Sound and Subjectivity in the "techno-sublime": *Autobiographer* and *Ring*.

The concept of the sublime is traditionally understood as a means of critically framing emotional and sensory experiences pertaining to fear and fascination, usually evoked by nature. In art, it is not the object but what the object does that evokes a sublime experience; subsequently the sublime (as an experience) can provide us with insights relating to human existence. In this instance the theatrical event is the art object that I propose has the potential to evoke a techno-sublime experience: a sublime experience specifically mediated through the use of digital technology. My experience of Melanie Wilson's performance *Autobiographer* in 2012 [1] provoked for me a turn to the sublime. The production, sponsored by the Welcome Trust and Fuel Productions, was the result of collaboration between Wilson and the Alzheimer's Society. *Autobiographer* features a soundscape that constructs an aural experience of disorientation, deepening confusion, a sense of fear, disconnection, isolation, and/or abandonment; arguably all experiences associated with dementia. Many of these experiences were achieved through the use of audio technology: the voice of each actor was amplified via a discrete microphone (small headset microphone) and sent to discretely positioned speakers. Thus the performance played with the audience's perception and sensory experience in such a way as to replicate the dis-ease of Alzheimer's.

Shortly after seeing *Autobiographer* I experienced a second production by Fuel Productions titled *Ring* [2]. *Ring*, an immersive performance in which audience members used headphones, took place completely in the dark and caused me to further reflect on the efficacy of theatre events that set out to play with the audience's sensory engagement, this was achieved through the use of binaural recording

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technology. The distinctiveness of these two exemplary productions is that they mobilized the sublime (for me at least) in that they afforded a profound experiential dislocation of subjectivity through an audio-led immersive experience, which nevertheless sustained some aspect of critical distance in the very disturbances of its dislocations. That is to say, the intensity of the dislocations of immersive visceral experiences activated mental reflection on the experience whilst it was happening. As a consequence of the particular experiences that these two theatre performances triggered for me, this article critically explores *Autobiographer* and *Ring* as case studies that employed audio technological soundscapes to disorientate, confuse, and disturb the audience, generating, what I argue is an experience of the techno-sublime. I define this as a sublime experience mediated and heightened by aural technologies. The case for the techno-sublime extends on a previously published account of *Autobiographer* published in 2013 [3] and further demonstrates contemporary theatre's potential to mobilize experiences of the (Lyotardian) sublime.[4]

In both performance events the complexity of the structure made the experience profound. The aesthetic processes utilized challenged our perceptual field: it was as though we were unable to trust our own senses, perceptions, experiences; we were rendered temporarily unstable and out of control. As audience members we are driven to feel as though we are on the brink of oblivion: losing ourselves through perceptual dislocation. The performance events aimed to disrupt relationships between spatial and aural environments. The audience member as "reader" begins to wonder why the theatre artists chose to effect such responses. In *Autobiographer,* the aural environment was controlled through the judicious placement of small speakers within the audience. The location of each actor's amplified voice was displaced and the perceptual experience for each audience member was dependent on where s/he

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was positioned within the performance space. In *Ring*, the aural environment dominates as the audience's presence becomes suspended between the live space that s/he thinks they are in and the prerecorded, predetermined space constructed for the listener that simulates the live space. Similarly, both events situated the audience between a fictional institutional environment and the actual performance studio where the events took place, for example, *Ring*, when the darkness descended, implied ambiguously that the audience had been transported to a selfhelp group meeting.

The following is a critical account of the theatre experiences, beginning with a description of each event, followed by an examination of the spatial and aural engagement strategies employed, before I finally examine the experiences mobilized for audiences in light of the techno-sublime.

Ring

Ring was conceived and directed by David Rosenberg as a binaural sound journey (the soundscape was created by Ben and Max Ringham). I experienced the performance at the Axis Arts Centre, Cheshire (UK) in 2012. The performance required the audience to wear headphones and be seated in concentric circles in the performance space. Following a cleverly set up introduction to the event, where the ambient sounds of the space were mixed into a prerecorded soundscape, we, the audience, were met by and introduced to 'Michael' the MC for the event. Michael asked audience members to move seats and sit next to someone they did not know. Above the seating area microphones were suspended, capturing the ambient sounds in the room so that wearing the headphones, we were led to believe, resulted in our still being able to hear the familiar sounds of the space. Michael then rehearsed with us the experience of the lights being switched off before we were plunged into complete darkness for the duration of the performance. The darkness marked a second

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beginning to the event. Of course the idea that we had been seated next to a stranger, a person whose voice we did not know, reinforced the illusion of the reality of the event as, in the darkness, the various whispered voices and mutterings were not familiar.

