Theatre aurality and the spatiality of sound in performance

Theatre aurality refers to emerging practices of sonic-led theatre and a critical field of theatre and performance analysis. It explores sound in and *as* theatre; and it refers to the phenomenal and discursive field of theatre sound *and* to the structures in which these occur; the socio-political and philosophical, as well as the aesthetic. This paper will focus on the work of Extant, the UK's leading theatre company for the Blind and visually impaired, and its experiments with omnipresent, directional and tactile sound in *Flatland,* a production of theatre-in-the-dark. The sound design for this production **generated the feeling of spaces** in a number of ways, through near-ear and hand held devices and via a sound design which explored the particular ambiguity of dimensions in *Flatland*. Drawing on the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy I will explore how we can **navigate spaces through sound**, through its **feeling and hapticity**, and how it can literally move its audience without recourse to the visual.

10 mins

Theatre Aurality describes an emerging critical field of sound and performance practices. It explores the use of sound in, of and *as* theatre. Examples of the latter include theatre productions whereby sound constitutes the entire experience, such as headphone theatre or theatre in the dark. In these forms of theatre we only know the drama, the characters – the **spaces through sound**.

(excerpt from Fiction)

This paper will focus on an example of theatre in the dark in order to explore how sound generates the feeling of spaces particularly when seeing is censored by the quarantine of light. How does sound in all its sonorous, sensual and sensitising potential form the audience experience? And is this possible if an audience is not fixed to the space of an auditorium but is mobile, as in promenade theatre or immersive performance? Can sound not only move us but allow us to move? **Creating the spaces around us as we traverse through them?** These questions became increasingly important to director and writer, Maria Oshodi and her team of collaborators at Extant, the UK's leading theatre company that makes work for the visually impaired. Oshodi's focus as a theatre maker and writer for companies, including Graeae Theatre Company, is centred on the audience experience beyond that which falls upon the ear. She has become drawn towards the opportunities that sonic technologies can offer the visually impaired audience to get out of their seats, a radical shift from being guided to guiding new forms of access.

In order to explore audience motility Oshodi developed *Flatland (*2015) a platform for a unique experiment in sound, haptic technology and theatre that was researched and developed with partners at the Open University, UK and Haunted Pliers/Yale University, US.[i] This was an artistic project, described by the company as a large-scale installation as well as an immersive theatre experience, based on what Oshodi describes as the science of the 'tactile and the senses' (2015, www.extant.org.uk).

***Flatland* offered a highly unusual platform for sounding out the space.** It was an adaptation of the novella by Edwin A. Abbott (1992 [1884]), about a space that consists only of two-dimensions. Flatland is a 'world inside your own, hidden to most people' (Achtman, 2015, p.1), with area but no volume, with a north but no 'upwards' (Abbott, 1992, p.106) which lends itself well to experiments with a non-spectating audience (whether visually impaired or not), because in this two-dimensional world there is no light. As a consequence, the characters of this partitioned place live their lives through highly developed auditory and tactile senses which, when adapted by Oshodi and partners for the theatre, become the means by which audience takes place. Flatlanders live by hearing and 'the art of Feeling' (Abbott, 1992, p.28), and we encounter a piece of theatre that, by touch, is entirely heard. Though our presence as an audience, as three-dimensional beings in a two-dimensional world, is radically different and must be disguised and protected so that we can experience this other dimension without it annihilating us in the process. We are described as 'spacelanders', which doesn't just describe our orbit into Flatland itself, but articulates our three-dimensionality and our excessive sensorial state. The audience are outsiders, alien to the culture of Flatland and, ostensibly, to its rigid hierarchies of class, gender and regularity.

The non-visual nature of *Flatland* is by no means a simple metaphor for the visually impaired. Though there is an absence of light, sight is available to Flatland's inhabitants, but it can only be used in exclusive circumstances and by the chosen few. This is a place ruled by strict hierarchies with versions of the laws of nature that control almost every aspect of conduct, movement and engagement, one of which is the rare opportunity to 'see' (albeit only in the conditions of Flatland's dense fog) which is only used by the well-educated as a form of 'Sight Recognition' — a means of discerning 'between the middle and lowest orders' (Abbott, 1992, p.25). Abbott describes this hierarchy as a constitution based on a 'theory of configuration' (1992, p.52) whereby triangles beget squares, and squares beget pentagons and so on, in which the development of the regular shape is maintained by the extinction — or consumption — of all 'irregular' shapes at their birth. Achtman's adaptation explores this as a regime of 'configural evolution' (2015, p.6), how homogeneity is established and difference is extinguished. Extant's *Flatland* placed an emphasis on how this world is

governed by a regime that upholds 'regularity' by displays of experiments in reductive existence and Oshodi's vision of this adaptation of *Flatland* was prompted by the parallels with disabled culture and the lurking presence of eugenics in Abbott's story, but within it she also found modes of engagement that offer a critique of and an alternative to the hierarchies of sight.

