

## BRUCE BARTON AND BRUCE KIRKLEY

### INTRODUCTION: EVERYTHING NEW IS NEW AGAIN (AND AGAIN, AND AGAIN...)



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We first discussed the possibility of co-editing an issue of *Theatre Research in Canada* with a focus on the topic of intermediality back in June of 2006. While we knew that TRiC's then lengthy list of guest-edited theme issues-in-waiting pushed the prospect several years into the future, we were both keen to explore the potential for such a project. As our turn in the lime-light approached, a (to us) surprisingly small number of responses to our first two calls for proposals further delayed our move to print. However, the unusual time span between inception and completion has offered us a similarly uncommon opportunity to consider and revise our aspirations for the issue. Now, in the autumn of 2011 and on the verge of publication, evidence of this extended and somewhat circuitous evolution can be seen in this issue's contents. One of the essays in this collection was first proposed to us in the middle of 2008; another only completed its peer-review process a couple of months ago. Charting the developments from the first conversations around the project, through the sequence of submissions, assessments, and revisions, it is easy to see that the field of intermedia studies has evolved rapidly and substantially during this period, with the result that the issue also provides an unintentional yet illuminating window on that evolution.

One of the most oft-cited assessments of the impact of the 'digital revolution' on the performing arts, Steve Dixon's *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (2007), was published at much the same time that this current issue was first proposed. Among his many valuable insights, Dixon was particularly observant in his description of the intense yet transient allure of emerging technologies in the face of human adaptability:

An inescapable fact about the progression of software is that after the initial miracle of new computer "life," a certain sameness and staleness creeps in through repetition that replaces

the initial awe and wonderment, the more so a little later when contemporary advertising constantly uses the latest digital effect for dramatic punch [...]. But the miracle aspect tends not to last, we simply get used to it, adopt it, absorb it, and wait for the next miracle to arrive. (208)

However, intermedia studies (including Dixon's writing) increasingly emphasizes the complexity of these adaptive strategies, the unconscious and implicit nature of which allows for pervasive realignments of behaviour(s) at the personal and cultural levels. Intermedia research has turned its focus to the implications of such all-encompassing social change—and, in the process, has grown ever more preoccupied with advancing technology's impact on the understanding and experience of *performance*. As Chris Salter muses in his 2010 study, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (which was published at much the same time as we were arranging our final peer-review process),

[. . .] if everyday life becomes a media spectacular [...] and an ongoing ludic artifice, all made possible through technical beings, a central question remains: namely, what role does artistic performance, particularly that dependent on new technology, still have to play? After all, the estrangement of daily life's routines that long was the territory of artists is now in the hands of everyday people who, in their attempt to elevate the workaday to the status of the fantastic, upload videos of their daily cooking and cleaning rituals, going to church and taking out the trash on YouTube, like so many home movies, hoping to achieve the millisecond attention of our increasingly saturated eyes. What could possibly counteract such a widespread cultural transformation? (352)

One of the most direct ways of assessing the transitions during the period of this volume's preparation is a survey of the introductions to two key publications that, in effect, bookend the contributions to this issue. The Intermediality Working Group of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR) is responsible for a couple of the most significant efforts to articulate the dense and diversified conceptualization surrounding the term "intermediality" in the twenty-first century. In 2006, Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, the editors of *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, described their agenda as follows:

Our thesis is that the intermedial is a space where the boundaries soften—and we are in-between and within a mixing of spaces, media and realities. Thus, intermediality becomes a process of transformation of thoughts and processes where something different is formed through performance. In our concept of intermediality, we draw on the history of ideas to locate intermediality as a re-perception of the whole, which is re-constructed through performance. (12)

*Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* was, at least in part, invested in establishing general principles, categorizations, and definitions. The understanding of intermediality as an “in-between” space gained much popularity in the wake of this publication, leading to the concept regularly being defined through oppositional comparison with more traditionally (and thus more stably) defined artforms, disciplines, and modes of experience. Equally important, Chapple and Kattenbelt, along with several of the authors included in the volume, proposed intermediality as a zone and vehicle of perceptual training and cognitive adaptation. Intermedial performance was proposed as a site where theatre offered controlled lessons in navigating new technological (and thus cultural) developments in society at large.