Following the darkness, I, along with each audience member, experienced people seated on chairs behind me, moving around; there was urgent whispering and the sound of chairs being scraped along the floor. We then experienced a male voice that I connected to Michael who reassuringly whispered in my ear, "it is okay, you can stay where you are". I, along with many other audience members [5], mistook the voice as being live and speaking directly and only to me, as opposed to merely being part of the prerecorded soundscape performance that everyone was receiving simultaneously through the headphones. I innocently responded and thanked him in a whispered voice. Rosenberg has described the event as "directly engaging with the physiology of hearing and psychology of perception." [6] In the postshow discussion the performer (Michael), Guy Dartnell, and deviser, David Rosenberg, talked about the necessity of staging the event in a public space where a group of people might legitimately meet. Because the event takes place in complete darkness it could take place on the radio or online where the audience might listen to it in their own private spaces. However, such an environment would not generate the sense of isolation and intimacy played with in the performance space. The sensory play, and consequent disruption, requires an audience member to be present in a shared space full of people.

In *Ring* the audience member experienced both isolation and intimacy: we were both implicated as being inside a fictional selfhelp group and uncertainly outside this group. We were both recognized and then misrecognized as another, a figure named Francis/Frances. We were invited to question both notions of identity and

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characteristics by which we might define ourselves. Without visual reassurance we took our cues from the aural arena but these cues lead to further disorientation.

Figure 1: Image from *Autobiographer* of the four performers playing Flora: Alice Lamb, Janet Henfrey, Penelope McGhie, Melanie Wilson courtesy of Monika Chmielarz and Fuel Productions.

Autobiographer

Autobiographer is a performance poem written, directed, and performed by Melanie Wilson in conjunction with three other female performers (see Figure 1), and with support from the Wellcome Trust. The production explored the experience of dementia through six manifestations of the figure of Flora and also simulated a sense of dementia for the audience by using a form of narrative and aural immersion. The production toured the UK in 2012 and this account is based on my experience of attending the performance at the Toynbee Studios in London.

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Both performance events discussed here are concerned with disrupting relationships between spatial and aural environments. In *Autobiographer* there was a suggestion through the activity of the older figure of Flora that she (and the audience) was in a nursing or residential institution; however, this sense of being immersed in a locality was not made explicit at the beginning of the performance. Performers and audience shared an intimate space, wooden chairs were set in concentric circles for the audience to sit on, and the performers moved around and across the space; sometimes sitting with us, sometimes standing. The Floras spoke to us, sometimes generally; and sometimes intimately, waiting for a response. The four female performers were all dressed in plain, navy blue frocks. They represented Flora at different stages of her life: in her late teens, in her mid-30s, in her early 50s, and in her late 70s. In addition, there was a prerecorded voice heard who offered an internal voice to Flora. The sixth Flora was a young girl who appeared mid-way through the performance and walked across the space, pausing by each Flora before running out of an opposite door. This was the only evident door in the space, and the door we had all entered through. The narrative poetically engaged us with fragmented scenarios from Flora's life where time and place became increasingly confused, as occurrences appeared sometimes from the past, sometimes the present, and sometimes were announced as though they were yet to come. Parallel to the disorientation of time there was an evident disorientation of sound location for the audience. The Floras inhabiting the space wore discreetly placed microphones that mediated their voices through hidden speakers, generating a strange aural disruption as the audience saw them speaking but become aware that the sound source of their voices was located elsewhere in the space.

It is evident that the spoken and technological score foreground, and collectively challenge, both the audience and the four intersubjective Floras to consider what happens to our sense of embodiment and signification in the face of dementia. Here we become other to ourselves, less recognizable, an object to be spoken for as opposed to an embodied subject whose agency is manifest in our unique speaking voice. The interrelationship of the voices obscures the sense of Flora being an embodied subject, the technological intervention further diminishes a sense that Flora is a single coherent entity: the embodied voice cannot withstand mediation and becomes a ghost of itself. Norie Neumark suggests that this ghosting, or haunted voice, has an inbetween and uncanny quality that has, in relation to Freud's sense of the uncanny, a sense of the unhomely.[7] Thus as Flora's voice drifts in and out of mediation so too does her voice drift in and out of her body: the digitally mediated voice is beginning to replace Flora's physical body (here the audience's perception is that the voice has moved from the location of the body to the location of a discrete speaker positioned elsewhere in the performance space). It also becomes apparent later in the performance that Flora is both literally and metaphorically no longer "at home" but in a "home."