Design for sound and audience

The design for a two-dimensional world in which a three-dimensional audience moves was created by the use of sound to create a sense of scale and dimension, and haptic technology to enter and encounter it; as such, Flatland was a space designed from the perspective of hands as well as ears. The upshot of this for the audience is that a kit is required to experience the production: we are clad in a full spacelander's suit which is adorned with sensors that track our movement in the space; we are also equipped with wireless bone headphones, which perch on our cheeks just in front of our ears; and we are provided an 'animotous', the haptic device that moves us in the dark.

Our bodies are almost entirely covered but crucially our ears are not. Once plunged into darkness all our modes of engagement are in some way regulated, but our hearing remains open to a range of listening experiences.

Sound designer Matthias Kispert's first task presented the particular challenge of creating the sense of a two-dimensional space from the very three-dimensional form of sound (Kispert referred to the nature of sound as such).[ii] The vast scale of Flatland was created by an 'acoustic blanket', which consisted of a continuous drone comprised of low frequency sounds and white noise (including a sample of an air conditioning unit) 'that soak[ed] up those sound details which are essential for getting a sense of the size of the space [including] reverb, sounds of other audience members in the distance, sounds intruding from outside [and so on].' Thus any sounds from the audience were rendered inaudible by this constant and considerably (though not unbearably) loud drone, even our own breath was difficult to discern, as such our presence felt acoustically absent, as well as visually so. Kispert's acoustic blanket served as a backdrop for the narrative itself as it was easily 'filled in' (as he put it) with isolated, directional sounds found in the specific zones of the story and delivered through the bone headphones. The effect was less one of sound compressed or flattened out to give an impression of a two-dimensional world, but rather was one of **'spatial ambiguity'**. Kispert engineered this by experimentation with different effects from different sound sources and for different points of listening. For example, a scene transmitted via the bone headphones may be recorded with reverb, giving the sense of spaciousness near the ear against the dense drone of the

acoustic blanket. This had the effect of creating a space within a space that was incongruous (*Flatland* being not a place of volume) and thus there was a doubling of spaces, with scenes made from spatial effects that were at odds with its dimensions.

For *Flatland*'s narrative, Kispert decided to focus on the particular shapes of the inhabitants including the sounds these might make as they move, their vocal qualities and how these might cluster around the narrative zones of the space. These were made using mallet instruments, including xylophones and kalimbas, which produced crisp sounds that were discernible against the drone of Flatland itself. Each zone of the story — Church, Home, Hospital and University — is marked out by physical shapes that are encountered and etextiles that, when touched, trigger recordings of moments that when assembled by our roving ear, comprise the scenes. For example, the Hospital zone is played through sounds delivered via a series of vertically stacked pipes and articulated tubes, some of which the audience strain upwards to catch, others drift from apertures at angles which are found by feeling the shapes and directions of the structures (see fig 6.2). Some of these listening points were made with MP3 players replaying looped voices, others contained little battery powered motors with bits of rubber attached that gently thrumped the interior of the pipe and produced sounds reminiscent of distant generators and incinerators, an effect reminiscent of the engine of a hospital.

Audience to all this requires considerable concentration, the sheer scale of the sound design and its multichannel composition was something which the researchers found occasionally overwhelmed its listeners — some of whom decided to stop moving to gain a sense of what was happening aurally, or simply went off-piste to try and find a quieter or more comprehensible spot. This form of audience required particular effort on our part, and multiple modes of engagement that we had to commit to — or give ourselves over to — in order to fully experience the performance. Sometimes this was a case of relinquishing control of our movement over to sounds in order to navigate the unknown spaces, whereupon we had to shift our mode of perception and engage in auditory focus to catch parts of narrative, or we had to allow ourselves to be distracted by distant or drifting signals to capture other stories.

