staccato sounds played by the orchestra at the beginning of Purcell's *King Arthur* contrast with a projected photograph of a billowing eucalyptus tree; the shapes and

movement are organic and flowing, and incongruent with the clipped, snappish sounds. Many of the images, both on their own and in relation to the music, are uncomfortably ambiguous. For example, a photograph with a house is presented with a warmly lit window and a red-orange sky behind it, which could be from a destructive bushfire or a beautiful sunset. From one image to the next there is contrast (intradomain incongruence); while the overall tones of the images are dark and brooding, there are juxtapositions in the linearity of the sequence. For example, one moment presents an image of a girl's naked backside, her head over the groin of a faceless boy, while another boy looks on; an image later, clouds in close-up are lit from behind. Lior's lyrics in R.E.M's *I've Been High* reference a person or character, but the simultaneous photograph shows a darkly-lit industrial landscape. Disjuncture and synchronicity ebb and flow, drawing attention to perceptual processing and the tendency towards synchresis. This tendency is revealed in a particular audiovisual pairing; a slow zoom-out of a girl's face is presented against melancholy music, however when the tone of the music changes and becomes more cheerful, my reading of the image also changes. In another moment, poignant classical music contrasts with the banality of bad street graffiti.

The work triggers consideration of the ways in which our perceptual systems sense, and make sense of, sound and image, and of how individually specific and varied this processing might be. Stevens asserts that the trope of zooming the image into abstraction means "that the lack of details sometimes gave the feeling of excessive slowness. They also created ambiguity from the uncertainty of what the image actually was, and this uncertainty, when the image could not be deciphered, interrupted the focus on the music" (90). This slowness forces the spectator to grapple with the uncertainty of the image, making a feature of ambiguity and demanding its consideration. The interruption in "the focus on the music" denies passive spectatorship, stimulating contemplation of the audiovisual relationship. In interpreting this relationship, it is significant that the projection screen is hung well above the stage so that the visual frame of the image and that of the orchestra are kept separate. This is another element ruled by Stevens as it has a distancing effect on the audience; they cannot simultaneously focus visual attention on both elements. However, this separation of the orchestra and the photography adds to the sense of these audio and visual elements as distinct media, presented simultaneously with some potential for connection developed through synchresis, but largely resisting comfortable synthesis.

In *Luminous*, the visual medium, photography, is electronically/digitally mediated and remediated through projection above the stage, while the audio medium, the music, retains a visual dimension (the performers on the stage) but this is dominated by the scale, position, and brightness of the projected photography. Though inevitably still framed as part of an intermedial *mise en scène*, there is a bracketing out of the visual and audio content. This bracketing presents audio and visual content via two distinct modalities without a clear causal connection between the two, united by simultaneity alone. The next section addresses another means by which intermedial theatre can bracket audio and visual content through the use of headphones, which seclude sound from other sensory stimuli.

## Perceptual Incongruence of Headphone Theatre

The term 'headphone theatre' refers to a form of intermedial performance in which the audio components, be they live or pre-recorded, are accessed by the audience through headphones. I have elsewhere defined the field of headphone theatre: "now a sub-genre of the wider sphere of 'immersive' theatre, though also connected to a history of ambulatory arts practices, 'headphone theatre' is rooted within a digital performance paradigm that uses locative, wearable, audio, and mobile devices to facilitate immersive and intersensorial audience experiences" (Klich, "Amplifying Sensory Spaces" 366). In headphone theatre, the spatiotemporal, sensory, and material modalities combine to place the listener at the centre of an environment that is simultaneously both virtual and real, with the headphones placing an auditory lens over the visual landscape. The mediality of headphones "makes intimate the sonic and makes distant the visual, establishing a theatrical relationship between what is heard and what is seen; the aural soundtrack alienates the viewer, providing an added layer of staging" (Klich, "Amplifying Sensory Spaces" 378). Headphone theatre has a particular capacity to play with incongruent perceptions of audio and visual content. Visual elements of headphone theatre can be both staged, for example, through scenography within theatre or other performance space, or found, for example, on the streets of a city, or a combination of both.

The following example presents a specific moment of perceptual incongruity in a production of *Lady Eats Apple*, by the company Back to Back Theatre, presented at the Barbican in June 2018. Back to Back Theatre are an Australian ensemble of neurodiverse performers whose work "questions the assumptions of what is possible in theatre, but also the assumptions that we hold about ourselves and others" ([www.backtobacktheatre.com](http://www.backtobacktheatre.com)). *Lady Eats Apple* is an intermedial triptych, reinterpreting the creation of the universe and exploring the birth of mankind, the fragility of humanity, and the politicization of human existence. Headphones are worn throughout and are used in a variety of capacities across the show, including to amplify the voices of physically distant actors, to address the audience directly via pre-recorded, second-person narration, to enable digital augmentation of the actors' voices, to provide non-diegetic soundtrack, and to directly implicate the listener's body via binaural sound transmission.

