



# ORAL TRADITION

Performance Literature I

Volume 20, Number 1

March, 2005

Slavica



# ORAL TRADITION

---

Volume 20

March 2005

Number 1

---

*Editor*

John Miles Foley

*Associate Editor*

John Zemke

*IT Manager*

Jamie Stephens

*Managing Editor*

Heather Maring

*Senior Editorial Assistants*

Michael Barnes

*Editorial Assistant*

Andrew Porter

## Slavica Publishers, Inc.

For a complete catalog of books from Slavica, with prices and ordering information, write to:

Slavica Publishers, Inc.  
Indiana University  
2611 E. 10th St.  
Bloomington, IN 47408-2603  
[www.slavica.com/journals/oraltradition/oraltradition.html](http://www.slavica.com/journals/oraltradition/oraltradition.html)

ISSN: 0883-5365

Each contribution copyright 2005 by its author. All rights reserved.

The editor and the publisher assume no responsibility for statements of fact or opinion by the authors.

*Oral Tradition* ([www.oraltradition.org/ot/](http://www.oraltradition.org/ot/)) seeks to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary focus for studies in oral tradition and related fields by publishing research and scholarship on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression. As well as essays treating certifiably oral traditions, *OT* presents investigations of the relationships between oral and written traditions, as well as brief accounts of important fieldwork, and occasional transcriptions and translations of oral texts. In addition, issues will include the annual Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture on Oral Tradition. Submissions should follow the list-of reference format (style sheet available on request) and may be sent via e-mail ([csot@missouri.edu](mailto:csot@missouri.edu)) or snail-mail; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. Most contributions will be reviewed by at least one specialist reader and one member of the editorial board before a final decision is reached.

*Oral Tradition* appears twice per year, in March and October. To enter a subscription, please contact Slavica Publishers at the address given above.

All manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to the editor, John Miles Foley, Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, 65 McReynolds Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA.

Printed in the United States of America.

## EDITORIAL BOARD

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| Mark C. Amodio<br><i>Vassar College</i><br><i>Old and Middle English</i>                    | Joseph J. Duggan<br><i>Univ. of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>French, Spanish, comparative</i> |
| Patricia Arant<br><i>Brown University</i><br><i>Russian</i>                                 | Alan Dundes<br><i>Univ. of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>Folklore</i>                          |
| Samuel Armistead<br><i>University of California/Davis</i><br><i>Hispanic, comparative</i>   | Mark W. Edwards<br><i>Stanford University</i><br><i>Ancient Greek</i>                    |
| Richard Bauman<br><i>Indiana University</i><br><i>Folklore, Theory</i>                      | Ruth Finnegan<br><i>Open University</i><br><i>African, South Pacific</i>                 |
| Dan Ben-Amos<br><i>University of Pennsylvania</i><br><i>Folklore</i>                        | Thomas Hale<br><i>Penn. State University</i><br><i>African</i>                           |
| Mary Ellen Brown<br><i>Indiana University</i><br><i>Folklore, Balladry</i>                  | Lee Haring<br><i>Brooklyn College, CUNY</i><br><i>African</i>                            |
| Chogjin<br><i>Chinese Academy</i><br><i>of Social Sciences</i><br><i>Mongolian, Chinese</i> | Joseph Harris<br><i>Harvard University</i><br><i>Old Norse</i>                           |
| Bridget Connelly<br><i>University of Cal./Berkeley</i><br><i>Arabic</i>                     | Lauri Harvilahti<br><i>University of Helsinki</i><br><i>Russian, Finnish, Altai</i>      |
| Robert P. Creed<br><i>Univ. of Mass./Amherst</i><br><i>Old English, Comparative</i>         | Lauri Honko (†)<br><i>Turku University</i><br><i>Comparative Epic</i>                    |
| Robert Culley<br><i>McGill University</i><br><i>Biblical Studies</i>                        | Dell Hymes<br><i>University of Virginia</i><br><i>Native American, Linguistics</i>       |
| Thomas DuBois<br><i>University of Wisconsin</i><br><i>Scandinavian</i>                      | Martin Jaffee<br><i>Hebrew Bible</i><br><i>Univ. of Washington</i>                       |

## EDITORIAL BOARD

- Minna Skafte Jensen  
*Odense University*  
*Ancient Greek, Latin*
- Shelly Fenno Quinn  
*Ohio State University*  
*Japanese*
- Werner Kelber  
*Rice University*  
*Biblical Studies*
- Burton Raffel  
*Univ. of Southwestern*  
*Louisiana*  
*Translation*
- Françoise Létoublon  
*Université Stendahl*  
*Ancient Greek*
- Karl Reichl  
*Universität Bonn*  
*Turkic, Old and Middle English*
- Victor Mair  
*University of Pennsylvania*  
*Chinese*
- John Roberts  
*Ohio State University*  
*African-American*
- Nada Milošević-Djordjević  
*University of Belgrade*  
*South Slavic*
- Joel Sherzer  
*University of Texas/Austin*  
*Native American, Anthropology*
- Stephen Mitchell  
*Harvard University*  
*Scandinavian*
- Dennis Tedlock  
*SUNY/Buffalo*  
*Native American*
- Gregory Nagy  
*Harvard University*  
*Ancient Greek, Sanskrit,*  
*comparative*
- J. Barre Toelken  
*Utah State University*  
*Folklore, Native American*
- Joseph Falaky Nagy  
*Univ. of Cal./Los Angeles*  
*Old Irish*
- Ronald J. Turner  
*Univ. of Missouri/Columbia*  
*Storytelling*
- Susan Niditch  
*Amherst College*  
*Hebrew Bible*
- Andrew Wiget  
*University of New Mexico*  
*Native American*
- Walter J. Ong (†)  
*St. Louis University (Emeritus)*  
*Hermeneutics of orality and*  
*literacy*

# Performance Literature

Special Editors

Rosalind Thomas and Drew Gerstle



# Contents

Rosalind Thomas <i>Special Editor's Column</i> <i>Performance Literature and the Written Word:</i> <i>Lost in Transcription? .....</i>	1
Peter Middleton <i>How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem.....</i>	7
Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster <i>"Fellow Townsmen and My Noble Constituents!":</i> <i>Representations of Oratory on Early Commercial Recordings.....</i>	35
Felicia Hughes-Freeland <i>Visual Takes on Dance in Java .....</i>	58
Edward L. Schieffelin <i>Moving Performance to Text: Can Performance be Transcribed? .....</i>	80
Isolde Standish <i>Mediators of Modernity: "Photo-interpreters"</i> <i>in Japanese Silent Cinema .....</i>	93
Naoko Yamagata <i>Plato, Memory, and Performance .....</i>	111
Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel <i>Shellac, Bakelite, Vinyl, and Paper: Artifacts</i> <i>and Representations of North Indian Art Music.....</i>	130
<i>About the Authors .....</i>	159

## Special Editor's Column

### **Performance Literature and the Written Word: Lost in Transcription?**

**Rosalind Thomas**

This volume examines performance and the phenomenon of performance literature in a highly comparative framework. Literatures around the world, both in the past and in contemporary times, were and are experienced through live performance. This is true in the West, but even more so in non-Western societies. Performance involves engagement, audience, emotion; and performance literature therefore cannot be understood without its audience and social or religious context. This remains the case even when there are written texts that represent some or all of the words. In the modern Western world we are now used to experiencing literature primarily from reading silently, and despite theater and poetry readings, the dominant idea of proper literature in academic circles is of something preserved permanently upon the written page (and scholars therefore start with the written text). This is not the case in most literatures of the non-Western world, or of the pre-nineteenth century in the West; nor is it the case for contemporary popular youth culture, the world over, where song and the iPod are now constant companions. "Performance literature," literature meant primarily to be experienced in performance, is the subject of this volume of *Oral Tradition*.

Performance literature was the theme of a series of four intense and intensely exciting two- and three-day workshops held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, between July 2001 and May 2003. They were part of a still more ambitious enterprise with its focus firmly on Oriental and African literatures, the eight workshops of the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for Asian and African Literatures based in the School of Oriental and African Studies and University College London. For two years the Literature and Performance Workshop, whose project leaders were Drew Gerstle and myself, had a regular core of participants, many of whom were based in London or were leading scholars in their fields from outside London and outside the United Kingdom: most were specialists in one or another African or Asian

literature—historians, anthropologists, and literary specialists—or historians and literary scholars of a pre-modern European society with comparable interests. Of the former group, all were “hands-on” specialists with direct experience in the field. Themes and questions were formulated for each workshop, and ideas and research developed from one to the other. As entirely appropriate for workshops on performance literature, many papers played videos or tapes of performances; many papers were performances themselves—performances of words, but also in some cases of dance—and the sessions were far more visually or aurally engaging than most seminars on literature.<sup>1</sup> There was a palpable sense of excitement over the coming together in one room of specialists in so many different literatures and over the suggestive similarities and equally provocative differences between them. Papers, questions, and discussions sparked further questions. The articles in this and the next issue of *Oral Tradition* represent many—though by no means all—of the literatures discussed in the workshops, and while we cannot include the interventions of “discussants” and the spirit of the general discussion, the articles here have all been informed by them.

From Japan to Somalia, from Indian to Xhosa society, there are rich traditions of performance art and performance literature that often challenge Western categories and the assumptions of literary theory based on the European paradigm. Even in so literate and book-oriented a society as that of Japan, performance remained—and remains—central. While it is generally recognized that “oral” and “written” are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, those scholars most interested in the performance of literature outside drama are often studying oral literature.<sup>2</sup> As the performance literatures discussed in this issue indicate, it is inappropriate to approach performance literature in terms of a relatively simple division between written text and oral performance (though that has been productive in recent studies) or of any straight division between literacy and orality. As students of oral poetry, and readers of this journal in particular, are well aware, oral

---

<sup>1</sup> See the Centre website for details of the research project, with a full list of papers, themes, and research questions for each workshop: [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Projectsindex.html) and [www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html](http://www.soas.ac.uk/literatures/Projects/Performance/Performance.html).

<sup>2</sup> With the important exception of the relatively new discipline of Performance Studies, see most recently the books on oral literature by Lauri Honko (2000), Ruth Finnegan (1992), and John Miles Foley (1995 and 2002). This is not, of course, to underestimate the broader conceptualization of performance influenced by Erving Goffman (1969) and the universalizing theories about performance of Richard Schechner (2003).

poetry forces the critic to think particularly acutely about audience, society, reception, and tradition, all of which continue to give the oral poetry its force and meaning. Similarly, performance literature concentrates attention upon audience, audience reception, the social and cultural significance of the event itself, and the effect of audience upon performance as well as performance on audience. Performance literature and the performances themselves also generate other art forms, other publications, artistic or otherwise, or truncated, abbreviated memorials of the performance (most strikingly in Japan—see Gerstle 2000); it is paradoxical, or perhaps related, that these performances that vanish the minute they are finished are extraordinarily productive of further art forms and attempts to memorialize them. Performance literature is a stimulant for other activities. These further creations enable one to explore the continuing cultural and social importance of performance literature in a way that is not always possible with some forms of oral poetry in entirely oral societies.

These essays, then, explore the complex ways in which people try to capture performance literature, partially or completely, in written text, recordings, reading, and the visual arts. It is possible in many cases to examine the “gap” between performance and the written text—or other visual representation—in order to ask what is lost in transcription or what is gained in performance. Several articles investigate various attempts to represent or memorialize performances, whether indigenous to the society in question or anthropological and scientific (see the papers by Richard Schiefflin, Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel, and Richard Bauman and Patrick Feather). An interesting element is the connection between partial texts and the desire to keep the keys to performance in the hands of professional performers (du Perron and Magriel). Another important aspect is the phenomenon in some cultural traditions where the poems or songs were never written down, but where one is inclined to talk of “fixed texts,” though they are in essence oral texts (see Barber 2003 and Orwin 2003); what is raised here is not simply the familiar controversy about whether orally transmitted and performed poetry can be “fixed” or unchangeable, but rather the dynamics of each performance and the experiences or reactions of the audience within this tradition to what are clearly defined and recognizable genres.

We hope that this collection of articles will go some way toward concentrating, and further encouraging, attention on performance literature as a concept; to moving on from the ideas stimulated by important work on oral poetry (composed and performed entirely without writing), that performance is something that needs to be considered for oral literature but less pressingly for written literature. It also brings into serious consideration

the other elements of performance that are not reducible to “text” and words—for example, voice, intonation, dance, music, and visual effects, the elements that Ruth Finnegan in the forthcoming issue of *Oral Tradition* (20, ii) will call the multi-sensory effects of performance. The workshops were particularly effective in blurring the common disciplinary boundaries between the study of words and music. Among the articles below, Felicia Hughes-Freeland examines the way Javanese dance has been—and can be—represented in physical form, together with indigenous concepts of performance; Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel analyze the problems of recording north Indian art music; and Richard Schiefflin examines the anthropologist’s dilemma in trying to record and understand a performance when the audience and audience participation are in fact almost as central as the main performance itself and certainly influence it. Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster look at the once-radical new way of disseminating performances of rhetoric in the early recordings of speeches and the contemporaneous (and surprising) attitudes toward this new medium. Isolde Standish considers the mediation between traditional Japanese forms of performance and the Western cinema as the latter was initially adapted for Japanese audiences.