How sound helps to navigate spaces through **feeling and hapticity**

One of the ways in sound helps us to navigate these unseen spaces is through resonance, but not just the movement or precedence or echo, but through the way in which resonance brings us into the relation with other things: with surfaces, shapes, spaces – and selves. To explore how audience takes

place within these spaces of sound, Jean-Luc Nancy's seminal theory of listening and his analysis of resonance offers a great deal; Nancy's listener is never in isolation, but is always in relation to or *with*, which has intersubjective possibilities that can tell us something about audience — in particular, audience that is entirely sonorous. Nancy's frequently quoted declaration, 'What secret is at stake when one truly *listens*' (2007, p.5, emphasis in original) is usually cut short; the sentence continues '[…] that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?' (*Ibid.*). Nancy's call is for a form of listening that is unshackled from what forms we think meaning takes — for example, that normative notion that sounds should always signify — and instead is let loose in the sonorous world, in other words it is listening amidst aurality. However, this is not an auricular immersion into a dispersed and meaningless world, far from it. At the heart of his listening is an exploration of the feeling of sound and how, in feeling, we form a sense of ourselves. It's a particularly material approach,[iii] articulated through the ear and manifested through the motility and resonance of sound and its affects, which invites an exploration of sound as experienced — particularly in theatre.

This has interesting consequences for the design of theatre which is only available through sonority, in particular its design for audience which is almost entirely regulated bar the ear: in *Flatland* our vision is censored by the pitch black environment, our bodies are ambulated by feeling and our touch is directed — but our hearing sense is let loose, and more so it seems without any of the other senses, particularly sight, to indicate what will generate sound's presence (because we do not see the things, spaces or events that create the sounds we encounter. In order to *make sense* of anything we must engage in a kind of hearing within hearing, a form of listening which, as Nancy put it, is 'in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it' (Nancy, 2007, p.6) but is also a movement of sensing that is 'a straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible' (*Ibid.*).

Touch

In *Flatland*, the invitation to listen also takes place by touch. The journey through *Flatland* is propelled by a handheld robotic device, the 'animotous', a form of haptic technology that moves in our palms indicating the direction of travel from one zone to the next. Tracking devices in the spacelander suits are picked up via an internal GPS system, with multiple infrared beacons scattered throughout the space which allow the technical team to send its audience in different directions so that sections of the narrative are discovered in various sequences, ensuring there is space in each

zone for free exploration of the listening points (and so that audience members do not collide in the dark). The animotous, nicknamed the 'haptic sandwich' by the technical team, is formed of two parts and the top slice shifts an inch in the required direction of travel, rotating and extending accordingly and moves rapidly from side to side if we have progressed too far, at which point we should turn in the opposite direction for the device to recalibrate our position in the space. The design of the animotous is based on the movement of a lotus flower[iv] and our instructions for its proper use are to hold it in our palms facing upwards with our fingers arranged around it like petals.

The animotous is the one aspect of our entire audience encounter that doesn't make direct use of audio it prompts us into movement via vibrotactile feedback, it quickly vibrates in our pockets and gently resonates in our palms as we progress. It functions entirely through touch; the reverberant tactility not only draws us towards the particular sonic encounters of *Flatland*, it resonates in our palms as it does so. Albeit without 'sound' the animotous moves — and moves us — in ways that are sonorous.

Hapticity

The haptic refers to touch, but also to the act of contact and the manipulation of that touched and held. An example of this is the type of material which, like the animotous, can be both held and beholden: it comes into our possession but remains something that we regard — or look upon (as the traditional meaning of behold alludes to) as we hold it. Hapticity refers to the strange quality of the haptic; to that sensation that when we hold something we also sense that it is *not* of us, and how this difference is marked out and bridged by touch. Sound operates in a similar way. We know sound moves us because we feel it. It can be literally felt through our bodies, on our skin and, depending on the frequency, through to our bones. Sound can be touching. We can feel it touching us, as we can feel it touch the bodies of others. It is tactile to the extent that it has the some of the qualities of the haptic; it can hold us but cannot be fully held by us. There is a discrepancy between our feeling of sound and our capacity to feel it. It is the feeling of sound that articulates our exposure to it **and sounds out the spaces** around us. The interface between touch and sound is explored in *Flatland* through the animotous and through eTextiles, materials and objects with MP3 players within that, once felt, activate sound. In this production there is a contingency between touch and sound which means that sound is more than that felt but in its feeling it has an affect, it does something to us. For Nancy, this is a form of listening as an openness to sonority which, by *being felt*,

becomes constitutive of selves in the world. Nancy's theory of listening is also a theory of subjectivity.