The first section of the production involves two characters overseeing Earth's creation in ways that challenge the social constructs of disabilities. In the middle section, the lights fade out and a calm female voice in the headphones instructs the audience to breathe slowly, guiding them towards sleep in the darkness. On the ceiling, swirling, out-of-focus shapes are projected, accompanied by eerie, cosmic music that works congruously with the visuals to simultaneously both overwhelm and defamiliarize. When the lights come up for the final sections, the large Barbican auditorium is revealed; the audience find themselves sitting on the stage facing the main stalls and there is abrupt perceptual disturbance. The soundtrack amplifies what seem to be audience noises; sounds of chip packets rustling. I hear clanging as if the source of the sound is spatially

located amongst my fellow audience members and I turn around to see where the sound is coming from, as do others. What I hear bears no congruence with what I see. The confused faces of the other audience members looking questioningly around suggests their experience is similar. I recognize that I am listening to a binaural transmission and realise I am hearing the world as if through someone else's ears, but cannot understand whose. My sight and hearing offer mutually exclusive versions of reality. Finally, two people come into view, dressed for tidying up rubbish at the back of the auditorium. While I recognize the people as performers, there remains complete disconnection in the relation of sound and image, and I am perceptually disoriented, unsure which sensory modalities to trust. Slowly, synchresis kicks in, and it becomes apparent that the headphone-mediated binaural soundtrack is presenting the amplified audio of the cleaners' actions as they pick up litter. While the performers are far back in the auditorium, visually distant, the volume and binaurality of the audio feed positions the audience close-up, indeed, in-between, the two performers.

Through the use of headphones, the production plays with the positioning of the audience in relation to the action. One reviewer, regarding the transition between the second and third acts, writes:

Though the use of binaural sound vehemently succeeds in certain sections, in live performance, especially conversation and intimacy, it becomes unclear what the position of the audience is in relation to the characters; am I still observing them, or have I become Man ([Simon Laherty](#)) experiencing reality? A clearer distinction was needed (Laurinaitis, "Review: *Lady Eats Apple*").

It was this lack of clarity, and the initial confusion of the location of the sounds at the beginning of act three that drew the attention of the audience (having been lulled into a trance-like calm in the previous act) to perceptual processes. Whilst still perceptually immersed, the audience's absorption in a fictional world is entirely disrupted in the third act, forcing them to query the reliability of their sensory apparatus, and to question how audiovisual perspective positions one as witness/audience/participant in relation to the action.

Referring to the point of convergence of audible and visible information in the case of the Walkman (headphone) user, Thibaud notion of the 'visiophonic knot' suggests inter-weaving harmony between the headphone content, the listener's body and the exterior environment (337). Thibaud describes an experience of expansive audiovisual integration, with the qualities of the music colouring the visuals to create synchresis and audiovisual congruence. In *Lady Eats Apple*, as well as in other examples of intermedial theatre that simultaneously stages separate audio and scenographic texts, perceptual incongruity manifests as moments of punctuation in which the perception of audiovisual integration breaks down. These moments may be large, lengthy moments of confusion, or they may be small, even accidental moments of brief

audiovisual dissonance. In these moments, the visiophonic knot is, temporarily, unravelled.

A further means of conceptualising perceptual incongruity and the perceptual disturbance that occurs when audio and visual processing is in contradiction, is the concept of the 'glitch'. This has received much attention over recent years as a both a generative computational occurrence and an aesthetic embedded within the postdigital context. The term connotes a fault or interference in the performance of technology and has been applied by theorists across an array of cultural and sociological fields. Rosa Menkman defines 'glitch' as a "break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that result in a perceived accident or error" (9). This definition positions the 'glitch' at the disruption of expectations – an understanding furthered by Leszczynski and Elwood's conceptualisation of "glitch epistemologies", which they offer as an orientation towards "material-spatial incongruities" (3). They describe the 'glitch' as referring to instances or occurrences that "do not compute" (2). Casey Lynch reflects on that theorisation and asserts "the glitch is a matter of perception" (2) and a question of "perspective and positionality" (4). For Lynch, "[g]litch epistemology highlights spatially and temporally situated moments of encounter between a subject and a digital system. It calls attention to the contingent arrangements through which those encounters play out as anticipated or not" (3). The glitch draws attention to mediation, to disorientation, and "interruptions to systemic orderings" (Leszczynski and Elwood 4).