Several articles ask about the various ways in which people try, or have tried, to preserve or memorialize a performance—methods indigenous to the culture as contrasted to those of outsiders involving modern technology, anthropologists, politicians, Western musicologists (Schiefflin, Bauman and Feaster, du Perron and Magriel, and Hughes-Freeland)—and how the aims of such memorialization may relate to the methods used (many workshop papers in the next issue will deal with the visual representations of performance). What arises from this set of investigations are some answers to the perennial question: what in a performance can be preserved, recorded, or transcribed? What is lost forever? What are the limitations of various attempts at recording or retaining some memory of a performance? What is the gap between a performance and even a carefully scientific attempt to record it on paper (Schiefflin)? Moreover, for historians who cannot experience any live performances at all in the societies they study, such diverse comparisons are extremely helpful in delineating or widening the set of possibilities that they might envisage concerning the relation of written texts to performances (for instance, if the historian has only written texts remaining from once complex performances) or stimulating wider questions to ask based on their evidence. This is particularly instructive for ancient Greek society, for instance, where we know that poetry was heard and sung in performance and often at elaborately choreographed religious occasions, but where the development of classical scholarship has tended to concentrate

exclusively upon the written text as the object of literary criticism (see Thomas 1992 and Goldhill and Osborne 1999). In another essay in this issue Naoko Yamagata provides an interesting discussion of Plato's representation of, and reaction to, such performance culture in a period of rapid change in ancient Greece, and in particular his troubled relationship to the popular performances of the canonical poems of Homer in his time.

These articles, then, offer several answers even to so obvious a question as "what is the written text for?"—something often taken for granted by Western scholars. A study of performance literature shows the many ways in which written texts can relate to performance, the many different forms of textuality, and the relationships, sometimes within the same cultural tradition, that can grow between text, performance, and reperformance. Above all, we are left with the enduring and ubiquitous vitality of performance literatures all over the world. When a performance is so obviously something to be experienced live and in reality, why are there so many different ways, in different societies, of attempting to keep a memory or representation of performance? Why does it often seem immaterial that such representations do not necessarily repeat the text, the words, of the performance? The converse to this concern is also examined in the case of the "performance" of modern English poetry in poetry readings: in his contribution to the present issue, Peter Middleton tries to pin down and analyze what it is that makes such a performance still sought after in our text-based society, and what it is that a performance of such poetry adds to the bare text on the page.

We live in times of rapid technological change that is altering the ways in which we interact with each other and with literature and culture defined in the broadest terms. These essays and those that follow in the next issue raise various questions about the significance of performance literature and offer an array of case studies to show how performance has been and remains an essential element of the fabric of our cultural beings. The diversity of the participants and papers at the "Literature and Performance" workshops was both exhilarating and challenging. We hope that the essays will convey some of the excitement and challenging atmosphere that the workshops fostered.

*Balliol College  
University of Oxford*

## References

- Barber 2003                      Karin Barber. "Text and Performance in Africa." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66:324-33.
- Finnegan 1992                    Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Tradition and the Verbal Arts*. London: Routledge.
- Foley 1995                         John Miles Foley. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 2002                         \_\_\_\_\_. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. With eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org/hrop](http://www.oraltradition.org/hrop).
- Gerstle 2000                      Andrew Gerstle. "Performance Literature: The Traditional Japanese Theatre as Model." *Comparative Criticism*, 22: 39-62.
- Goffman 1969                    Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Goldhill and Osborne 1999    Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, eds. *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Honko 2000                        Lauri Honko, ed. *Textualization of Oral Epics*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Orwin 2003                         Martin Orwin. "On the Concept of 'Definitive Text' in Somali Poetry." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66:334-47.
- Schechner 2003                    Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*. Rev. ed. London: Routledge.
- Thomas 1992                        Rosalind Thomas. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## **How to Read a Reading of a Written Poem**

**Peter Middleton**

Poetry readings have become a standard element in the practice of poetry in the English-speaking world over the past fifty years, yet their significance as anything more than entertainment remains little understood.<sup>1</sup> Literary studies has lagged behind another field that has made significant steps in the study of poetry performance—oral poetics. My title alludes to John Miles Foley's recent textbook (2002) on the study of oral poetry, which offers both a comprehensive account of different theories of oral poetry and an extended introduction to his own contribution to the study of the units of composition. Foley's work, like that of other ethnographers of oral poetry, has important implications for the study of the relation between any written poetry and its performance, even among the most literate, print-based cultures.

My own research into the contemporary Anglophone poetry reading in which a written, often printed, text is read aloud, began with a puzzle: the seeming dissonance between the opportunities for understanding a poem when read silently and the fleeting impressions presented by an oral performance of the same text. Poetry readings can seem explicable if one thinks of them as entertainment, or part of the celebrity system, or as performances of a verbal score that like most musical scores can only be appreciated properly once converted by instruments and voices into sonic form. All of these variations do take place and important poetry has emerged in each area. Why then is it that such poetry is in the minority, and that the main body of contemporary poetry is also regularly performed by its authors and yet would seem to require the kind of thoughtful, prolonged attention that only silent reading of a printed text can supply?

This question turns out to go much deeper than it would appear. It requires an almost complete rethinking of what we understand as the reading of literary texts in contemporary Western culture. The study of performance

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent essays on this topic include Bernstein 1998, Finch 1994, LaBelle and Migone 2001, Lazer 1996, Morris 1997, Robinson 2002, and Vincent and Zweig 1981.

challenges the idea that reading a book is a practice that can be conceptualized as a solitary and autonomous practice, despite the apparent isolation of the silent reader. Although the commonsense image of reading treats it as a cognitive activity taking place in a mental realm that only exists within one subject, just as dreams, thoughts, and memories also occur there, the analysis of oral performance of texts contributes to the hypothesis that literary reading is a collective activity of which the singular encounter with a printed text, and a mind turned inward, is only a small part of a complex network. This collectivity constantly finds different means of representing itself through institutions and rituals: performances in the simple sense, where one or more persons stand in front of an audience, as well as more cutting-edge rituals that are likely to disguise the ritual and performative elements with anything from politics to education, mass media formats, and internet protocols. Orality remains much more important for all forms of modern literature than literary theory and criticism assume.

A contemporary Western poetry reading may seem far from research into texts and readers from earlier periods of history and far from the significance of aesthetically rich language performances in other cultures. There are several reasons, however, why we should not assume that this is the case. One baseline for literary and ethnographic theory is an image of Western literature whose outlines have been shaped by an academic culture of reading largely blind to the degree to which orality and performance remain part of literature today. A revision of the standard picture of texts as objects ready for interpretation is badly needed in spite of the work of historians and theorists of reception into the formation of reception communities and the vicissitudes of reader-response. A second reason is that those few writers, mostly poets, who have investigated the interdependence of writing and orality, have produced bodies of literary work that could, if translated into the more familiar modes of academic conceptualizing, be of considerable value. A third reason is that the textual memory produced by literary texts is spread across networks whose needs are neither understood nor well-supported at present. The significance of specific literary texts for the work of social and individual memory is not in itself neglected. Think of that striking blurb on the cover of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, in which the reviewer says that without this novel there would be a continuing void in American memory. What is not so well understood is the degree to which poetry is a form of emergent social memory that organizes both recollection and forgetting, through performance as much as publication and private reading.

The ordinary poetry reading potentially offers a rich source of research material for the study of how contemporary literary production and

reception work. The lack of self-awareness of the cultural work of the poetry reading among its practitioners means that there is a dearth of documentation and theorizing, but for this reason the structures, values, and effects that tie oral performance of written texts to the wider processes of reading are not venerated over, and are therefore often more accessible to a researcher willing to engage directly with poetry events than they would be if there were a great deal of institutional self-consciousness.

In this paper I offer a schematic outline of the key factors at work in the production of meaning during a contemporary Anglophone poetry reading, in the hope that this will prompt further research, which will, no doubt, both clarify and challenge what I offer here. The principal idea that underlies the following schematic descriptions of the features of the poetry reading is that the contemporary Anglophone poem requires both to be read on the page and to be heard read aloud by the poet, because these poems extend over time and memory to create effects that depend on a mutual interdependence of performance and silent interpretation. Although the usual ordering of composition as a sequence leading from draft writing on the page, to first oral performances, to second and further drafts, and thence to publication, might seem to indicate priority of written text over oral rendition, the relation between written and oral versions of the poem does not necessarily follow this temporal hierarchy. My initial puzzlement arose from a misunderstanding of this principle. Both silent reading and oral performance are incomplete scenes of reception.

**1/ Both the performance of the poem and silent reading of the poem are necessary to experience the poem.**

Some contemporary poetry readings dispense with openly displayed scripts, and require performers to memorize, and improvise, their poems, notably the Slam events discussed by John Foley (2002:3 and *passim*). These events are still atypical; poets at most readings flourish paper. I once saw the old W. H. Auden, recently arrived in Oxford to retire to a cottage at Christchurch College, try to read his poetry from memory and soon stumble over his words to the point where he had irritably to have recourse to a book. This was already eccentric behavior in 1969. Most poetry readings still present poets carrying a sheaf of papers and a few books from which they read aloud work composed in isolation well before the reading. The presence of this text is not a measure of some failure to memorize, nor is it a lack of performative ambition. Anecdotes about poets who write their poems the

day before a reading, or alter their poems during performance are striking mainly because they are deviations from the norm. The poetry reading is a public airing of a written text for approval, communication, and above all oral publication, which will place the poems in a tradition, however local or defined as innovative. Reading aloud from a written text enacts the most basic axiom of this poetry: it is both text and performance at once. It might seem as if there were an invitation to the members of the audience to simulate the performer silently by bringing along a text in order to follow the reading of the poems. This certainly could help with recognition of exactly what words and phrases are uttered, but for most people the division of attention would come at a high price—the loss of many of the nuances of the performer’s soundings and embodiment of the text. Attempts to project poems on the wall run into similar difficulties.

Most contemporary Anglophone poetry is meant to be both read from the page with attention to meaning, spacing, visual appearance, and sonic indeterminacy sharpened by the ease with which one can reread under such conditions, and witnessed in performance. Silent reading of a poem is similar to the practice of a musical score until one can integrate most of its features into an overall experience. A skilled reader who reads a poem he or she has not encountered before—a reader who is both familiar with poetry readings and with the performance styles of the poem’s author—may be able to guess at a possible performance just from the page, much in the manner of an actor or director projecting theatrical performance from a play script. This analogy helps emphasize the importance of the actual reading. Contingency always exceeds anticipation in performance. Directors might doubt whether it were necessary to stage plays if it were possible to anticipate just what would happen when the various elements of a production converged on a particular night. Poems are similar, and the reader of the poem also has to experience the poem’s presentation in a reading if he or she wants to gain a sense of its range of potential.

What is it that only silent reading of the words on the page can achieve for a reader of the poem? Take a poem with an apparently simple construction, Jackie Kay’s “Brendon Gallacher (For My Brother Maxie).” I am reading a version published in an authoritative anthology, *The Penguin Book of Poetry From Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (Armitage and Crawford 1998), where it is the only poem to represent Kay. An introduction to the poem tells me that “Jackie Kay was born in 1961 in Edinburgh, and has lived in Glasgow, London, and Manchester. A playwright and librettist as well as a poet, her adult collections include *The Adoption Papers* (1991) and *Other Lovers* (1993). A collection of poetry for children, *Two’s Company*, was published in 1992” (406). So she is Scottish and has an ear

for lyrics, information that will inform my reading perhaps, but what do I do with the information about Manchester, or her other books? The impression that will inform my reading is that here is a younger poet who is already a high achiever, and someone whose accent may well be a blend of English and Scots pronunciation. The poem is in five stanzas of five lines each, and each line is capitalized, which makes the repetition of some of these opening words, notably the male pronoun “he” repeated five times in the first eight lines, carry great emphasis. Is this poem about a longing for male companionship, or masculine prerogatives perhaps? The stanzas break up the story of an imaginary friend into five chapters. Many lines are end-stopped with a full stop, but several enjambe with a comma, and the effect on my reading is to make me hear a colloquial voice pause for a moment, and then continue, as if the narrative were itself making the point that it will continue further. Musically the verse sounds slightly flat to me, despite the repetition. As I scan down the left-justified margins and notice that the lines are mostly the same length but seem to grow slightly shorter towards the close of the poem, I also notice that there is a great deal of verbal repetition—lots of repetitions of this name, Brendon Gallacher, and lots of “mums,” “dads,” “one days,” and so forth. As a consequence the poem does not have much sense of forward movement, even though it does narrate a story that unfolds across two years. It takes some effort to notice that many lines end in the same rhyme syllable or a variant on it, not least the sound “er”, because some lines do not appear to rhyme in this scheme, such as the lines ending in “poor” and “door.” What catches my interest is the unspoken suggestion that the reasons for the imaginary friend have something to do with her ambivalence towards her father, who is a communist party worker, and I find myself reading across the poem working out the details of this connection.

I have not witnessed Jackie Kay perform the poem, but I have heard her read it aloud on a recording sponsored by the British Council (1998:tape 2, side A, track 4); even that partial transformation occludes several of the features whose effects as meaning I have just described. She begins her reading with a discursive introduction: “Between the ages of five and seven I had this imaginary friend which I called Brendon Gallacher . . . now it’s the word for lie in our family.” When we read the poem in the anthology it might have been a fiction written in the first person. Now the author is testifying that this is a true history of her own childhood, and since this is the first thing she says about the poem we are given a strong message that this authenticity is crucial to how we should listen to it. Kay might have wanted to keep back the information about Brendon Gallacher since the poem

springs his virtuality onto us only near the end. When we read silently we have to go back and rethink our reactions to what we read. Does she tell us the denouement because she knows that as listeners we might mishear the story, a concern that implies that when heard aloud the poem is not quite able to do all the work that it can on the page? She even concludes her introduction by saying, “So this poem’s about Brendon Gallacher just to keep him alive.” The full significance of this intention is only going to be evident to those who have already seen the poem and recall that Brendon Gallacher “dies” in the poem once he meets the test of reality and parental disbelief.