Resonance and Space

Nancy's theory of listening is also a theory of subjectivity, one which comes into being amidst the spaces of sound, through resonance. Resonance is the motility of sound in which listening takes place. Nancy's point is that: 'All sonorous presence is […] made up of a complex of returns [*renvois*] whose binding is the resonance or "sonance" of sound' (2007, p.16). This is not an unfamiliar definition of sound, however less attention has been paid to resonance and its relation to subjectivity — in particular 'listening' as its opening, and this is the absence that Nancy's theory seeks to address. Resonance is not constant but is set off by sound. It announces sound by means of the 'attack' of its beginnings, and it constitutes sound by its movement between surfaces and amongst bodies, amidst both subjects and objects. This return or 'renvoi' of sound is how resonance is best understood. The referrals of resonance are not just of its movement between surfaces but also lie in its capacity to delineate space and 'spacing' which, in turn, create the distances necessary for repetition, and so on. The distance is a demarcation of resonance — for instance, of sound's return — yet it is its spacing which makes the return discernible. Space forms sound's referral by creating the conditions for the return.

The sonic scenography of *Flatland* created an assembled and autonomous audience, while the ear remained open to ubiquitous sound, the body of the audience — both individually and collectively — was also free to encounter the haptic devices in any sequence. Furthermore, the animotous — and its voice in our cheek bones — could position us severally in several places, individual or collectively, depending on the audiences' migration through the space. This combination of autonomous and directed movement made us aware of what is at stake when we are moved, whether we are about to be brought together or dispersed, we are always on the cusp of an encounter. This is the final and perhaps the most pertinently political aspect of Nancy's listening: just as it is a foundation of subjectivity, as an opening to the sensing of the self, listening also becomes a sensing of the self in relation to *other* selves in the world. The resonance of listening is not an exclusive, singular act, we resonate with and within sonority that contains within it all kinds of subjects, selves, objects, events. It is a form of engagement that by its very materiality places our-selves in inter-subjective relations. In this way, the subjectivities of the visually impaired are not replicated but **the spaces of their**

experience can be encountered through navigating the sonorous world. **Sound performs the encounter with difference, differences and otheredness placing us amidst this spatiality.** Listening brings the self into exchange with others, it is a means of moving from the singular (whether a self, a meaning or a position or belief) into the plural: it is a route towards — or sense of — the coextensive state with the outside world. As such, Nancy's listening has a political function, in that the being of the self is always in relation to being *with*.[v] This has significant potential for unveiling the political potential of the sonority of theatre sound, which is the kernel of theatre aurality.

[i] Haunted Pliers is the research and development company of Dr Ad Spiers who develops robotic and haptic devices for surgical and artistic endeavours.

[ii] These and other quotes from Matthias Kispert are taken from interviews with the author of this book in person and via email; they are cited here with kind permission from Kispert. Or they are from Extant's research dissemination event held at Theatre Delicatessen, Farringdon Road, London, 29 April 2015.

[iii] I use the term 'material' here to refer to the way in which listening, as a sense (in all senses of the word that Nancy uses it), has fundamental corporeal implications. Ian James (2006) makes the point that Nancy's notion of sense 'is therefore "material," not because it implies the notion of substance, but because it is the precondition for the bodily know-how through which, prior to conscious thought or cognition, we orient ourselves …' (p.106). These particular material conditions were described by Rolf Großmann as an 'auditory dispositif', see Schulze (2013) for analysis of this in spatial, temporal and corporeal ways.

[v] Nancy's theories of being take a departure from Heidegger's *Dasein* and relate more to *mitsein* – being-with, or *mitseinsfrage* – or the question of being-with (see Heikkilä, 2008 p.10 and Hutchens, 2005, p.27). It is this move from the emphasis on singular being to singular/plural existence (see Nancy, 2000) which distinguishes Nancy's work from mid-century phenomenologies.