Rules of Engagement

Accounts of both performance events detail that spatially and procedurally the audience is located in a both/and position. This position follows Merleau-Ponty's notion of spatial embodied consciousness;[8] used here to describe an immersive theatrical space that simultaneously provokes critical reflection. The immersive spaces exist in both a liminal zone, between one reality and another, and as concrete spaces of cognitive/corporeal hyper-reflection. Hyper-reflection is a state whereby a reflection is simultaneously aware of itself and engaged in the act of perceiving the

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world. Merleau-Ponty describes this form of reflection as "Being no longer before me, but surrounding me and in a sense traversing me"[9] and thus is particularly relevant to the experience offered by the two immersive performances that invite a doubled experience of being at once both inside and outside the event.

　Theatrical immersion works against an imposing and controlling pre-determined reflective space because of the intimacy affected by the form. More recently Josephine Machon's notion of (syn)aesthetic theatre has offered a critical framework that seeks to promote a fusion of the "somatic and semantic *in order to produce* a visceral response in the audience." [10] Her critical discourse usefully draws attention to a need for a vocabulary responding to changes in theatrical practice. She offers a framework to support "making sense/*sense*-making" in order that "intangible ideas, states and experiences are made tangible." [11] The two studies here, moves the discourse on further in terms of critical apprehension. Both performances construct an immersive environment that functioned as a metaphor for the disturbing experience engendered for the immersant (to use Machon's term) or audience member. Importantly, Machon's description of visceral experience as affecting "an upheaval and disturbance of the physiological body itself" [12] is essential to what I will discuss in relation to the techno-sublime.

In both *Autobiographer* and *Ring* the immersive strategies provoked a realization that what was occurring to us was beyond are sensory and cognitive capacity to control. In neither event were the immersive qualities consistently employed, thus the audience were not transported to a fictional reality but were caught between various fictional realities all of which were enigmatic, fleeting, and obscure. Further, both events called on our sense of being in the here and now that appeared stable and familiar but was demonstrably ambiguous and createed uncertainty and

disorientation. The sense of disorientation encouraged me to reflect on and question the implications of the sensorial experiences imposed on me. Both events played with the idea that as a member of the audience each of us was also a player inside the fictional world; however, this role was only ever inferred and never made explicit.

In *Ring*, throughout the period of darkness, the rules for engagement were not made apparent to the audience. At times it appeared as though the audience was part of a fictional narrative and expected to actively participate; however, the audience's role was vague and appeared elusive. The design of the soundscore exacerbateed our confusion: we were prevented from becoming immersed and lost in the fictional story of a selfhelp group that continually prompted us to question our experience of the event, our perceptual understandings, responses, and anxieties. Similarly in *Autobiographer*, the four performers playing Flora frequently turned to audience members for answers to direct questions, reassurance, and assistance in finding a way "home." This strategy indicated that we were all a part of the same fictional world; however, we did not know where we were supposed to be or who we were supposed to be. Audience members challenged to answer specific questions appeared disconcerted and hesitant in their responses.

Sound design and aurality

As evident in the above descriptions, both performances utilize designed sound to afford a sense of disturbance by manipulating the audience's sensory experience of sound and space. While there are numerous ways that we are able to locate sound based on how audio signals reach both left and right ear, it is, however, the strategies that can be used to dislocate sound that are of particular interest here. Andy Farnell [13] notes that locating sound is more difficult in interior spaces, where, as in both *Ring* and *Autobiographer*, sound is low level and sustained. The diffusion of

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the mediated sound scores designed by Wilson for *Autobiographer* and by Ben and

Max Ringham for *Ring* created a challenge for the audience to detect the location of

sound sources. As Blesser and Salter state, "a fully diffuse sound field creates an

enveloping feeling, unlike any other listening experience." [14] The following provides

an account of some of the strategies used in the two performance events and the

sensory impact of these devices.

In *Ring,* the audience were subject to technological disorientation achieved by

employing a binaural soundscape experienced through headphones that effectively

blurred the boundary between the actual performance space that the audience

occupied and the theatrical soundscape heard in the completely darkened

environment. In *Autobiographer,* the disorientation was a result again of a soundscape

but here the aural experience was potentially misperceived as the voices of the

performers were mediated through hidden speakers, and the sonic arena of sound was

disrupted. Both performance events demonstrate experientially that we cannot always

control or trust our senses to locate us in the world. As George Home-Cook discusses

in *Theatre and Aural Attention*, the notion of designed sound is associated with

"trickery, deception, and *manipulation*." [15] His term "sonic stealth" usefully describes

the ways in which both the sound designs discussed here effect sensory manipulation;

he says, "[o]perating undercover, or 'by stealth', sound creeps in by the back door of

perception, stealing our experience from under our ears." [16]