The oral reading also brings out into the open several features that a reading of the page is unlikely to discern. A strong Scots accent and a powerful emphasis on the metrical rhythm combine to give the poem a ballad-like quality. The words “poor” and “door” are diphthongs that fall into the same “er” sound as the other lines. We learn that the lines of the final stanza need to be shorter than the rest of the poem because her voice slows down there to bring out the pathos of the situation. The final line, which felt flat when read on the page,—“Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher”—is infused with grief and longing that is meant to arouse similar feelings in the audience. Pauses are somewhat different in the oral version to those signalled on the page. This is the printed version of lines 8-11 (Armitage and Crawford 1998):

He’d get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.  
A wee holiday someplace nice. Some place far.  
I’d tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.  
And she’d say, “why not have him round to dinner?”  
No, no, I’d say he’s got big holes in his trousers.

If the spoken version were printed to indicate the breaks in her utterance it would look something like this:

He’d get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.  
A wee holiday  
someplace nice.

Some place far.

I’d tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher How his mum drank and his  
daddy was a cat burglar.  
And she’d say,

“why not have him round to dinner?”

No, no, I'd say  
he's got big holes in his trousers.

It turns out that the page layout is not a good guide to the oral sounding of the poem. The lengths of the breath unit vary considerably, there are extended pauses even in the middle of lines, and most surprisingly of all there is a long line created by the rapid run-on from one stanza to the next. This oral structure elicits two responses. New emphases are created that then enhance or diminish the significance of the meaning of certain words and phrases, notably the phrase “some place far.” We hear a dislike of the city of her childhood very strongly here, a dislike that the little girl might be concealing from herself. We also notice that the details about her friend are merged into a long and undifferentiated list when she is in conversation with her mother, because none of this matters to their interaction. A second, more analytic response to this would be to think of the oral atoms of composition. Behind this oral rendition is likely to be a tradition of storytelling in which certain familiar units can be built up into a rhetorically satisfying narrative that affirms intimacy and identity. The phrase “I'd tell my mum” could be followed by a long string of reported speech that would nevertheless be encompassed by the opening report statement.

Although Jackie Kay's poem “Brendon Gallacher” encompasses both the oral performance and the written text, her art is sufficient to make it possible for readers to get by with just one or the other version of it. Only when the two are combined does a reader fully experience the poem as the movement between print and orality brings the poem apparently to life, just like the imaginary boy.

## **2/ The live event is a performance irreducible to any form of recording.**

My analysis of Jackie Kay's oral performance is only a partial account, because it is entirely reliant on a tape made by the British Council. Live events, as I have detailed elsewhere (Middleton 2005:30), are stagings of poetry's temporary ascendancy in environments where other activities usually have primacy. Almost all poetry readings take place in pub rooms, art centers, church halls, classrooms, lecture theaters, theaters, and concert halls, where other arts and other social and institutional priorities have set the terms of the architecture and ordinary use of the space. Many poetry readings can only attract an audience if there are compensations for their

commitment of time to the event: alcohol, perhaps music, and plenty of opportunities for friendly conversation. Many cinemas now show a brief film asking patrons not to make distracting noises; poetry readings are usually awash with them. Poor acoustics, outdoor noise (many of my tapes of London readings are interrupted by sirens, horns, and cries from the street outside), comings and goings of drinkers, coughs due to poor ventilation, encouraging remarks and heckling, lack of proper sight-lines, all make it an extra effort to concentrate on the poetry, and these disturbances can also act on the performer to redouble the problems. Added to this, poets are not usually trained performers able to project and control their voices like actors, and usually do not want to appear too slickly professional. But these imperfections are not really flaws at all. As poetry is vocalized amid this resistance to its command—a drama of poetry's struggle against the conditions of a modernity that does not value poetry much alongside many other arts, especially those of advertising or with enormous commercial potential—listeners and performers enact a momentary triumph together that represents their collective desire for poetry's social promotion to a position of importance.

A poetry reading is therefore first of all a performance of the actual space and its occupants at a particular moment. Performance is the key word here. A poetry reading is a performance, and therefore much of what has been studied and theorized about performance in many arts can be brought to bear on the poetry reading. So can accounts of oral and written poetry in other cultures studied by ethnographers, classicists, and historians. Theories of singing, of theater, and even of popular music may all have insights to offer to the study of the poetry reading. These theories cannot be applied wholesale, however. Their relevance will have to be assessed on the basis of the distinctive qualities of a particular reading, poet, venue, audience, reading series, type of poetry, and other factors. Only on this foundation could we begin to distinguish some general outlines of the contemporary poetry reading.

Such a project will need to take into account a number of key aspects of the performance, including its norms and the diversions from the norm. Most salient of these is the curious fact that until very recently there was virtually no writing about the poetry reading at all, and even now, the few essays that have been written tend to concentrate either on issues of sound, the visionary possibilities of performance (which often has a very high value for proponents of innovative work), or the failings of the typical venue and reader. This silence could be studied ethnomethodologically, showing that the tacit knowledge at work needs to avoid self-reflection in order to be most effective. Too many questions and reflections on the nature of readings

might undermine trust or make too visible some of the limitations or guilty pleasures of the event. But my comment is only speculation. This is a question that remains to be answered. At the very least, the silence about readings suggests that their participants bring to them a range of beliefs, which, like those involved in other rituals, may not withstand too much open examination.

Some aspects of performance—the author's presence as reader, the audience's intersubjective collaboration, voicing, and sound—I shall address in more detail in later sections. A full research program would want to bring the many theorists of performance into dialogue with other aspects, too: the interaction of bodies with each other and the space; other forms of communication such as smell, touch, and gesture; the sharing of emotion among those present; the internal narrative of the event; the importance of the reader's introductions, errors, asides, and even bodily noises; the significance of group histories and allegiances, as well as poetry movements and cliques for the occasion (venues and poets have their fans just like football teams); the need for social contact between poetry-lovers and how the reading plays a part in satisfying that need alongside other types of gathering, ranging from educational courses to entirely social occasions; and those interactions mediated by communication apparatuses.

Poetry readings do not differ from other performances in the degree to which they are not recordable, but their emphasis on sound does make it seem as if not too much is lost if one has a tape recording of some kind, a video recording being even better. It is important to recognize that this accessibility of the event to the future can be just as misleading as films of dance or theater, for instance. Gone is the moment-by-moment responsiveness between audience and performer; gone is the information about the setting that is understood largely subliminally by the audience, and yet provides a backdrop to everything that happens. A more dramatic but still realistic way of saying this is that gone too is much of the element of risk that submitting oneself to a performance entails. One will usually be affected by the event, bodily, emotionally, and intellectually; and it will become a part of who one is, to a degree much greater than any listening to a recording can induce. Other losses of information are very little understood. Very little of the recording of poetry readings is done with the level of audio fidelity used for studio recordings of music since the equipment is designed for speech recording and therefore limited to a fairly shallow frequency range in which most but not all of the sounds produced by the speaking voice are supposedly located. We simply do not know to what degree this compromises some of the finer sonic effects of the vocalisation. Poetry

performers often use a wider range than the ordinary speaker, one closer to that of the singer, and like singers, use fine-grained effects, such as the slight lowering of pitch and volume at the end of the line that Kay uses so emphatically in the recording of “Brendan Gallacher.” The role of hand gestures is likely to be lost in most recordings too. When I recorded the poet Cris Cheek reading a poem in his own kitchen I was surprised that even though this was purely an oral version by a performer known for his full-bodied renditions of texts, he still made occasional hand gestures that were clearly integral to his understanding of how to perform and seemed out of place in the small room.

Recordings are not, however, redundant nor are they merely prompts to memory or clues to lost aspects of performance. Recordings are also part of the repertoire of the poem and, in cases like Jackie Kay’s “Brendon Gallacher,” establish themselves as contributions as important to the reception of the poem as print publication. There are plenty of texts for which a studio recording exists; that recording takes on a third, in-between status of poem, neither written text nor performance. Their relative scarcity may be due to their limitations, both technical (it may be hard to locate a poem on tape—CD tracks are readily located but field equipment for making CD recordings is only just becoming available and is not yet in general use, and MD has a restricted circulation) and as representations of performance; and also due to the costs of production, which until the advent of computer generated CD-Rs made small press productions of recordings too expensive to be viable. Yet there has not been a flood of recordings, even through the internet.<sup>2</sup> This scarcity of recorded material in circulation, like the silence about performance, is itself a further element of the poetry reading that needs to be better understood.

---

<sup>2</sup> By the time this article is published an important new venture to make available recordings of poets reading live should be online for researchers and readers of poetry. Penn Sound is Charles Bernstein’s project for the English Department at the University of Pennsylvania. He is creating a website with short downloadable MP3 files of individual poems and, where pertinent, the accompanying paratexts also in their own files; these will represent as wide a range as possible of second-wave modernist poets writing in English. Ubu Web ([www.ubu.com](http://www.ubu.com)) is currently the largest website providing an archive of downloadable sound files of poets reading and performing their texts. We (the Centre for Cultural Poetics at the University of Southampton) have a small archive of UK poets at [www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc](http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc).

### **3/ Poetry readings are irreducibly singular and historical.**

Literary theory and scholarship over the past 30 years has repeatedly challenged the reification of literary texts as icons, autonomous units of meaning, material objects, or intentional expressions of an author. Despite this, it is still too easy to think that when we speak of a poem or a novel we are referring to an enduring, stable structure of meaning that corresponds directly with a set of verbal signs contained in a single material form to which we can gain direct sensory access. Poems are particularly prone to this belief in the power of iconic representation. Poetry readings by contrast are more difficult to reify than the readings elicited by printed texts, and this quality may account for their relative neglect by literary scholars.

Silent reading of a text is rarely thought of as a singular act, unless we have read a book at a time that was itself memorable—a holiday, a journey, or perhaps at a time of excitement or trauma. Silent reading is not easily bounded in time either, since we are likely to accumulate acts of attention to the text into a relatively seamless overall memory of it. Live poetry readings are very clearly bounded in time and space. Miss a line and it has gone; there is no rewind. The best that you can do is go to hear the same poet on another occasion read the same poem, except that it is unlikely to emerge quite the same the next time. Poetry readings are also evidently part of a history, which is often made explicit. The reading is part of a wider event, or a memorial to someone, or the occasion of a visit by the poet to that place, and so the reading is part of a sequence of causes and determinations of which participants will to some extent be aware.

When Tom Raworth read his poem *Ace* in a lecture room at Birkbeck College in May 2003 under the auspices of both the SubVoicive poetry reading series organized by Lawrence Upton, and the Centre for Contemporary Poetics directed by Professor Will Rowe, the reading carried with it a history that would have been known to varying degrees by the audience. There were distances within and without the poem. The poem itself was first published in 1974, but most of the copies were accidentally destroyed by a flood in the storeroom where the first print run was being held due to a dispute. The poem was only republished in 1977 by an up-and-coming American poetry publisher, The Figures, which would go on to help establish the careers of a number of avant-garde poets known as the Language Poets. As Tom Orange says, “it’s difficult to imagine what these poems must have looked, read and sounded like in 1974” (2003:161). Each page of the 1977 edition has a single column of very short lines near the middle of the page. At the time of the Birkbeck poetry reading *Ace* had

recently been republished again in the *Collected Poems* from Carcanet Press, a landmark in Raworth's career. In this version the poem has had to undergo an economy, and there are two somewhat longer columns on each page, which changes the appearance of the poem considerably. Although widely known to specialist readers of modern poetry through many small press publications, and widely thought to be one of the major poets of his time, Raworth had, I believe, been published only once by a commercial publisher since the early 1970s (and then in an edition that was quickly pulped). His presence at the Birkbeck Reading therefore celebrated the 2003 publication of his *Collected Poems*, while also lending kudos to the research center there. By combining with the Subvoicive series of poetry readings (first established in 1979), the event could confidently expect to attract a substantial audience. Campus events can be offputting to outsiders, and so considerable effort had been devoted to ensuring that the atmosphere was more pub room than college chamber by providing cups of wine and water and welcoming people with informality. Before the event began, Will Rowe mentioned the half-time break and the chance to smoke outside the building, and Raworth offhandedly said, "You can have a break whenever you want." Most of the audience were known to one another and consequently there was a great deal of greeting and quick conversation before the event started and everyone sat down on the bench seats of the lecture room. One recurrent motif in this chat was the expectation that Raworth would once again demonstrate his impressive ability to read his poetry fast without faltering.

*Ace* was not the first poem to be read, and so by the time we reached it we were becoming familiar with Raworth's rapid delivery and the absence of introduction or commentary. The only introductory words he offered characteristically disowned any direct intent to inform us or make some statement of his own through his choice of poems to read (a choice that is usually a fiercely held prerogative of the poet): "Will sent me a list of things possible to read, so, we'll just start at the beginning and see how far we go." *Ace* begins with a phrase that might be self-reflexive, referring to the new face of the poet standing in front of the audience, asking for a response ("what do you think") (2003:201):

new face  
 from my home  
 what do you think  
 I'll voice out  
 of the news  
 alive and in love  
 drill  
 another hole

near the edge  
 of the label and  
 play it  
 from there  
 with a light  
 pickup  
 bless you brother  
 yours  
 till the energy  
 gaps again  
 let light  
 blink  
 history think

Although the first person pronoun is used from time to time, and later in the poem he even cites what appears to be a self-critical comment (“mister raworth / continues / to believe / every / thing / possible”), the tone of voice is not confiding and does not signal emotionally affirmed sincerity of expression. Raworth speaks with a clear, warm, punctuated delivery that mostly emphasizes the line breaks, but also allows longer units to appear. This delivery is not primarily driven by syntax, narrative, or the shifting demands of the current of emotion as in Kay’s poem. Vocalization resolves ambiguities that are more active on the page: the line “in hail” refers to both bad weather and smoking when seen on the page but heard aloud the meteorology all but disappears in the face of the much more familiar usage. In the following passage Raworth opts for the surprising long “i” in the word “wind,” a decision that has less to do with the immediate meaning of the line and more to do with a running pattern of both long and short “i” sounds associated with words such as: it, in, I, will, life, lives, different, fill, still, hits, wind, ruffle, and many others.

each day  
 repeated  
 he lives  
 for ever  
 he thinks  
 alone  
 in the honey  
 comb o  
 the subjunctive  
 that ruffle  
 of the deck  
 wind  
 here the surf  
 hits the beach

Reread on that occasion at Birkbeck College by a poet now some twenty-five years older than when he wrote it, and looking a little more rounded and whiter-haired than the man who looks over the shoulder of his wife in a photograph at the back of the second edition of *Ace*, the poem's quick flashes of meditative self-examination become almost nostalgic. How many of us will remember that the word "ace" enjoyed a short life as an expostulation meaning something similar but not quite the same as "cool" means today among the young? And the poem provides its own support for this at some points (2003:220):

voices  
 decay  
 into time  
 of what  
 is it  
 memory  
 writing  
 pattern  
 spelled  
 change  
 unreel  
 twist  
 tone  
 i am  
 again

To hear Raworth read his poem *Ace* on this specific occasion was to hear it as the latest point in a long history of publication, readings, and the career of the poet, as well as to experience the reading as a manifestation of the otherwise largely intangible institutions that had shared organization of the event. References to the Rolling Stones and the Supremes or to computers had a very different resonance. So too did the sight of an elderly, energetic man reading this poem from his past.