Perceptual glitch, as manifest in the experience of perceptual incongruity in intermedial theatre, refers to those moments of encounter for an audience member with audiovisual content that, at least initially, fail to compute. The dramaturgical deployment of contrast and contradiction, and the intentional divergence of audio and visual media in performance, essentially work to fracture the process of communication whereby the act of perception leads to cognitive distortion in the perceiver's mind. The sensory perception of the media products renders a 'glitch' in reconciling the simultaneous interpretation of mutually contradictory cognitive imports, leading to a 'glitch' in the process of making sense in the perceiver's mind. 'Perceptual glitch' describes a vivid instance of dissonance and disruption experienced when one encounters audiovisual content that is not only aesthetically or conceptually incongruent, but that is perceptually incongruent, challenging audiovisual integrity by presenting oppositional information to be rendered by different senses.

### **Conclusion: An Aesthetics of Divergence**

In embracing the incongruent, the mis-matched, and the divergent, intermedial performance can challenge the conventional idealization of integration across media arts and culture. While some headphone theatre strives towards a filmic or virtual reality aesthetic in which audience members are physically, perceptually, and psychologically immersed in an audiovisually-rendered fictional world, the use of audiovisual counterpoint has the potential to deconstruct this aesthetic, and to query 'total'

spectatorship. This potential for disharmony in audiovisual processing also stands in contrast to the metaphors of 'synaesthesia' that are applied to experiences of immersion in performance environments (e.g. Machon) and digital art (e.g. Gsöllpointner et al.). Whilst sensorially saturating, immersion in this type of performance is self-aware and critically reflective as the audience experience the audiovisual not as synaesthetically integrated, but as separate streams of information, perhaps contradictory yet equally valid.

In *Notes on the Opera*, Brecht railed against the model of the 'total work of art', suggesting that "[e]verything that aims to induce hypnosis...must be abandoned" (75). Brecht called for a "radical separation of the elements":

As long as the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* means that the whole lot can be dealt with in one go, in other words as long as art forms are supposed to be 'fused together', then the individual elements must all be degraded to the same degree, so that each one can only be a cue for the other. The smelting process takes hold of the spectator, who is also melted down and represents a passive (suffering) part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This sort of magic must of course be contested. Everything that aims to induce hypnosis, or is bound to produce undignified intoxication, or makes people befuddled, must be abandoned (75).

Intermedial performance has the capacity for the radical separation of modalities, where "various media may occupy the same theatrical space but retain their modal structures and qualifying aspects more tenaciously than in convergent forms" (Crossley 33). While the individual audio and visual media streams may each proffer immersive content, the potential for incongruence across these platforms enforces critical awareness and distance. It disrupts psychological immersion, creating perceptual glitch, and resists the totalising effects of media integration and convergence.

In defying the flow and synthesis of modalities, sensory disjunction in headphone theatre and other audiovisual installations can be perceived as a postdigital strategy for resistance against notions of convergence and media integration that have become a defining aspect of digital culture. Henry Jenkins explains media convergence as involving the flow of content across different media platforms and the cooperation of media industries, but insists that convergence should be understood not as occurring through media devices but as occurring within the brains of individual consumers (2). Sensory divergence and perceptual glitch as deployed in intermedial performance resist convergence and reveal the tendency towards the perceptual integration of media modalities as an automatic process without intention or assertion.

In addition to probing concepts of media and sensory totality and integration, of convergence and completion, the strategic facilitation of disorientation and perceptual glitch can undermine the authority of, and confidence in, human perception. It can reveal the fragility of perception and its biases. Asbjørn Grønstad argues for the value of blurry, distorted, and degraded works of art, explaining:

Broken art reflects a sense of the inherent precariousness of our lives and helps cultivate an ethical relation to the world and its persistent otherness. In this too, visual opacity establishes a bond with the notion of the precarious. Material and sensory imperfections suggest susceptibility, the state of being vulnerable to outside forces, to incompleteness, or to ephemerality (21).

Perceptual incongruence and glitch push for an active perceivership, making space for consideration of sensory processing and one's encounter with the unreliable and unresolvable, and experiences that cannot be reconciled. In encounters with the perceptually dissonant, the perceptual system itself is revealed as susceptible, imperfect. But like the glitch, these moments of perceptual failure or thwarted expectation can be generative, drawing attention to the very 'contingent arrangements' and 'systemic orderings' they interrupt.

The deployment of perceptual incongruence creates a divergent aesthetic, where sight and sound may offer contradictory accounts of the world. In a 2019 interview in the *Financial Times* on "The Politics of Abstraction", artist Julie Mehretu comments

I am looking for that space where you can't have that singular, particular experience...It's about what is undefined, unstable — and for me, that's important politically. There is always a multitude of ways of seeing. The effort to control and delineate — that is really part of a different project. It's a project of power ([www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com)).

At a time when authorities increasingly insist on coherent narratives, the resistance of singularity with regards to ways of seeing, of perception, of realities, and the promotion of plurality becomes potentially if not inherently, political. Intermedial theatre, particularly headphone theatre, has a unique capacity to glitch perception, to open the eye and query the ear, to help us to realise that seeing, hearing, or previous sensory interpretations may no longer be reliable bases for belief, and to champion plurality.

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