While this article does not intend to engage significantly with the science of

sound, it is worth touching on particular characteristics of sound perception that

support the critical argument for the techno-sublime effected in part by sound

disorientation. Hence, concepts such as interaural time difference (ITD) identifies the

experience of ambiguity regarding sound location that is the result of sound waves

reaching ears at different times. [17] Ross Brown states that "sound is round" and we each have an auditory sphere bounded by the sounds or noise contained within earshot. [18] However, in order to seek coherence and orderliness within our auditory sphere we need to work with spatial cues and sound localization. Binaural hearing utilises the ways in which each sound is captured by each ear to create a sense of space and order. However, our perception of sound can be confused by what is referred to as "phase ambiguity." [19] This confusion can occur where the source of sound cannot be located, for example, some areas, especially behind and infront of the head, are particularly difficult for us to distinguish sounds because these areas are equal distance from each ear; these areas are sometimes referred to as "cones of confusion" [20] and are areas effectively manipulated in both *Ring* and *Autobiographer* to effect disorientation. In *Ring* the cones of confusion exacerbate an audience member's difficulty in locating other 'characters' seated in the ring who, aurally appear to be members of a selfhelp group. At this point we, the audience, were led to understand that we were now part of a fictional space; this was later reinforced by sounds of, for example, the sea thus indicating that we had been transported to another fictional space entirely. However, the sound design of the event repeatedly draws us back to the space we are actually located in.

The aural design in *Ring* also played on the audience's haptic disorientation and confusion. As part of the introduction to *Ring* Michael, the MC, asked us our name as we entered the space, and chatted with us as he walked amongst us; thus, when we were plunged into thick darkness, there was a sense that we were individually known to Michael; we had been singled out as of special interest by him, for protection perhaps, or maybe something more sinister. In actuality, the darkness was impenetrable so the logic that he could see any of the audience was illusory. The

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individuated experience of Michael electing to whisper in my ear and reassure me that I did not need to move my chair whilst all those around me appeared to be moving, was specifically heightened as a consequence of the introduction, and reinforced by my experiencing the sensation of his whispered voice as the touch of his breath on my neck. This haptic experience was a trick: we have felt the sensation of someone's breath on our neck and this has previously indicated an intimate presence of a body in close proximity behind us but, in this instance, the sensation was duplicitous, caused by a sensory misconnection effected by the use of binaural recording technology and darkness.

The sensory disorientation generated by the darkness excited an added anxiety for the audience. Aurally we were made aware of others around us, seemingly being invited to move around, tell stories, sing, being involved differently from ourselves thus creating a sense of anxiety that we were behaving in a way that was out of kilter with the rest of the group. Had we been excluded? Had we missed an instruction? Despite being reassured by the voice whispering in our ear, we could never quite be sure whether we were doing what was required; whether we were in the group or not.

Amanda Stewart (2010) [21] argues that the mediation of the voice through headphones leads to a greater sense of intimacy, despite it being disembodied; however, her argument is not supported by *Ring* where the listener does not experience the treated prerecorded voice as disembodied but has been afforded a greater intimacy because, as an audience member, I felt the breath of the speaker. Other audience members spoke of being able to smell the breath of the speaker as he leant in and whispered intimately into their ear, "You are safe…You should walk tall. Your silence is your greatest weapon." [22] The audience's misperceptions may have been the result of hearing the unamplified and embodied voice of Michael prior to the

darkness. In the darkness, the binaural recording integrated his prerecorded voice along with the ambient sounds of the space and created a dislocated phenomenal experience.

At a later point in the performance the sound of a heartbeat was used; as the sound became increasingly louder audience members reported that they could feel the sound as though it was being produced inside their own bodies. Stephen Di Benedetto notes that,

> Hearing is done not only with the ears, but also with every fibre of our beings as vibrations of sound move into our bodies. Sound touches us, inside and out. And this feeling of being touched by sound is heightened by technology: when microphones amplify and record sounds, they not only involve the ears, but also every other part of the body. [23]

In this instance the sound of the heartbeat could be experienced as terrifying as it again confronted the audience with a heightened sense of our own inner visceral sensory system characterized as interoception, that is a sense of the body from within.