**4/ Poetry readings are extremely diverse and this diversity is not necessarily homologous to the types of poetry performed.**

During the past 20 years performance poetry has become much more widespread and visible, and this may encourage the view that different movements in poetry, whether primarily distinguished by formal characteristics, by the shared identity of the poets, or by geographical

proximity, are the main determining factors in shaping the diversity of readings. In practice, however, although the kinds of poetry performed do have some bearing on how the different events are staged, it is only one of several causes at work. When we think of a poetry reading most of us probably think of an event somewhat like the Raworth reading. Keen poetry lovers gather to hear a poet, whose work is already known, present poetry written some time previously and probably already partly published. There are many other kinds of venue and occasion, however, and some acknowledgement of this is needed if we are going to understand what is happening even at a normative event like the Raworth reading. Here are some of the kinds of occasion: memorials for the dead, not only poets, but for anyone, especially younger people (a friend of the deceased, who is not normally a poet, will write and read a poem as an elegy at a memorial event); writing classes, which may also include “open mike” sessions; cabaret, comedy, and other forms of entertainment that include poetry; live or performance art taking place in gallery and other art spaces, which can include text readings; local poetry groups entirely independent of educational institutions where the members read their work and exchange criticism and ideas for publication; political events, ranging from rallies to cultural occasions, organized either by political parties or social movements such as feminism; religious settings in which secular and sacred poems commingle; and ethnic cultural occasions such as the South Asian *mushaira*. The same poem could potentially be read by the author at all of these different occasions, and if it were, its meaning would vary considerably across these sites.

Such observations are familiar enough to anthropologists and scholars of folk and oral poetry, but rarely factored into the study of contemporary poetry. The point I want to make here is not only that ethnographic research can contribute to the study of the poetry reading; it also draws attention to the degree to which the normative reading is itself in need of such analysis. However ordinary the reading occasion, it is deeply embedded in wider social, historical, and cultural matrices. The Raworth reading affirmed Raworth’s significance as a poet in 2003 on the basis of a 30-year publication history, and linked his reputation to the college and the reading series. It also reconnected the poet with friends and admirers who had a chance to link up under the auspices of the event. Despite the apparent informality, the audience members were conscious that they were taking part in an occasion that partook of a long tradition.

Even the normative poetry reading is a loose category within which there is considerable local variation. Raworth avoided introductions, did not

try to give the words dramatic or emotional emphasis, read from a book, and stood in one place reading with one eye on the text and one eye on the audience. Many readings encourage the reader to talk confidently to the audience about the poems they are about to hear, and the poet to read with passion, as if the poems were direct personal utterances of inner thought and feeling. Poets use sheets of paper, projected texts, books, and other forms of prompt. These differences could be summarized as tending to settle into about four sub-categories of the ordinary reading. There is the institutionally organized poetry reading (often at a university or college) that is fairly formal, may well have a stage and a podium, and presents the poet as an authority in the world of poetry whose profile is acknowledged by the status of the event itself. There is the poetry reading series that mainly presents poets whose work is based on a communicative, even conversational, use of language as an expressive medium to an audience who think of themselves as constituting the foundations of the series. Poetry readings organized by many local groups fit this model. There is the more avant-garde poetry reading series where the poet rarely speaks autobiographically and instead presents vocalized artifices of language that might in ordinary discourse be unsayable (the Raworth reading fits this category reasonably well). And then there is the arena like Apples and Snakes in London or the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York where the primary emphasis falls on politically aware entertainment. Political rallies sometimes include poetry, as do religious gatherings, and there is an increasing tendency to include poetry readings in conferences of literary scholars. At the other end of the scale, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that small informal groups of people still read poetry aloud to each other, as was very common less than a century ago before new patterns of entertainment and transport reconfigured leisure practices.

### **5/ The author performs authorship by reading her or his own poetry.**

When Dylan Thomas made his famous tours of America in the early 1950s, he was praised for his ability to bring familiar poems by other poets to life with his splendid voice. Twenty years later when I went to a poetry reading given by Robert Lowell at Oxford University, he was subjected to gestures of dissatisfaction when he announced at the start that he would read poems by contemporaries he admired; Lowell eventually gave way and read his own work. Today it is rare for the poet to read anything but texts composed by the poet. This could strike someone unfamiliar with poetry readings as odd. Why not employ trained speakers and actors to deliver the poetry? And how is it that a poet such as Robert Creeley can read aloud his

poetry as if he were undergoing the anguish that led to the poem's composition, even though he wrote the poem years earlier and was apparently in a good mood a moment ago? Isn't there almost a deception at work when the poet reads a poem with feeling, not dissimilar to the miming of singers and guitarists when they appear on certain television shows or pop videos, or to what Eminem did recently in his stage show by singing along with his own records?

In earlier articles I have set out the arguments for considering the role of the author as playing a key role in the production of poetic meaning in the contemporary poetry reading, and so here I shall only summarize them.<sup>3</sup> Readings provide a chance to see the person of the author in the flesh, and therefore to register all the subliminal cues to character, class, sexuality, and other markers of social and aesthetic status. Hearing the poet's particular choices of pause and intonation, as in the cases of Jackie Kay and Tom Raworth, can also help train readers to be attentive to features of the poetry that they might otherwise miss or misconstrue in their unaided silent reading. More importantly though, poetry readings are opportunities to stage authorship, to explore what it means to be the author of a poem. Whether or not the words uttered are in the form of a personal statement that includes explicitly or implicitly a first-person pronoun, the act of vocalizing the words of the poem lends them a warrant or assertive force. An audience witnesses what it means to say these particular words in public.

Denise Riley is a brilliant reader of her own poetry because she is extremely aware of the implications of communicative interaction with the audience that entails performing her authorship of the poem. The final line of her poem, "*Lure*, 1963"—"And you're not listening to a word I say" (1993:30)—is not primarily addressed to the reader or audience, but still delivers a great punch when she speaks it aloud to an audience. After a richly visual explosion of passionate images of color that are associated with memories of the hopes and imaginings created by the clothes desired by the teenager that she was, the poem turns back on itself, saying, "Oh yes I'm the great pretender." As she reads this and other poems she places this self-exposure between herself and the audience, as if it were a third person there, and talks in and around it. Of course the audience is listening, but it experiences a moment of guilt that it is perhaps not attending as closely as it might, and this emotion can then be folded back into reflections on what it means to try and use clothes, or other kinds of self-display, to win the affections of others.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Middleton 1998, 1999, 2002, and 2005. This latter volume contains extensively revised versions of these earlier essays, with some new material.

Riley's poems are subtle explorations of the self as a product of recognition. In an age in which anonymity is an everyday experience, everything from advertising to politics can be a negotiation with, and an invitation to construct, changing identities. *Interpellation* is widely exploited, and the ordinary experience of self is troubled. Poetry readings have consequently become one of the more significant occasions for the aesthetic negotiation of identity.

Identity is also closely bound up with another contemporary issue, authority. Our public spheres are vast, complex networks interdependent with communication technologies, institutions, and power structures that control the authority of the utterances of those who do speak in public. Speech may be free, but plausibility is not. Poets have to compete with a culture of experts whose expertise is legitimated by processes that usually exclude artists. Poets who wish to talk about social or scientific issues are not going to be heard unless they can give their work the glow of authority, and one way to achieve this on a local scale is to do what politicians have always done: appear in person as a plausible, representative spokesperson for the group. A poet lends a certain, admittedly limited, authority to their own poem simply by reading it aloud with conviction at a public event. Poetry readings are a powerful way of lending more cultural capital to poetry as a whole.

#### **6/ Voicing depends more on group norms than individual choice.**

Studies of oral poetry show that, as Foley explains (2002:127), the unit of composition is an expanded word, which can be anything from a single word or short phrase to a substantial clump of lines. Just what will constitute the indivisible parts of the poem depends on the local tradition out of which the oral poetics emerges. At first sight these insights would only apply to a small proportion of the poetry read aloud at poetry readings today, such as Slam poetry, which Foley analyzes, or the work of poets such as Jerome Rothenberg, who have been deeply involved in ethnopoetic research. The constraining traditions for most poets are literary histories in which the prosody is first and foremost a guide to writing. Many modern poetry movements have emphasized the importance of vernacular, idiomatic, and above all speech-based writing, but the important point of reference here is ordinary conversation, not the narratives of cultural memory encoded in special phrases and rhythms that demarcate an active oral tradition. As a result, very little research has been done on the influence of styles of oral poetry reading on the compositional practices of poets whose work is largely

defined by its printed form. Scholars take it for granted, I suspect, that there are no reading practices that correspond to the expanded words of the oral tradition. There is, however, if we look more closely at the recent history of poetry readings, reason to suspect that there are some parallels with the oral traditions after all.

There are, to begin with, a small number of reading styles each of which is widely practiced by poets who almost always stick to the one mode. On the Random House Audiobook version of his book, *The Ghost Orchid*, the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley reads in a particularly marked version of the most widespread style of reading poetry in the United Kingdom. In his performance of the following short poem, “Form,” his use of caesurae is particularly evident, and marked here by a backslash (1998:104):

Trying to tell it all to you / and cover everything  
Is like awakening / from its grassy form, / the hare:  
In that make-shift shelter / your hand, / then my hand  
Mislays the hare / and the warmth / it leaves behind.

The listener notices that the pauses are heavily marked by a softening of the voice, which is especially noticeable in the second line. Analyzed as a wave file by computer, graphs of the line show that the amplitudes of the words “awakening,” “form,” and “hare” have a very similar shape: each is gradually attenuated slowly from a decibel level about half that of the mid-phrase volume. Upper frequency speech formants are also either missing or attenuated. This style of reading was not originated by Longley (its origins deserve investigation), and has apparently spread by imitation to the point where almost all poetry that is a form of personal expression, like Longley’s, and is not aiming to be humorous, now employs this technique to some degree. Subjectively the effect is elegiac, a tone of voice that indicates seriousness—emotions of loss, sadness, or regret dominating over others. At its most pronounced it becomes a recurrent “dying fall” of the voice, as it does in this instance from Longley. In common practice it tends to be most heavily used at the ends of lines to reinforce the closure of metrically regular lines.

A second style of reading can be associated with the innovations of poets such as William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Robert Creeley, although it too has multiple origins. These poets treat the written poetic line as a unit of what Olson called “breath,” although this could be misleading if it were taken to mean a pause for breath in the way pauses are used by singers. Line endings are also indications of shifts of thought, instants when

emotion interrupts expression, and through the intake of breath, the bodily presence of the poet. Robert Creeley's reading style is particularly dramatic in its use of the line ending. During an interview with another poet, Charles Bernstein, for a radio program in the United States, which was also issued as a tape recording, Creeley is asked to read the poem "Here" from a collection entitled *Windows* (1991:101).

In other  
words opaque  
disposition intended  
for no one's interest  
or determination  
forgotten ever  
increased but  
inflexible and  
left afterwards.

His voice as he reads lingers on almost every word, sometimes pausing before the next, and usually pausing at the end of the lines, although sometimes he introduces an effect rather like syncopation, and almost runs on. He reads the third and fourth lines so: "disposition / intended for no one's interest." As soon as he has finished his voice changes: he speaks fast, saying with amused irony, "like I don't wanna bother anybody so this is a poem which [breathy laugh] will not have, you know this is a poem which will offend no one, will engage no one." Then almost without pausing he reprises the poem completely so that its first three words appear to be a continuation of what he has been saying to the interviewer. This time the poem is read more softly and fluently, with more feeling, and the line breaks emerge as more effective indicators of the feelings and thoughts within the poem's matrix. Comparing the two readings of the poem one has the sense that the first effort was guided more by these internalized rules for marking the line-breaks on the page than by the mood semantics of the text. When Creeley reads the next poem in the interview, "Echo for J. L." (1991:142), his performance is more assured, and the breaks work effectively. Here are the third and concluding stanzas of the poem:

skin. It feels  
itself  
as if a place it  
couldn't

ever get to  
had been at

last  
entered.

The third stanza is enunciated with exceptionally precise attention to the line breaks, so that there are measurable, and potentially disconcerting, pauses after “feels,” “itself,” “it,” and “couldn’t.”

Creeley’s reading style has always been laden with affect, as if the line-breaks were also triggers of emotion. This is distinctive to his performance, but the use of the page layout as a score for the pausing and breathing by the poet reading the poem aloud is widely used, both in the U.S. and the U.K., and is closely associated with the poets whose work is in the modernist or avant-garde traditions. Although Creeley is an extremely skilled reader of his work, his performances occult that skill so that the voice appears naturally expressive, and the sounding of the words is overlaid both cognitively and emotionally by their communicative force.