Four years later, many of the members of the same working group collaborated on *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, and the differences in focus, orientation, and organization, as compared to the earlier volume, are numerous and substantial. Less interested in establishing categories and overall definitions, the second book instead sets out, literally, to “map” the increasingly crowded and contentious playing field of intermedial performance, in pursuit of a matrix rather than a taxonomy. To this end, the editors cite the diversified, multi-level understanding of intermediality proposed by Klaus Bruhn Jensen as an entry-point into the later volume’s approach:

Three conceptions of intermediality may be identified in communication research, deriving from three notions of what is a medium. First, and most concretely, intermediality is the combination and adaptation of separate material vehicles of representation and reproduction, sometimes called multimedia, as exemplified by sound-and-slide shows or by the audio and video channels of television. Second, the term denotes communication through several sensory modalities at once, for instance, music and moving images. Third, intermediality

concerns the interconnections between media as institutions in society, as addressed in technological and economic terms such as convergence and conglomeration. (qtd. in Donsbach 16)

Jensen's framing effectively simplifies the concept of intermediality through a separation of its composite implications, distilling into distinct considerations issues of emerging technologies, aesthetic practices, audience engagement, and socio/political/economic dynamics. In many ways, this is the same gesture of the working group's second volume as a whole: to emphasize the complexity of the total project of grappling with intermediality while, simultaneously, insisting upon clarity, specificity, and flexibility within focused efforts of analysis. It is our hope that this slim volume of essays on "Theatre and Intermediality" contributes, however modestly, to this laudable effort.

## BK...

The articles in this collection trace the contours of specific moments in the evolution of intermedial consciousness. Jean-Marc Larrue's essay, "Théâtralité, médialité et sociomédialité: Fondements et enjeux de l'intermédialité théâtrale," looks back to the theatre's early encounters with the "new media" of electronic sound reproduction and amplification, and queries the tenacious resistance to electronic mediations of the voice that continued for decades beyond the theatre's relatively speedy embrace of incandescent lighting. Like Dylan going electric and scandalizing the purists of the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, the actor's acoustic voice encounters the remediating shock of a new electronic presence.

Fast forward to the first decade of the new millennium, and the wired world has thoroughly penetrated human consciousness, now accelerating rapidly into the vast, intimate networks of the World Wide Web. Investigating the global reach of the Web, Kathleen Irwin's article, "Crossing Over: Theatre Beyond Borders / Telematic Performance," discusses the findings of her recent research project that employed the internet to link students in Regina and Utrecht, inviting them to use digital technology to perform and exchange experiences in global mobility, as they took on the roles of immigrants, emigrants, and asylum seekers. The immediacy and intimacy of the students' digital interactions reveal a strong sense of presence within the virtual environment.

“Cyberspace is not a non-place,” Irwin observes, noting how users both hold the mirror to, and are the mirrors of, their multiple reflections.

Dimitry Senyshen’s essay returns us to more traditional terrain—theatrical performance—but focuses on the highly problematic experience of mediated reception. Senyshen has chosen François Girard’s 1991 video adaptation of Gilles Maheu and Carbone 14’s stage production *Le Dortoir*—which he has only ever seen in its televisual form—as his case study. He then brings to the task of analysis theoretical and critical tools derived expressly from the study of live performance to assess the video’s potential to *represent presence*. Despite its demonstrably post-modern attitude toward the self and representation, Senyshen asserts, *Le Dortoir* frequently strives to bring into focus the inherent semiotic ambiguity of its dancers’ bodies—a move which engenders in the audience an intimation of presence and works to reproduce mimetically the narrative’s ostensibly modernist preoccupation with recovery and fulfillment. By bringing a specifically theatrical conception of presence to bear on his mediated experience of an imaginarily reconstructed ‘live’ performance, the author attempts what, in effect, amounts to an intermedial critical discourse on presence and absence.

The blurring and interpenetration of public and private boundaries captures one of the defining characteristics of intermedial experience. In our Forum piece, “Coherent Confusion and Intentional Accidents,” co-editor Bruce Barton explores how bluemouth inc.’s performance event *Dance Marathon* stirs our contemporary anxiety and enthrallment with surveillance. During the event, performers and audience participate together in a simulation of the dance marathons popular in North America from the 1920s through to the 1940s, with the action being simultaneously captured by video cameras and projected onto screens throughout the performance space. As Barton reveals, situated in a mediatized environment, the participants perform their own mediatization until, hours into the event, one of the performers is invited to the microphone to share his story and, in so doing, shapes a moment of exquisite humanity. And strangely, in that moment, an orchid blooms in the land of technology.

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, referring to the medium of television, Baudrillard writes,

The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the confusion of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the

first great formula of this new era. There is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer even say that the medium is altered by it. (30)

We now live in a completely mediatized global culture. From Blackberries to Twitter, Skype to YouTube, Google to Facebook, Wikipedia to MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), Napster to Occupy Wall Street, we are all, to one degree or another, plugged in to the digital matrix. Distinctions between producer and consumer, performer and spectator, creator and imitator, instigator and follower, all collapse as roles become blurred and interchangeable. To echo the Bard, the stage is now everywhere. We are all of us infused in intermedial consciousness. ✨

### WORKS CITED

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