In *Autobiographer* the four Floras each wore microphones and, while the performance space was intimate and did not require the performers' voices to be amplified, the audience heard the four female voices both live in the space and, simultaneously, mediatized and thus appearing to come from different parts of the space (loudspeakers surrounded the audience but were hidden behind drapes). The performers purposively all spoke in quiet, soft tones that exacerbated the difficulty in locating vocal sounds within this experiential region; the voices were carefully controlled, through volume, to optimize a sense of intimacy. This dynamic form of

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listening required a particular form of attending to the performance and demonstrably responded to Home-Cook's repeated call for "a dynamic, intersensorial, bodily engagement with the 'affordances' of a given environment." [24] It was as though the audience needed to actively lean into the performance of *Autobiographer* to better hear and grasp what the women were saying. Amanda Stewart describes the mediation of the voice through amplification as both a removal of the body but also a return of the body "with reinvigorated power and intimacy." She argues, as discussed in relation to *Ring,* that "[a]mplifying the voice, putting it through speakers or headphones and subjecting it to editing and other treatments transforms it into a new materiality and also affords a greater intimacy with and awareness of the embodied, unamplified voice." [25]

In *Autobiographer*, the voices of Flora, being both amplified and unamplified, served to create a sense of both intimacy and isolation, both for the audience and the four figures of Flora. There were moments in the performance when the Floras become aware of each other as well as times when the prerecorded voice of Flora interrupted, creating another sound arena that commented or added to a fragment of narrative recollection. These moments drew attention to Flora's vulnerability and paranoia; at other times these moments echoed a failure to complete a story or a sentence. While all the voices were at times processed through speakers, they were never amplified in a conventional sense of making sound louder: they were amplified to the level of normal speech and this enhanced the perception of isolation and dislocation of voice from body.

The vocal dislocation of the four figurations of Flora at times conjured a sense of ventriloquism. Neumark describes a similar effect, in his essay on the paradox of the voice in performance, as a "doubling figure." He describes the paradox of the

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voice as a voice that appears "disembodied" as it emanates from one body but is heard as coming from another body. [26] In this instance, disembodiment reinforced the fear of losing oneself: Flora is losing her ability to tell her own story as she fails to recollect her narrative; at the same time she finds her voice being taken from her. This fear was reciprocated for the audience in the technological manipulation of voices and, as described above, a collapse of the sonic image was experienced for the audience who saw Flora speaking but experienced the sound, much like in ventriloquism, as coming from elsewhere in the space. A tension between the embodied and disembodied voices created and disturbed both the audience's sense of Flora as well as her own sense of self, and, in this sense the voices had what Neumark has argued to be an uncanny performative quality, "haunted by the media from which they emerge." [27] The interruptions voiced by the virtual Flora, along with the disembodied voices of Flora in the performance space, created a further sense of the uncanny because these voices were mediated and became dislocated, reinforcing a separation of the mind and the body as the mind began to fail. Neumark highlights the apparent paradox of the simultaneity of the present and absent voice when mediated, again such aspects of vocal manipulation were evident in the manner that Flora's sense of self became diminished.

In her book *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression,* Adriana Cavarero argues that the human voice does not deceive because it produces a unique sound that is manifest as an individual's speaking voice. She puts it this way:

What it [the voice] communicates is precisely the true vital and
perceptible uniqueness of the one who emits it. At stake here is not a

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closed-circuit communication between one's own voice and one's own

ears, but rather a communication of one's own uniqueness that is, at the

same time, a relation with another unique existent. It takes at least a duet,

a calling and a responding – or better, a reciprocal intention to listen, one

that is already active in the vocal emission and that reveals and

communicates everyone to the other. [28]

Each of the Floras possessed a unique voice, but these voices, and the different

aspects of Flora become tangled, woven into a chiasm where the uniqueness of the

figure of Flora and the communication became lost; ultimately all the Floras

possessed the same voice. As the four Floras listened and responded to each other,

their voices reverberated across the years of Flora's life and the phrases resonated

differently depending which version of Flora uttered them.

When young Flora says she wants to go home the phrase was charming and

funny, but when the elderly Flora repeats the same phrase it reinforced her loss of

control. Phrases such as "I'd like to go home" and "Someone will tell you the answer"

were spoken by each of the four Floras at different points in the vocal text and traces

of the phrases clung to the audience as the phrases floated through the performance

space in a way that suggested that we should have actively responded to them.