A third, less common reading style differs in the degree to which the voicing does become a foregrounded element in the performance of the work, even though this is not usually indicated by the page. These poets have often studied voice production, singing, and the avant-garde voicing of such artists as Meredith Monk and Robert Ashley. These poets are also likely to be familiar with the work of “sound poets” such as Emmett Williams, Henri Chopin, and performance groups such as the Canadian ensemble the Four Horsemen. Although a full discussion of this tradition is outside the scope of this essay it is important here to acknowledge that although it is a relatively small number of poets who work at this edge of articulation, they have had and continue to have considerable influence on other styles of performance. This highly developed use of controlled vocal effects represents a continuing investigation of the possibilities and limits of sound, body, and language.

## **7/ Performance implicates the audience on the stage of meaning.**

The audience members for a play or film let themselves imaginatively enter the fictive and diegetic spaces of the staging and screening. Theories of this process of reception usually concentrate on issues of identification, positioning, and cathexis because although the audience is a group of people it can be treated as a collection of identical individuals for most purposes of analysis. The group is usually conceptualized abstractly as a singular collective subject. Some analyses of film reception have recognized that film-goers bring different interests to the screening and are therefore likely

to respond differently according to their age, experience, and their motives for the visit to the cinema, but in contrast to ethnographic work on ritual there has been little interest in the dynamics of the audience itself. Conditions in the cinema and theatre—darkness, the anonymity of the occasion, the discouragement of participation—appear to reduce audience dynamics to a few shared emotions such as laughter, shock, and sadness. Poetry audiences are different. The lights are not dimmed, the audience is aware of its co-presence, and it is commonly made up of people who do know one another and already form a loosely constituted group, however open to newcomers and occasional visitors. At the same time, they are like the audiences for theatre and cinema insofar as their relations with one another are mediated during the performance by the reading itself. Public conversation and debate are discouraged inside the borders of the formal occasion. We need therefore to study the intersubjective dynamics of the poetry reading through analysis of the interaction between the pre-existing internal affiliations of the group and the mediations staged within the imagined spaces created by the vocalized text. We also need to recognize that there will be an underlying tension between the individual responses and this network of intersubjectivity.

To draw even a partial picture of these dynamics is difficult. It requires good recordings, memories, knowledge of the setting and audience, and then analysis of the text itself. I am not sure that we yet have methods to do this adequately. Here I shall take a typically complex occasion and sketch out some of the dimensions of meaning that are generated in one poem as the poet reads. On March 8, 1995, in the early evening after classes, the Durham poet Richard Caddel read a selection of his poems to a university audience at the State University of New York campus at Buffalo. The day before he had given a lecture to graduate students about the poet Basil Bunting, whose work and teaching influenced Caddel's in several ways. The audience, sitting scattered across a large lecture hall, consisted almost entirely of students, with just a few academic staff, almost all of whom were themselves poets. This was, I believe, the first time that Caddel had visited the university, and his work was not known to most of those present. His introduction begins by establishing a link with at least some of those in the audience, and then goes on to make his Englishness a framework for this reading to an audience of Americans. He speaks haltingly with phatic "ums" and emphatic pauses whose effect is to project unrehearsed sincerity. The following is transcribed from a recording of Caddel's poetry reading:

Those of you who heard me talk yesterday will remember me talking  
about border sensitivities quite a lot. And a lot of those concerns will

manifest themselves in the set I'm reading tonight, which is very much to do with situations within the U.K. at the moment over the last few years where value of one kind or other seems pretty damn difficult to maintain. This might be familiar as a situation to some of you. And I fell back as a situation on some of the Celtic civilisations which are around me in the U.K. obviously and some of their imagery and so there are sequences of words taken from the Welsh in what's coming up. But more specifically the image which I want to hang before you before I get going is that of the standing stone Mên Scryfa<sup>4</sup> in Cornwall which is a standing stone with Celtic inscriptions on it which commemorates the names not of the victors of the battle which took place there but of the losers and it's that idea of commemorating the surviving, the loss of the battle that is going on in the set tonight.

Caddel acknowledges that these are mostly students ("those of you who heard me"), and implicitly asks to be heard again from that position. He acknowledges the time of day as a way of pointing to the specifics of the occasion, then encourages his audience to an act of sympathetic imagination (what I experienced in the U.K. is probably something you have experienced here too), and uses an expletive to emphasize the strength of his feeling as well as his Englishness (by employing a particularly British locution—"damn"). He then invites the audience to perform an act of inner visual creation together by thinking of the memorial to the Celtic dead. Finally, he concludes the opening remarks by saying that the idea of such an act of recovering the lost defenders of an ancient culture "is what is going on in the set tonight."

What is it that *is going on* in the poetry reading? This is the question that my entire essay is concerned with, and so what strikes me as fascinating in this paratext is Caddel's willingness to offer such a metalinguistic gesture. We might speculate that performers do this more often than we realize, and this might be a rewarding avenue of research. Caddel's wish to offer cultural anamnesis has to contend with some strong counter-forces, most obviously the cultural divide, coupled with the lack of knowledge of Celtic culture, let alone the obelisk. Who in the audience is likely to be able to perform the feat of visualization? Perhaps this opening offers a line to hang onto in the face of confusion or at least the struggle to form a coherent intersubjective response. Before performing one of his most significant poems, "Rigmarole: Block Quilt" (2002:118), Caddel prefaces it by saying that he will not repeat

---

<sup>4</sup> The tape is not entirely clear at this point, but I am guessing that this is the stone that Richard Caddel had in mind. It is a memorial to a king killed in the sixth-century Battle of Gendhal Moor.

what he is about to utter, so the audience must listen closely. This introduction to his reading of the poem fine-tunes his already established relation to the student audience: “The block quilt is again a method of maintaining fragments which would otherwise have been lost and as the alcohol starts to bite more and more into the memory bank in my case the act of memory becomes more and more important, and ‘Rigmarole: Block Quilt’ is a poem about maintaining fragments of memory in one sense or another.” What happens then as the poem is read?

From the beginning the poem provides other images that may hang in front of the audience: “scrape the vellum,” “patchwork concerns,” “scrape the record,” “the song come down to us,” “lost songs,” or “a fine concern for pattern.” The seventh stanza says, “we greet ourselves / from our separate thoughts,” and in the context of this public reading invites the audience to recognize its internal distances as opportunities for acts of recognition. Caddel’s introduction has already helped make this point more salient than it might have been. In the final three stanzas of this eighteen-stanza poem, the audience members are further encouraged to think of themselves as finding and hearing forgotten fragments of lyric poem and making a collage with them. Each stanza of the printed poem is set out in phrasal clusters with an extended caesural spacing between them and no punctuation. Caddel reads fluently, in marked contrast to his halting style of presentation, and he sometimes reads across a line-break as if it were not there, although on the whole he belongs to the school of poetry readers who do observe the line break. The printed text leaves a word-length space to indicate a substantial caesura (2002:121):

finally and unasked-for      caring’s not dead  
 written on the margins of sleep      speedwell  
 stitchwort, gentian      a distillation  
 eyes open and so much to learn from them

it’s what remains      when the slate is wiped  
 just wanted to say      I love you  
 and all of this too      pieces laid side by side  
 for clarity      no easy way

of breath      no wasted effort  
 the songs finding themselves      curled asleep  
 miles away      escapers in tender  
 common range of visible things

If one reads this text as spoken to and through the dynamics of that particular audience, one notices that the listeners are represented as not

having asked for affirmation that “caring’s not dead.” The audience has its eyes and egos open and recognizes that it has much to learn, not least about Celtic civilization and this English poet. The phrase “just wanted to say” is one of those almost phatic remarks that acknowledges an awkwardness of address, and here resonates as an example of a past intent to speak, a wanting, that is now perhaps being fulfilled. The songs and the listeners find themselves present among “the common range of visible things”—the poem seems to end with an invitation to wake up from its verbal spell to the mundane environment of lecture hall and evening in March. This audience finds itself in a back-and-forth shifting relation to the speaker, who enacts a drama in which his words may be at one instant in danger of being ignored (“unasked-for”) and at another longed for (“eyes open and so much to learn from them”). And there are many other momentary as well as extended dramas of inclusion for the listeners in a poem that is different from the norm only in its excellence.

## **Conclusion**

Time has changed that poetry reading of Richard Caddel’s in a manner that I have not yet mentioned. His death in April 2003 pushes the material of the recording and memories of witnessing it into an elegiac frame, and thence into a history whose agent is no longer active. This raises a question that my essay has not tried to answer, addressed as it is to potential scholars of this history of performance and poetry. What possible value does this investigation have for poets themselves?

I would like to think that a fuller understanding of the poetry reading would lead neither to self-consciousness nor a striving for greater dominance of the situation but to the improvement of the conditions under which audiences engage with poetry and the better understanding of the many ways in which meaning is produced. A performance situation provides further materials for the poem’s facture, just as page, language, contemporary discourses, and the book, all provide the palette for written composition. Learning what these are could help benefit the neophyte poet, and there is some evidence that this is now happening, that more and more poets are going to performance workshops. A better understanding of the relations between poetry on the page and poetry in performance will also enable us to historicize this interdependence and grasp how it has been changing over the past century. There is some evidence that boundaries between text and performance are becoming more permeable and that what we have called

poetry is gradually changing to encompass wider and wider ranges of performance, including installation art, conceptual work, and musical performance. The full significance of these developments is only likely to emerge from more historical study.

When a written poem is read aloud, positions for identification and interpretation open up within the semantic space that are available to both individuals and the group. The performance occasion works as a model of civic or public space, which is then like a back projection for the occasion of the reading and these intra-textual stagings. By contrast, the mere standing forth of the Xhosa praise poet, the *imiboshi*, is as important as the content of his political poetry, because the salience of his role is a reminder of the possibility of alternatives to the policy and even reality set by the chief. A poetry reading is a much less powerful version of this, yet this bearing of public witness remains a potent element within the performance occasion. I was recently among ten poets reading in Winchester Cathedral in the North Transept. The airy acoustics that swallowed poets' voices in receding echoes was one of many reminders that our reading, which included both secular and religious poems, was in tension—or perhaps dialogue would be a preferred metaphor—with the building's embodiment of a Christian mission. This unusual venue for a reading was a small sign that poets, readers, and critics of poetry are becoming more conscious of the possibilities and cultural work of poetry performances. Research is still in its infancy in this area, and the questions we ask will need to take account of the issues set out above, and no doubt of many others that still need identifying.

*University of Southampton*

### References

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Armitage and Crawford<br>1998 | Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford, eds. <i>The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945</i> . New York: Viking. |
| Bernstein 1998                | Charles Bernstein. <i>Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word</i> . New York: Oxford University Press.                      |
| Caddel 2002                   | Richard Caddel. <i>Magpie Words: Selected Poems 1970-2000</i> . Sheffield: West House Books.                                       |
| Creeley 1991                  | Robert Creeley. <i>Windows</i> . London: Marian Boyars.  |

- Creeley 1996 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Line Break: Robert Creeley*. Interviewed and Co-Produced by Charles Bernstein, and Directed and Co-Produced by Martin Spinelli. Buffalo, NY: Granolithic Productions. [Cassette Tape.]
- Finch 1994 Peter Finch. *The Poetry Business*. Bridgend, Wales: Seren.
- Foley 2002 John Miles Foley. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. E-companion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).
- Kay 1998 Jackie Kay. In *The Poetry Quartets: 1 Simon Armitage, Kathleen Jamie, Jackie Kay, Glyn Maxwell*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books. [Cassette Tape.]
- LaBelle and Migone 2001 Brandon LaBelle and Christof Migone. *Writing Aloud: The Sonics of Language*. Los Angeles: Errant Bodies Press.
- Lazer 1996 Hank Lazer. "Poetry Readings and the Contemporary Canon." In *Opposing Poetries: Volume One Issues and Institutions*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press. pp. 47-54.
- Longley 1995 Michael Longley. *The Ghost Orchid*. Read by Michael Longley. London: Random House Audiobooks. [Cassette Tape.]
- Longley 1998 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Selected Poems*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Middleton 1998 Peter Middleton. "The Contemporary Poetry Reading." In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*. Ed. by Charles Bernstein. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 262-99.
- Middleton 1999 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Poetry's Oral Stage." In *Performance and Authenticity in the Arts: Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts*. Ed. by Ivan Gaskell and Salim Kemal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 154-86.
- Middleton 2002 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Performing an Experiment, Performing a Poem: Allen Fisher and Bruce Andrews." In *Additional Apparitions: Poetry, Performance and Site Specificity*. Ed. by David Kennedy and Keith Tuma. Sheffield: The Cherry on the Top Press. pp. 29-55.

- Middleton 2005 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. Tuscaloosa: Alabama University Press.
- Morris 1997 Adelaide Morris. *Sound States: Acoustical Technologies and Modern and Postmodern Writing*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Orange 2003 Tom Orange. "Notes for a Reading of *Ace*." In *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth*. Ed. by Nate Dorward. *The Gig*, 13/14:161-69.
- Raworth 1977 Tom Raworth. *Ace*. Berkeley, CA: The Figures.
- Raworth 2003 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Collected Poems*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- Riley 1993 Denise Riley. *Mop Mop Georgette*. London: Reality Street Editions.
- Robinson 2002 Mark Robinson. *Words Out Loud: Ten Essays about Poetry Readings*. Exeter: Stride Publications.
- Vincent and Zweig 1981 Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, eds. *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language and Performance*. San Francisco: Momo's Press.

**“Fellow Townsmen and My Noble Constituents!”:  
Representations of Oratory  
on Early Commercial Recordings  
[\**eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)*]**

**Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster**

We live in a time of great preoccupation—in some quarters bordering on obsession—with the transformative effects of new technologies of communication—economic, social, cultural, cognitive, discursive. Oracles of the internet or computer multimedia or hypertext proclaim the revolutionary impact of these new media. Here, for example, is George Landow, one of the most frequently quoted prophets of hypertext (1997:21): “Electronic text processing marks the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. It promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg’s movable type.” Landow, like most others who are engaged in constructing the ideology of the computer as a technology of communication in the guise of attempting to anticipate its effects, invokes the advent of print as a frame of reference, in tacit acknowledgment of just how powerful the ideology of the print revolution is in the symbolic construction of modernity.

But a closer analogy, in some ways, might be the invention of sound recording, a communicative technology scarcely a century and a quarter old that has in that brief time extended its reach throughout the globe and that has been accompanied by significant social transformations of its own. Where it took several centuries before intellectuals began to speculate self-consciously on the social and cultural implications of print or on its potential for commercial exploitation, the invention of sound recording technology by Thomas A. Edison in 1877 was accompanied from the moment of its accomplishment by projections about how it might be used and what social transformations might follow in its wake.

The advent of new technologies of communication and inscription will perforce be of interest to those of us concerned with the representation

of performance, and indeed of anything else. In this paper we want to explore how the invention and early commercial development of the phonograph opened a cultural space for imagining how this new technology might be used for the representation of performance—specifically, oratorical performance—and how at least some of those imaginings were realized.

### **Imagining the Uses of the “Speaking Phonograph”**

When Edison hit upon the mechanical means of inscribing sound in a reproducible form, toward the end of 1877, the capacity of the “speaking phonograph,” as he called his invention, that most impressed him was that it allowed its user “to store up and reproduce automatically at any future time the human voice perfectly” (Edison 1989a:444). That is, it provided the means to overcome the ephemerality of the human voice; it made the spoken word durable as such, available for future reanimation, unlike writing, which required the transformation of the word into material and visual form for the sake of preserving it. The immediate question, then, was what kinds of speech were worthy of storing up toward future reproduction. For Edison, the quintessential inventor-entrepreneur, the answer had to lie in “practical use” (1989b:7), that is, something that would make money. One of the chief developmental goals that Edison framed for sound recording was “the transmission of such captive sounds through the ordinary channels of commercial intercourse and trade in material form, for the purposes of communication or as merchantable goods” (1878:530).

The first commercial application Edison pursued was targeted toward “business men and lawyers” (1989b:7), for use in letter-writing and other forms of dictation, a venture that proved notably unsuccessful because of the delicacy and complexity of the apparatus and the difficulty of making clearly intelligible recordings. Way down at the end of Edison’s list of possible applications, after talking dolls, other mechanical toys, and alarm clocks, was “*Speech and other Utterances*.—It will henceforth be possible to preserve for future generations the voices as well as the words of our Washingtons, our Lincolns, our Gladstones, etc., and to have them give us their ‘greatest effort’ in every town and hamlet in the country, upon our holidays” (1878:534). The preservation of great oratory and its reproduction on ceremonial occasions seemed an appropriate and desirable use for the phonograph. This was speech worthy of fixing and storing up, not just as words—which could be accomplished in print—but as performance, in its living voice. Each town and hamlet would have to purchase its own phonograph for such ceremonial occasions, so there was at least a little profit

to be had here. Compared to the fortune Edison expected to make from the phonograph in other fields, however, the reproduction of political speeches did not seem to be much of a money-maker. Edison evidently felt that investors were more likely to be won over by other applications, so he presented phonographic oratory as a perfunctory afterthought.

Journalists were more interested in titillating the popular imagination than in promoting the phonograph as a sound investment, so they tended to emphasize different points than Edison's official press releases. Judging from early journalistic accounts of Edison's "acoustic marvel," the capability of the phonograph that most captivated potential users was that it could preserve the living voice of people long dead. "How startling it will be," exclaimed an early article in *Scribner's Monthly*, "to reproduce and hear at pleasure the voice of the dead!" including prominently "the speeches of celebrated orators" (Prescott 1877:857).

In an article on "The Phonograph" in the November 7, 1877 issue of the *New York Times* (p. 4), the use of the phonograph for the preservation and reproduction of oratory moves to the fore. Playfully developing the conceit that the phonograph "bottles up" speech for future use, the author suggests that while "it may seem improbable that a hundred years hence people will be able to hear the voice of WENDELL PHILLIPS in the act of delivering an oration, [. . .] the phonograph will render it possible to preserve for any length of time the words and tones of any orator."

To this author, "it is evident that this invention will lead to important changes in our social customs." The principal change, however playfully it may be framed, amounts to the recontextualization of public culture to private settings in commodified form: "The lecturer will no longer require his audience to meet him in a public hall, but will sell his lectures in quart bottles, at fifty cents each; and the politician, instead of howling himself hoarse on the platform, will have a pint of his best speech put into the hands of each of his constituents." Whereas George Prescott, the author of the article in *Scribner's Monthly*, like Edison himself, foresees the use of the phonograph as among the "public uses" (Prescott 1877:857) of the technology, in keeping with the public context of oratorical performance, as "upon our holidays," the *Times* article anticipates the movement of public oratory to domestic space, "the home circle." What follows logically, then, is the possibility that a private individual might build up a collection of recorded speeches containing a mixture of oratorical styles, much as one develops a private wine cellar, with all the associated trappings of connoisseurship and consumerism. To speculate thus in terms of the "oratorical cellar" and the "connoisseur of orators" is to anticipate an

affluent audience for sound recordings, those who could afford prestige goods made for the burgeoning consumer market.

### **Representations of Oratory on Early Commercial Sound Recordings**

For reasons well beyond the scope of this essay, the full realization of the vision presented in the *New York Times*, that is, the marketing of ready-made recordings as consumer goods to the general public for domestic use, did not take off until the late 1890s. As the fledgling record companies moved to develop this market, they were faced with the practical problem of discovering—but also shaping—what it was that consumers would buy. As we would expect, however, after music, oratory figured importantly in their early catalogues. The recordings on which we will concentrate for the remainder of this article all stem from the formative period of commercial sound recording between the late 1890s and 1912, and all feature representations of political oratory. They fall into three major categories: recitations of canonical speeches from American history, campaign speeches for the elections of 1908 and 1912, and dramatic representations of ceremonial occasions in which oratory is a principal feature. We will be concerned in our examination of these materials with the transformations attendant upon the process of representation, here including the effects and concomitants of mediation, the effects of semiotic reduction to sonic systems of signification, the recontextualization of oratory from public to domestic space, and the constraints imposed by the technological limitations of the medium. We are especially interested, though, in the rekeying and refiguration of participant structures and roles. How do the recorded performances align themselves to an audience? By audience here, we mean the targeted receivers of the performance (though not necessarily the addressees), invited to hold in close attention the performer's act of communicative display and to evaluate the skill and efficacy with which the performance is accomplished (Bauman 1977). And, because the performances we are dealing with center around political oratory, we will be concerned with how the oratorical performances align themselves to a public (or to publics in the plural), both presupposed, in the sense of already recognized social formations, and emergent, as constituted by the recordings themselves and the marketing efforts that promoted them.

The term “public,” as we all know too well, covers a shifting and often inchoate field of phenomena, so in the interest of explicitness, let us specify also what we mean by the term. We take “public” in the nominal sense—a public—as a social formation constituted by discourse oriented to

the life-in-common of a collectivity, and constructed to foster dissemination, either synchronically, through open accessibility and direction to multiple addressees, or diachronically, through expansive or accelerated circulation, or both (cf. Hénaff and Strong 2001:1; Urban 2001). Different orders of metapragmatic regimentation will constitute different publics, or constitute the same publics on different grounds. The regimenting factors may involve sites of discursive production, generic or textual form, addressivity, and others to be discovered in any empirical instance. All of these, of course, will be closely bound up with the capacities of the communicative technologies employed.

### **Reanimations of Canonical Speeches**

The first category of recorded performances, recitations of famous speeches from the historical canon, consists of reanimations of the words of others, recontextualizations of the memorable utterances of famous orators, lifted out of their originary contexts of production and re-performed in new ones. The speeches continue to be attributed to their absent authors and associated with the occasions on which they were originally delivered, but in the guise in which we now hear them they are decoupled from both. The current reciter is not accountable for the message, only for the delivery.

Let us consider a couple of examples. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was recorded regularly throughout the 1890s and early 1900s by early performance specialists in the new medium of sound recording, most notably by Len Spencer and Russell Hunting.<sup>1</sup> The Gettysburg Address was a natural: not only was it the most widely known piece of American oratory in the repertoire, but it was short enough to fit in its entirety on a single record, which at the turn of the century meant two or three minutes.

From one point of view, we can recognize these recordings as belonging to an endless series of reiterations of this canonical speech. By the time commercial sound recording became a reality, the Gettysburg Address had been memorized and declaimed by generations of schoolchildren and students of elocution, performed in school exhibitions and other performance occasions. It is the quintessential commemorative text (Casey 2000:216-57): as delivered by Lincoln in 1863 it commemorated the death of the battle victims and the birth of the nation four score and seven years earlier, and as re-performed by those generations of reciters it

---

<sup>1</sup> To listen to a recording of Leonard G. Spencer performing "Lincoln's Speech at Gettysburg," visit the eCompanion to this article at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

commemorated Abraham Lincoln as well, the martyred hero who gave his life in the service of liberty and national unity. The Gettysburg Address thus represents the perduring ancestral word, recited on ceremonial occasions to commemorate the ancestors and available as well as a means of ceremonializing any occasion through intertextual ties with past ceremonies in which the speech was recited. Moreover, the Gettysburg Address is the authoritative word, as actively manifested in the verbatim replication of the text and the virtuosic crafting of the recitation, subject to evaluation for the relative skill and affecting power of the delivery. Virtuosic performance displays high regard for the authoritative text, represents it as worthy of reproducing artfully, with care (Bauman 2001:109-10). Spencer, Hunting, and other phonographic orators use a declamatory style promulgated by nineteenth-century elocutionists (Johnson 1993), marked by a slow and solemn pace, hyper-precise enunciation, careful marking of word boundaries, lengthened and resonant vowels (with an occasional quaver to signal affect), frequent use of tapped and trilled ‘r’s, measured intonation patterns, and so on. The style serves both as a vehicle for the display of artistry and as an index of solemnity.

How is this recording aligned toward a public? First of all, hearing the phonographic performance evokes those past ceremonial and performance occasions in which one has heard the Gettysburg Address before, as part of an assembled group of co-participants in a public event, public understood here in the sense of taking place in public space, openly accessible, on view, collectively enacted. Let us call this an *assembled* (Agacinski 2001:137) or *gathered public*. Second, the phonograph’s reiteration of the speech, and the recognition that it is a reiteration, invokes a *historically founded public*, made up of those who are heir to the legacy of the memorialized ancestors. And third, it invokes what we might call a *distributive public*, constituted by the dissemination of the text: those who have active or passive knowledge of it as a text and as a sign.

The siting of the recorded performance—that is, the playing of the record—in domestic space is of less transformative significance than one might assume. Many households of the period had print versions of the Gettysburg Address, in schoolbooks and anthologies, and, more importantly for our purposes, domestic declamations of the speech were common; it was an elocutionary display piece and this was an era of elocutionary cultivation in the service of upward social mobility—as a tool for success in business and the professions—aided by teachers of elocution, self-help books, and other means (Johnson 1993). Thus, performances of the Gettysburg Address, Patrick Henry’s “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death,” and other like pieces

were brought into domestic space in mediated form well before the advent of sound recordings.

A comparison of recordings of the Gettysburg Address with another oratorical staple of early record catalogues is revealing: “Portions of the Last Speech of President McKinley” (on Victor), also known as “President McKinley’s Pan American Speech” (on Columbia).<sup>2</sup> The speech was delivered at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, on September 5, 1901, the day before McKinley was shot by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz. (He died on September 14.) Companies marketed recordings of parts of this speech within a few months of the assassination, but they continued to record new versions for at least another year or two and kept these in production for years thereafter. The McKinley selection stayed in the Columbia catalogue until 1914 and in the Victor catalogue until 1911; judging from label types, the specific copies we consulted were pressed around 1908. Why continue to offer a recitation of portions of this speech so long after the fact? McKinley was a noted orator in his day, and it is likely that his reputation remained alive in the decade following his death. The proven long-term appeal of a recorded speech by one slain president—Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address—may have encouraged the record companies to think in similar terms about a speech by a second presidential victim of an assassin’s bullet. In any event, the recitation of McKinley’s speech was, like the recitation of the Gettysburg Address, a commemorative act, exploiting the same authorizing and valorizing devices in performance and reaching back in time to an originary utterance.

It is noteworthy, however, that the recorded performance contains only about one-eighth of McKinley’s original text (Hazeltine 1902:10505-12), which is all that could fit on a single recording. The portions selected for recitation turn out to focus on employment and trade conditions and their policy implications. Labor and tariff issues were central concerns of McKinley’s political career, to be sure, but at the time our examples were pressed, around seven years after McKinley’s death, the country was in a severe state of political instability that came to be known as the Panic of 1907, marked by economic failures, a depressed labor market, and trade anxiety. (Out of financial desperation, Columbia introduced a new line of discs with recordings on *both* sides in 1908, and our copy of their McKinley recording was pressed as one of these new “double discs.”) That is to say that in addition to their links with the ancestral past, the portions of McKinley’s speech replicated on the recording invited recognition of the *current* salience of his message. What we are suggesting is that in addition

---

<sup>2</sup> For a version of this speech, visit the eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

to the alignment of this recording to the historically founded public that was heir to the legacy of McKinley's life and death, and to the distributive public constituted by the circulation of his last speech—both founded on the commemorative thrust of Spencer's recitation—this recording is aligned as well to a public constituted around an orientation to issues that bear upon their lives in common, perhaps the *polity as public*.