Otherwise there would have been no communication, no sense that Flora's presence

was acknowledged. We were also made aware that this voice was also our voice,

seeking answers, seeking reassurance. There was a call and response aspect built into

the performance between the Floras and the audience, which picked up on another

aspect of shared bodily and social space. Audience members were made aware of their

own voice in the moments of engagement with Flora, particularly because of the

rhythm, cadence, and timbre that the actors used. The quality of their voices appeared to dictate a mode of response from audience members. Flora 3, for example, asked a member of the audience, "Can you spell world backwards?" In the written text, the direction states, "They do it together gently." Indeed on both occasions I attended the performance event, the member of the audience asked did respond "gently." At an earlier moment in the performance the use of repetition established a mantra: (a mantra was established though repetition): "A dandelion clock; A packed suitcase, I keep myself free." When the mantra began again, at a later point, the Floras struggled to recollect the vocal pattern and turned to an audience member asking, "Do you know?" In the written text the direction stipulates two responses:

"(If the audience member answers 'a suitcase', then…)

Flora 2: A suitcase, yes, a suitcase.

(If audience member remains mute, then…)

Flora 2: Surely it doesn't matter, someone will know." [29]

On neither occasion that I attended the performance did the audience member who was asked offer a reply.

The Sublime and the Techno-Sublime

Having focused on the dual notions of critical distance and aurally mediated sensory experience my aim is now to re-evaluate the concept of the sublime as a critical tool for evaluating theatre events that provoke a heightened sensory experience. F. Elizabeth Hart, [30] following Merleau-Ponty, argues that phenomenology and cognition are not diametrically opposed positions and that both the lived experience and cognitive reflection are duel mechanisms mediated by the body. In both performances discussed here, the question of interactivity and agency is foregrounded by our being in the world of the fictional event while simultaneously being critically

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outside it. This liminal space parallels Merleau-Ponty's notion of "hyper-reflection," a space described as "perception-reflected-on and thing-perceived-within-a-perception-reflected-on." [31]

The concept of the sublime is described by Kant as an overwhelming sensation of both pain and pleasure evoked by the contemplation of an aspect of nature or human artifice that confronts our sensibilities and creates a phenomenon of incomprehension and awe. [32] More recently, Lyotard re-engaged with the sublime and included art as a vehicle that could evoke a sense of the sublime. [33] For an entity to be experienced as sublime it needs to overwhelm our perception and imagination in a manner that enlivens or challenges our rational comprehension. Although the human body itself is not usually considered to be a vehicle with the capacity to evoke a sublime experience, an art object such as theatre can. Thus, as exemplified by both case studies cited here, the sublime can be mobilized by a defamiliarized sensory experience of the body. As an audience member I was confronted by the notion that I could not control or dominate my own sense of self, but this experience was too painfully overwhelming to contemplate. In the moment of the performance, audience members are challenged to create a critical, and reflective, distance between the object of the sensory confusion and our self in order that the experience is made safe; in Kantian terms it becomes "disinterested." The experience of theatre for most audiences could be described as "disinterested," the result of the distinct spatial arrangement of audience and performers. The audience are seated in an auditorium where they can contemplate the stage action from a "disinterested" distance, but immersive theatre events, such as those discussed here, seek to disrupt the aesthetic gap, or critical distance, between audience and performer and/or audience and

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fictional world; thus substantiating the need for a critical perspective that addresses the dissolution of "disinterested" distance.

For a theatre event to be ascribed with the properties of the sublime it must be rendered out of the ordinary. Paul Crowther [34] suggests that the sublime effects an "affective jolt" to our disposition that disrupts the routine monotony of our lives, reaffirming both the experiential pain and pleasure (of our experience) of existence. While Crowther does not discuss theatre as a stimulus for the sublime, he does point to "collective rite" as an important stimulus and thus the immersive events that form the two case studies here reveal how being an audience member may evoke the sublime. Indeed both performances deliver an "affective jolt" because of the disorientating use of sound technology and the dislocation of the audience's perspective that here affords a sublime affect, whereby sensorial experience invited critical reflection both whilst it was happening and following the event. That the sublime is mobilized by digital sound design suggests that the affect may be argued as techno-sublime.

Andrew Westerside, a theatre performer and director with Proto-type Theater, explores the affect of the techno-sublime in a theatrical context. He states that, "being there, so profoundly crucial to the synthetic a priori, is also crucial to the evocation of the sublime." [35] For Westerside it is the collision of the visceral and the virtual in an aesthetic performance context that is at the core of the techno-sublime. [36] An illogical aspect of a concept such as techno-sublime is that it appears tautological. While the sublime experience confronts us with the unpresentable, with chaos, with something beyond control and comprehension, technology is controllable: it can be switched off. Both *Ring* and *Autobiographer* offer an experience that can be described as technologically sublime because the experiences they engender are mediated by

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technology. The technology, in this instance, is a mechanism that allows us to perceive and experience an overwhelming sense of existence that enhances our sense of being alive, whilst simultaneously confronting us with the negation of life. Crucial here is the notion of critical distance: a characteristic of the techno-sublime that is queried by both Hal Foster and Barbara Bolt. Foster describes the concept of critical distance as having been erased due to effects produced by new technologies. Foster comments that the literal space used by the senses to process sound is reduced when, using headphone technology, sound is fed directly into our ears. [37] Consequently, technology compresses and edits out auratic distance and space for contemplation. He argues that technology produces a mediated intensity and immediacy, a paradox that leads to critical distance being lost.