### **Presidential Campaign Speeches of 1908 and 1912**

Certainly the factor of topical salience comes most fully to the fore in the recordings of campaign speeches made by the candidates in the 1908 and 1912 presidential elections. Between May and September of 1908, all three major companies—Edison, Victor, and Columbia—issued recordings by William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and William Howard Taft, his Republican opponent. In the campaign of 1912, Edison recorded only Theodore Roosevelt, candidate of the breakaway Progressive Party, whom Edison himself supported, while Victor issued recordings of all three candidates: Roosevelt, Taft, and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson. (No campaign recordings were made for the election of 1916, and the campaign of 1920 marked the advent of radio, which is another story.)

The 1908 presidential campaign was not the first time that campaign speeches were marketed on commercial recordings. An 1896 catalogue from the United States Phonograph Company lists five speeches “as delivered by” the presidential candidates William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic candidate, and William McKinley, the Republican nominee:

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S CROWN OF THORNS AND CROSS OF GOLD SPEECH. The Peroration of the famous Address that won him the Presidential Nomination at Chicago. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

MAJOR MCKINLEY'S SPEECH ON THE THREAT TO DEBASE THE NATIONAL CURRENCY. As delivered by the distinguished Republican Nominee at Canton, July 11th. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S SPEECH AT THE NOTIFICATION MEETING IN NEW YORK. A part of his Address at the great Demonstration in Madison Square Garden, New York, on August 12th. Very loud. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S REPLY TO THE CHARGE OF ANARCHY. From the Candidate's great Speech in Hornellsville, before 15,000 people in the open air. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

HON. W. J. BRYAN'S OPINION OF THE WALL STREET GOLD-BUGS AND SYNDICATES. As delivered at the Buffalo Ratification Meeting, where he declared that the Creator did not make Financiers of better mud than he used for other people. Very loud and distinct. Applause. No Announcement.

Unfortunately, we do not have the recordings themselves. Note that these are "as delivered by" the presidential candidates and "as delivered at" particular public occasions during the campaign. These are representations of those gathered occasions, containing recitations of portions of the speeches delivered there. The performer is probably our friend, Len Spencer, who worked for the United States Phonograph Company at that time. The omission of the announcement, conventionally presented at the beginning of early recordings to identify the piece, the performer, and the recording company, renders the representations closer to the originary events by removing one of the principal signs of representation and mediation. The applause, done in the recording studio, enhances the simulation of a large, gathered political event, at which the person listening to the recording is cast as a spectator, present at the event, listening to the speech, but yet not fully a participant, even if some contexts may have invited "live" applause in unison with the recorded applause.

These listings highlight the capacity of sound recording to construct illusions, simulations of events. Recall, by contrast, the rhetoric of representational fidelity and accuracy that accompanied the invention of the phonograph. Taken together, these opposing constructions of the new technology define a field of tension between immediacy and transparency on the one hand, and mediation and illusion on the other. One early observer captured this tension beautifully by suggesting that a phonograph recording could contribute to "the illusion of real presence" (Anon. 1877). We will have more to say on this tension a little later.

Between 1896 and the presidential election of 1908, there were a number of attempts to use recorded speeches as campaign tools, including the presidential campaign of 1900 and William Randolph Hearst's New York gubernatorial campaign in 1906, but neither of these efforts involved recordings for a commercial market (see Bauman and Feaster 2003). The 1908 and 1912 recordings represented an entirely new departure: political speeches of great immediacy, addressed to "burning topics," as one advertisement put it, available for home consumption in mediated,

commodified form, recorded by the candidates themselves (*idem*). Edison, ever attentive to economic payoff, was explicit about the element of commodification and his desire to reach a mass market with his company's recordings of the presidential campaign speeches. A 1908 advertisement reads, "You can buy of any dealer in Edison Records records made by the Republican and Democratic candidates for President." Later promotional material proclaims that these records "may be had at a price within the reach of the poorest" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:33), tacit acknowledgment of the restrictions on length imposed by the medium. Edison ads also make explicit the fact that the recordings offer "selections" from the candidates' speeches, but emphasize their mimetic fidelity: "You can hear not only the exact words, but the exact tone and inflection of each Presidential candidate as he makes his speeches . . . each one a life-like representation" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:11). Together with claims such as this one, however, emphasizing the transparency of the medium—its immediacy, if you will—we find other statements that make a point of the technological mediation of the recording process, noting, for example, that "These records, the first ever made by THEODORE ROOSEVELT, were prepared with great care by our recording experts who have successfully brought out the forceful and convincing logic of his arguments" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:23). In an allied vein, a 1908 Victor ad for the recordings of Taft's speeches states "William H. Taft Speaks to the American Public through the Victor" (CD album notes in Marston 2000:12), neatly summing up the essence of the innovation, focusing on speaking, the communicative medium of co-presence, but here addressing the dispersed American Public, through the mediation of the Victor talking machine recording.

A pair of 1912 Victor ads capture especially effectively the ambiguous and emergent understandings of this new communicative technology vis-à-vis political oratory, poised between a visionary imagining of its unique capacities on the one hand and a conservative framing of its representations on the other:

Would you accept a special invitation to hear Mr. Taft, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. Roosevelt speak from the same platform? Then come in and hear them discuss the important topics of the campaign, just as you would hear them if seated in a convention hall with these three great men speaking to you. (CD album notes in Marston 2000:21)

The Republican, Democratic and Progressive candidates have decided to present their views to the people through that greatest of all public mediums, the Victor, which will bring directly into the home the actual voices of the aspirants for Presidential honors.

Heretofore, only a very small proportion of the people were able to listen to the candidates in person. Now, for the first time in the history of our country, the Victor makes it possible for the people to hear the actual voices of the three nominees in a discussion of the principles involved in the campaign. This debate, an intensely interesting one, fills eighteen records, most of which have been combined in double-faced form, thus insuring the widest publicity for the discussion. (CD album notes in Marston 2000:22)

Both advertisements are exercises in virtual reality, setting up for an undifferentiated mass of potential customers imaginative conditions in which those who accept the invitation to buy the records will be transposed from the dispersed settings of their individual homes, listening to the technologically mediated, disembodied, and fragmented voices of the separate candidates, into the selected, gathered audience at a live political debate. As a member of that select audience, you are the directly targeted addressee of the great speaker's words. The force that actualizes this complex virtual reality is "the actual voices" of the candidates, mediated though they are through the Victor talking machine. The power of presence embodied in the voice is the pivot-point around which the new experience of hearing campaign speeches in the privacy of domestic space is assimilated back to the more familiar—if less widely accessible—experience of listening to campaign speeches in convention halls. Note that this reverses the trajectory envisioned in early imaginings of what the phonograph might effect, that is, moving oratory from public to domestic space. Now the reader of the ad is asked to imagine himself or herself back in public space. But interestingly, the ad turns at the end from this imagined restoration of the speeches to the context of a live performance to invoke a dispersed, distributive public, for it is through the diffusion of these recordings that "the widest publicity for the discussion" can be achieved.

The recorded texts themselves likewise signal the ambiguity of a new medium whose capacities have not yet assumed—or been disciplined into—a clear shape. For example, the cylinder and disk formats available in 1908-1912 allowed for recordings from around 2.5 to 4 minutes in duration. This constraint impelled the recorded speeches toward topical and formal closure within the relatively brief and bounded span of a single recording. Pulling in the other direction, however, were the generic expectations of the campaign speech, which tended to be considerably longer and more complex both in argument and form. Moreover, the candidates approached the recording process, by and large, intending to adapt speeches composed for live delivery at public political events to the new medium. Not surprisingly, then, there are instances on the campaign recordings where the disassembly of

longer speeches into short, bounded, and finalized units is imperfectly accomplished, leaving only traces of the cohesion that tied the original text together. For example, a 1912 recording by Theodore Roosevelt entitled “Why the Trusts and Bosses Oppose the Progressive Party” opens with the sentence, “Now this statement of Mr. Archbold represents but part of the truth” (CD-2 in Marston 2000:track 14). “Now this” is a double deictic, but where is it anchored? “Now” actually serves here as a discourse marker signaling a transition in an ideational sequence, and is therefore anomalous at the beginning of an utterance such as this with no antecedent co-text; the demonstrative adjective “this” demands an antecedent as well. As it happens, though, the preceding recording (as determined by the serial numbers) does introduce a statement by Mr. Archbold of Standard Oil, and the “Now this” of the recording at hand expresses a cohesive link that was fully motivated in the original, unified text (CD-2 in Marston 2000:track 13).

Also revealing is the deictic alignment of the recontextualized speeches to situational contexts of utterance as well as to co-text. Consider, for example, the following passage from a 1908 recording by William Howard Taft: “I am not here tonight to speak of foreign missions from a purely religious standpoint. That has been done and will be done. I am here to speak of it from the standpoint of political governmental advancement” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 21). What time and place are indexed by “here tonight?” The recorded utterance has carried some of its history with it in the process of recontextualization from the gathering at which it was originally spoken—the referent of “here tonight”—to the recording session, and beyond that to each playing of the record. This marks it as a reiteration of words originally spoken at another time and place, even if the author/speaker is the same individual. Unlike many of the other campaign recordings, free of such deictic baggage, this recording cannot fit as seamlessly into the context of the listening event, and thus cannot take full advantage of the immediacy that the speaking voice can evoke.

The point is that the campaign recordings were unsteadily poised between varying alignments to an audience and other aspects of context; they are unsure of their footing, in Goffman’s sense. Much of the work of contextualization is devoted to negotiating the transition between the gathered, co-present, co-participant public of those events in which political speeches were conventionally delivered, addressed directly to the assembled audience, and the dispersed public of record buyers, sited in private, domestic space, listening to speeches for which the targeted addressee was not clear, by an absent orator, who was nevertheless still somehow present, through his voice.

### **Parodies of Political Oratory from Popular Entertainments**

Among the speeches recorded by William Howard Taft in 1908 was one entitled “The Rise and Progress of the Negro,” in which Taft declares his support of “the Negro in his hard struggle for industrial independence and assured political status” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 14). In a curious piece on “Irish Humor,” Taft celebrates “that trait of humor so fully developed in the Irish character” and the important contribution to the American character brought about by “the infusion into the American people of the Irish strain” (CD-1 in Marston 2000:track 18). And of course, not only Taft but all the candidates declare support for the agrarian economy, the American farmer, the “working man,” and so on. Clearly, these speeches point up dimensions of differentiation in the American public (not only these, of course), indexing differences on the part of these various social sectors with regard to their own interests and the interests of others. The rhetoric of these campaign speeches, however, is unifying in its thrust, with the common interest, embodied in the presidency, the dominant concern.

We make this point in order to contextualize the last group of recordings we want to discuss, which implicate some of these same dimensions of social difference in discursively different terms. These are recordings featuring comic representations of oratory drawn from popular entertainments, principally the blackface minstrel show and vaudeville. These entertainment forms were enormously popular at the time that commercial sound recording entered onto the scene (though the minstrel show was declining in popularity, giving ground to vaudeville), and were strongest in the urban areas that provided sufficiently large audiences to sustain their continued operation.

A prominent performance genre in these entertainments was the comic skit, broadly burlesque in character, full of parody and exaggerated ethnic and regional stereotypes. And a common dramatic theme for these skits was political oratory. These were quickly adapted to commercial recordings, and that is what we will consider next. These materials are endlessly fascinating—if appalling as well—but we will focus only on limited aspects of the many that warrant analysis.

First of all, it is useful to establish that these were representations of representations. That is to say, while recording them required certain formal adaptations to the medium, and listening to them in domestic space instead of in a theater required concomitant adjustments of engagement as well,

listeners were preconditioned to engaging with these skits through a kind of theatrical representational frame, as enacted simulations, and that frame, *mutatis mutandis*, could be sustained in listening to the recordings as well. That being said, what did listeners to these recordings hear? Let us consider some examples.

The initial example, “A Meeting of the Limekiln Club” by the American Quartet, a studio recording group, was recorded around 1902 (Lambert cylinder 590). “Limekiln Club” appears as the name of a black fraternal lodge in the titles of several comic songs and minstrel sketches of the late nineteenth century. (A limekiln produces lime, which is the essential ingredient of whitewash—remember that these are white performers imitating black people.). We should acknowledge that although this is not a representation of political oratory per se, our warrant for including it is that it bears directly on the capacity of African Americans for a genre and a mode of discourse that was viewed as central to the exercise of political leadership, to qualification for full membership in the American polity, and to competent participation in the political process.

From A Meeting of the Limekiln Club, American Quartet

Announcer: A meeting of the Limekiln Club, by the American Quartet.

[Sound of gavel—4 raps]

President: De club will come to order. I have de pleasure dis evenin’ of conducin’ to you Brother Jimmy Dan Jones of Arkansas, who will undress you.

Crowd: Hear, hear, hear! Brudder Jones, Brudder Jones.

Brother Jones: Brudders of de Limekil’ Club, on this conspicuous momentum, my efforts am crowned wit’ de apex of my most laudable anticipations.

Crowd: Hear, hear!

Voice: Very good, Brudder, very good.

Brother Jones: On dis glorious mockasion I wants to compress upon you dat de whitewash brush am mightier den de sword.

Crowd: Dat’s right, Brudder Jones, dat’s right, Brudder Jones, dat’s right!

Brother Jones: And in declusion, I am constrained to ejaculate horse de combat, multiply in parvo, and e pluribus onion!

Crowd: Hear, hear, Brudder!

Voice: Dat man certainly can speak Latin.

[Listen to this speech at Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster’s eCompanion, [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).]

The first half of the skit, devoted to the guest speaker, offers a radically condensed, yet abundantly clear, representation of an oratorical performance, with a speech that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, each

one sentence long. The speech is keyed by such generic markers as the MC's formulaic introduction of the featured speaker, the speaker's invocation of multiple addresses in his greeting, his evocation of oratorical commonplaces ("On this glorious occasion," "I want to impress upon you," and so on), his Latinate vocabulary and Latin phrases, the closing formula ("And in conclusion"), the measured prosody and marked intonation, the enthusiastic responses from the audience, and so forth.