Bolt conversely locates the techno-sublime as an immersive experience where the experience of the event replaces reflection on the event: "[h]ere critical distance and reflection required for aesthetic judgment no longer operate." [38] My argument follows Westerside and argues that the techno-sublime is an available experience, a consequence of the spatial and aural immersion, and technological disorientation that compound to simultaneously create both critical space for reflection and an immersive experience.

For this reason *Ring* offers an evocation of the techno-sublime, what Bolt refers to as a "collapse of subjective boundaries" [39] as the audience plunge into darkness and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish who "I" am in the fiction and what role "I" am being invited to play, have elected to play, or am being hailed to play. The aural immersion trespasses the boundaries of "I" as a subject (I have been trespassed by the aural immersion). This experience of teetering uncertainly on an edge of inclusion and exclusion leads to an experience of fear: a sublime sense of

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encountering the ineffable and unknowable. The experience is similar to that experienced on awakening from a dream when we attempt to textualize the events and the experience for those around us who, strangely, were caught up in the same "dream." We struggle to order the events, to create a rational account of the experience; however, certain moments remain elusive, namely, the whispering in the ear, the sensation of warm breath on the back of our neck. We are sure that we experienced the sensation of breath on our neck, the heat of a body as the speaker hovered behind us. The realization that it was all an illusion is sublime. It excites both fear and fascination. Fascination, pleasure, and delight are evoked by the theatricality, the trickery; our own sensory ineptitude is foregrounded by our not realizing the trick and responding out loud when we thought our participation had been called for: calling out our name, joining in and singing along to a song by The Carpenters. An overwhelming sense of fear or pain results from our anxiety of being out of control, from being controlled, from being duped, from not being able to trust our senses. The sensual experience is paramount; the narrative is merely a vehicle that provides the opportunity to be aurally immersed in an experience that is extra-ordinary.

Similarly, *Autobiographer* engages the audience with the sublime pairing of fear and fascination as it confronts the audience with both the potential threat to their own selfhood in terms of becoming like Flora, as well as the gratification of being able to assert an individual sense of self in terms of not being Flora. Technology has a mediating role over our experience both of the natural world as well as the constructed fictional world of the performance: over both the experience of fear and fascination. The technological manipulation of the audience's experience engages with both what it is to be "I" and an audience member. Bolt explores the aesthetic

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encounter that involves "gambling with the very notion of what it is to be "I," whether it be in avant-garde art practices, the techno-dance party, or in cyberspace." [40]

In *Autobiographer* the spectatorial aesthetic encounter is both/and: as a spectator we are simultaneously both inside and outside the event. We initially assume a spectatorial role as outside observers, with critical distance, but as the performance proceeds the critical distance evaporates. We realize we are not outside but inside the event. Like Flora, we are disorientated by the voices and sit on chairs marked by a missing notch of wood. We are challenged to recall and complete sentences already heard, as Flora is, and we often fail, as Flora does. The high quality speakers being used in the performance relaying the mediatized voices of Flora lead to a very high quality simulation that for the audience is initially indistinguishable from the "natural" voices projected in the performance space and subsequently leads to disorientation: a collapse of the different time worlds and identity.

Our awareness of our bodies is made palpable by the immersive experience as we recognize and accumulate characteristics of Flora: while the outer visible body appears complete, inside, the synapses of the brain are failing. As Flora rubs her hands, continually looking/checking her hands as evidence of her continued existence as a subject, we are also reminded of our own bodies, what Merleau-Ponty has referred to as a "touching of the touch"; [41] if it is tangible then it must be visible.

Conclusion

The sensorial experience as well as the reflective, cognitive experience engendered by both performance events foregrounds an uncertainty and anxiety relating to our sense of self. Both performances demand a divided self, whereby we are invited to align ourselves with Flora and Francis/Frances and in so doing we reflect on and question aspects of our self and the experience of experience to which

we are exposed. There is an innate distance between the selfperceiving (of) the world and the selfreflecting on (our) perceptions. Merleau-Ponty states that, "In the concrete act of reflection, I abolish this distance, I prove by that very token that I am capable of *knowing* what I am perceiving, I control in practice the discontinuity of the two selves." [42] However, the sense of knowing or the hyper-reflection is technologically sublime and reveals that agency cannot be controlled. Dementia is a state where losing oneself is finite and all that is left is the touch of the touch to reassure the self that this is "I," here and now. However, in *Ring* the audience is confronted by a betrayal of the senses; here the sense of touch does not reassure but demonstrates discontinuity and our lack of control over sensory agency. Technology is the agent that mocks and teases us as it mediates the grain of the voice. This is the voice in close-up. The authenticity of sensory agency is called into question as a result of this direct technological immersion. We thus experience the experience while simultaneously querying the experience.

In *Autobiographer* the experiential encounter is asserted through spatial immersion and reinforced by technological immersion. While Kant states that the sublime experience emphasizes the role of rational apprehension, *Autobiographer* draws attention to the loss of rational apprehension. We become lost in a chaotic universe where beginnings, middles, and ends no longer exist, cause and effect are difficult to distinguish, and patterns and structures dissolve. There is, as suggested above, what Bolt describes as "a collapse of subjective boundaries." [43] There is a sense that maybe technology will be our escape, technology will prevent us from falling into an oblivion created by dementia. It is evident that personal consciousness and machine consciousness is blurred. The space between audience, performers, and technology shrinks and the effect of dementia becomes a shared experience. In this

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space the audience become a part of the connections and disconnections; we, along with Flora succeed and fail together. While there is a beauty and serene quality evoked for the audience by both performance events discussed here, this quality is matched by a profoundly disturbing experience and reminder that we are always teetering on the brink of oblivion and dysfunctionality.

Endnotes

1 http://www.melaniewilson.org.uk/projects/autobiographer

2 http://www.fueltheatre.com/projects/ring

3 see "*Autobiographer* and the Technological Sublime" published in *Performing Narrative: narration, 'denarration', fracture and absence in contemporary performance practice*. Eds. Jane Turner and David Shirley (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2013) 50 - 62.

4 For an appraisal of Lyotard's approach to art as sublime, specifically as a mode of postmodern deconstruction, see Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) and Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

5 Audience experiences reflect comments made in a postshow discussion of *Ring* at Axis Arts Centre, Crewe, UK in 2012.

6 http://www.run-riot.com/articles/blogs/interview-david-rosenberg-talks-about-his-latest-show-ring-and-psychology-perception

7 Norie Neumark "Introduction: The Paradox of Voice." *Voice Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media.* Eds. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010) 96.

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and the Invisible.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, [1968], 1995).

9 114.

10 Josephine Machon *(Syn)Aesthetic Redefining Visceral Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 14.

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13 Andy Farnell *Designing Sound*. (Cambridge: MIT, 2010) 79.

14 Barry Blesser, and Linda-Ruth Salter *Spaces Speak, are you listening?* (Cambridge: MIT, 2007) 145.

15 George Home Cook *Theatre and Aural Attention. Stretching Ourselves* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 59.

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17 Farnell 79-80.

18 Ross Brown *Sound: A Reader in Theatre Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010) 138.

19 Jan Schnupp, Israel Nelken, and Andrew King *Auditory Neuroscience Making Sense of Sound* (Boston: MIT, 2011) 182-3.

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21 Amanda Stewart "Vocal Textures". *Voice Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media.* Eds. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson, and Theo van Leeuwen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010) 177.

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24 Home-Cook 3.

25 Stewart 177.

26 Neumark xvii.

27 96.

28 Adrianna Cavarero *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression.* Trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) 5.

29 Melanie Wilson *Autobiographer* (London: Oberon Books, 2012) 27.

30 F. Elizabeth Hart "Performance, phenomenology, and the cognitive turn". *Performance and Cognition Theatre Studies and the cognitive turn. Eds.* Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart (London: Routledge, 2006).

31 Merleau-Ponty 38.

32 Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1790] 2007).

33 Paul Crowther offers a comprehensive assessment of Lyotard's argument that avant-garde and postmodern art can be considered sublime in his book titled *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

34 Paul Crowther *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 126.

35 Andrew Westerside "Taste, Beauty, Sublime: Kantian Aesthetics and the Experience of Performance" (Diss. U of Lancaster, 2010) 279.

36 286.

37 Hal Foster *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 222.

38 Barbara Bolt "The Techno-sublime: Towards a Post-aesthetic". *Sensorium Aesthetics, Art, Life.* Eds. Barbara Bolt, Felicity Coleman, Graham Jones, and Ashley Woodward (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007) 45.

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41 Merleau-Ponty 133.

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43 Bolt 43.