But of course, we hear these things as the dialogic voice behind the dialect, the malapropisms, the puns, the garbled syntax, the nonsequiturs, the botched Latin that mark this as parody. What is represented to us is a display of conspicuous communicative incompetence, lampooning the purported African American propensity for the grand style and highlighting the utter incapacity to achieve it. The generic markers are all right, the execution all wrong. And the orator's audience, in its enthusiastic approval of his ridiculous speech, displays its incompetence as well, its incapacity for apt evaluation.

While blackface performances are the most numerous, other ethnic groups come in for their share of stereotyping mockery as well. Irish dialect routines, of the kind represented in the next example, "McGuire's Fourth of July Celebration" (Columbia A585, recorded in 1908), were especially popular. This is a fairly elaborate piece, part of the appeal of which is that all the voices are done by a single individual, Steve Porter, a specialist in Irish dialect humor. Our colleague Lesley Milroy tells us that he has the Cork accent down right.

McGuire's Fourth of July Celebration, Steve Porter

[Laughter and shouts: (childish voice) C'mon Mickey, c'mon Mickey, come on!; sound of firecrackers]

A: By golly, it's a fine day for the Fourth of July.

B: You bet it is. [Band music]

A: Ah! the kids'll be havin' a great time.

B: There! Listen to the band comin'.

C: Here comes the parade! [Music ("Marching Through Georgia"), cheers]

A: Look at Riley with the flag! He holds it like he were carryin' a hod!

[Laughter]. Ah, they're a fine body o' men! Look at the walk on Dugan!

[Laughter] Hello, Mac! [Cheers]. You're all right!

[From the crowd: You're all right! (inaudible)].

A: Here comes McGuire ridin' in a hack! [Cheers, music]. Ah, that's a fine band. Here comes the flag. [Music].

[From the crowd: Get back there, get back; fine fifer!; cheers.]

A: Well, here we are.

D: Now, a . . . a little order, please. Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to intro-duce to you the speaker o' the day, Alderman uh uh McGuire o' th-th-the Third Ward [Cheers]

McGuire: Gentlemen, I'm greatly honored be bein' called upon to make a few remarks on the glorious Fourth o' July. [Cheers]. We have here in these large boxes the fireworks we're goin' to shoot off this evenin'. (O'Brien get away from the boxes with your cigar.) Now, gentlemen, the day is called the Fourth of July because uh, uh, be-because uh uh it comes after the third o' July. [Cheers, laughter]. Now, as Alderman o' the Third Ward . . . (Say, O'Brien, will you get away from them fireworks with your cigar!) As I was about to remark, who was it that wrote the Declaration of Independence?

B: You did, did you not?

McGuire: I did . . . not write it. Gentlemen, I'll give you me solemn word it was not me that done it. [Cheers]. Now . . . (I'm glad O'Brien's cigar's gone out.) . . . in the first place . . . (Don't light it again, O'Brien!) . . . but as I said before . . . ([higher, frightened voice]: Look out, O'Brien!)

[Exploding fireworks] Sure, O'Brien was a good man. The last thing he done in this world was to smoke. I wonder if 'e's smokin' now.

[eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Note the mimetic devices that the performer employs to establish the festive context of the July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration, the occasion par excellence in the U.S. for ceremonial oratory: the laughter and shouting, the percussive sound of fireworks, the band music, the cheers of the crowd, the effort at crowd control (“Get back”), and so on. Additional constituents of the Fourth of July celebration—the parade, the flag, the dignitary riding in a carriage—are evoked through the observations and evaluations of spectators, established as such by their spectatorial modes of engagement: “Here comes the parade,” “Look at Riley,” “Ah, that’s a fine band,” and the like. All this is done with impressive economy.

The speech has some of the same framing and generic features as in the previous example—the formulaic introduction of the speaker, the vocative greeting of the audience, the measured prosody, the expressions of audience approval—and some additional ones as well, such as the local politician as featured speaker, his ritual acknowledgment of the honor of being invited to speak, the rhetorical question. But here again the performance is riddled with displays of incompetence, beginning with the introduction of the speaker, which is marred by malapropism, hesitation markers, and stuttering. The speaker is a windbag who can’t sustain an appropriate oratorical line, gives a foolish account of the significance of July 4<sup>th</sup>, gets caught in his own rhetorical question, and winds up disclaiming responsibility for writing the Declaration of Independence. Whereas the

competent Fourth of July orator must display at least some conventional knowledge of the history that occasions the celebration, this klutz knows nothing. And throughout the speech there runs the leitmotif of frame-breaking asides to O'Brien, whose lighting of his cigar near the fireworks brings the speech—and his life—to a disastrous but flippantly observed end.

The last example, “Congressman Filkin’s Homecoming” by Byron G. Harlan (United A1036, ca. 1910), shifts from ethnic stereotype to regional stereotype, poking fun at the rural or small-town “rube”—unsophisticated, homespun, and inclined toward bluntness.

Congressman Filkin’s Homecoming, Byron G. Harlan

[Crowd talk, train whistle]

Voice: I tell you, he’s the best Congressman we ever had.

Master of Ceremonies: Here comes the train!

[Band music: “Yankee Doodle”; train slows; steam whistle fades]

There he is! Three cheers for Congressman Filkin! Hip hip . . .

Crowd: Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Speech! Speech! Speech!

M.C.: Right up here, Congressman. Now then, I’ll introduce you. Now, fellow townsmen, Congressman Filkin!

Crowd: Hurray!

Filkin: Fellow townsmen and my noble constituents.

Crowd: Hurray!

Filkin: I see before me today many faces that I haven’t shaken hands with for a long, long time.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: I come before you as a public servant who has worked for the people, by the people, and the people.

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: You’re all right, Congressman!

Filkin: When you sent me to represent you in Congress, I promised to give you prosperity, didn’t I?

Crowd: Yes!

Filkin: You got it, didn’t you?

Crowd: Yes!

Voice: You bet your life, we did.

Old man [with quavering voice]: Don’t know ‘bout that.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: Looky here, Zeke Moseley, I’ve knowed you for nigh onto twenty years, and never knowed no good of you nohow. Now if you got anything to say, you come right up here and say it. Or I’ll answer you.

Voice: Go lay down, Moseley!

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: As I was about to say, I can see more prosperity for the farmer. Every day, any farmer can get an automobile nowadays. He simply has to cross the road to get one. He can’t tell just where he’ll get it, but he’ll get it, all right!

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: You always was a joker!

Filkin: Now the platform on which I stand . . . [crashing noise] Ohhhh (groan).

M.C.: Hurt you? //hurt you?

Filkin: //No, no, no, //not a bit, not a bit.

M.C.: //Right here, right here.

Filkin: That's all right. That's . . . that's all right. Now the platform on which I . . . ([aside:] Now sit still, would you? [laughter] Well, never mind the platform.) Fellow citizens, the great question before the American people today is the high cost of living. Now, I'll grant you that it costs more to live today than it used to, but by Jiminy Crickets, it's worth it!

Crowd: [laughter].

Voice: Right agin!

Filkin: Now I believe in honesty, especially honesty in politics. Why only a few centuries ago, people thought the world was square. Now they know it's crooked! Why, there's men in politics today so durn crooked they could hide behind a corkscrew.

Crowd: [laughter].

Filkin: Now in conclusion, fellow citizens, I want to thank you all for your kind attention. And, as the Senator from Idaho would say, "Have I put the right bridle on the right horse?"

Voice: You have!

Crowd: [cheers; band strikes up "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight"].

[eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Here again, we find many of the same mimetic devices, framing conventions, and generic markers that we have encountered before in the other representations we considered above, though it is worth looking again at how the keying of participant roles is accomplished, especially by reflexive references to his own performative actions on Filkin's part ("I see before me," "I come before you") and invocations of the spectatorial gaze of the audience ("Here comes the train!" "There he is!"). This performance represents a more interactive style of public speaking than the others, with members of the audience, Filkin's constituents, responding more actively to his questions and more critically to his assertions. There is also a somewhat greater reliance on speech-play gags of the kind that characterized minstrel show repartee ("he'll get it, all right," "so durn crooked they could hide behind a corkscrew," and the punning basis of the widely used collapsing platform routine). Filkin's oratorical infelicities, which carry the parodic load, include misaligned figures ("I see before me many faces that I haven't shaken hands with for a long, long time") misquotation ("for the people, by

the people, and the people”—invoking, please note, the same distributional public as the recording of the Gettysburg Address), gratuitous quotation (“And, as the Senator from Idaho would say, ‘Have I put the right bridle on the right horse?’”), and goofy non sequitur (“Now I’ll grant you that it costs more to live today than it used to, but by Jiminy Crickets, it’s worth it!”). Rubes have always been a comic resource for sophisticated folks.

Thus, what we encounter again and again in these recorded representations, in various ethnic or regional inflections, are displays of communicative incompetence. Oratory is a performance form, and performance resides in the display of communicative skill and efficacy, subject to evaluation by an audience (Bauman 1977). At the risk of oversimplification, oratorical skill was ideologized in turn-of-the-century American society as necessary to political leadership, and the knowledge and ability to interpret and evaluate political oratory as essential to participation in the American political process. In these recordings, however, the orators are laughably incompetent and the audience members represented on the record, in applauding their botched oratory, are demonstrably incompetent judges of what good oratory—and thus good leadership—should be.

Some critical observers of these materials, then and now, would argue that this was all in good fun, that members of the very groups represented in the skits enjoyed them too (see, e.g., Gilbert 1967:61). More nuanced assessments suggest that these representations expressed and evoked ambivalent feelings, ranging from sympathetic joking to bitterly hostile ridicule, from nostalgia for vanishing ways of life to embarrassed rejection of one’s parents’ backward ways, from indulgent smiles of recognition to the painful wounds inflicted by others’ contempt. Even the egregiously racist representations of the minstrel show may be read—often quite plausibly—as the carnivalesque troping of the Other as a device for working-class social and political critique (see, e.g., Cockrell 1997, Lott 1995, McLean 1965, Mahar 1999, Nasaw 1993, and Roediger 1991). All these views acknowledged, though, one reading to which these skits are fully open, we believe—that black people, Irish people, and rural people (and there are recordings featuring still other groups as well) are not fully competent to participate in the American political process, that they are not fully qualified for membership in the polity, the political public. In a related vein, one might interpret them as conveying the message that as long as African American or Irish or rural people behave like that, they are not qualified to participate, thus providing a stimulus toward full assimilation to the white mainstream model. This interpretation would be consistent with the

observation that members of these very stereotyped groups laughed at the skits—the uneasy laughter of the assimilated and the up-to-date (those who bought record players) at the crude ways of their less refined fellows. Either way, however, these comic recordings both presuppose and create a divided public, segmented by structures of inequality. Whereas the campaign speeches address social differentiation, and even occasionally acknowledge relations of inequality, they do so to reaffirm unity, to foreground rhetorically the centripetal force of common public interest. These comic representations, however, are centrifugal; their thrust is divisive and the interest they serve is that of the dominant, white, mainstream, modern, urban—and male, of course—sector of the society.

This is especially apparent, we would argue, when one views these comic recordings within the larger context provided by the full range of recordings featuring representations of political oratory. The full corpus, we may recall, offers to the listener three types of representation: (1) recitations of canonical commemorative speeches that index multiple modes of incorporation into various orders of public—gathered, distributive, historically founded, and so on; and (2) presidential campaign speeches that offer still others, such as issue-oriented participation in a unified polity. Each of these modes of incorporation and participation is predicated on the competent production and reception of political oratory. Finally, we have type (3), the burlesque representations of ethnic and rural oratory. Read against the third set, the first two serve as models of how to do it right, as a basis for full inclusion in the polity. Do it badly, as in the comic representations, and the implication is that you do not belong. You are not fully qualified for citizenship.

## Conclusion

“Aaand in declusion . . . .”—political oratory is quintessentially public discourse—everybody knows that. But it is not so clearly public, or not so clearly public in the same ways, when it is represented on a sound recording. What we have endeavored to do here by examining political oratory on early commercial records is to elucidate the ways in which the recorded speeches are aligned to various orders of audiences and publics. Focusing on the formative period in the development of commercial recording, before the producers and consumers of sound recordings had become habituated to the new technology (and the new commodity), brings experimentation and reflexivity to the fore, making the work of alignment more apparent. The text- and form-sensitive analysis of specific, representative recordings, we

believe, offers a critical complement to the characterizations advanced by media scholars and historians, who tend to frame the advent of new communicative technologies in relatively gross before-and-after terms and the transformative effects of the new media on “the public” in equally general terms. We have attempted to show here some of the concrete terms in which the transition from political oratory in live performance to political oratory on records was negotiated, in relation to how political oratory may be aligned to and constitutive of multiple publics—a study of how at least one aspect of the transformation of the public sphere was discursively accomplished.

*Indiana University, Bloomington*

### References

- Agacinski 2001 Sylviane Agacinski. “Stages of Democracy.” In *Public Space and Democracy*. Ed. by Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. 129-43.
- Anon. 1877 Anonymous. “The Talking Phonograph.” *Scientific American*, 37 (Dec. 22.):385.
- Bauman 1977 Richard Bauman. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Bauman 2001 \_\_\_\_\_. “Mediational Performance, Traditionalization, and the Authorization of Discourse.” In *Verbal Art Across Cultures: The Aesthetics and Proto-Aesthetics of Communication*. Ed by Herbert Knoblauch and Helga Kotthoff. Tübingen: Gunter Narr. pp. 91-117.
- Bauman and Feaster 2003 Richard Bauman and Patrick Feaster. “Oratorical Footing in a New Medium: Recordings of Presidential Campaign Speeches, 1896-1912.” *Texas Linguistics Forum*, 46: <http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/salsa/salsaproceedings/salsa11/SALSA11papers/bauman&feaster.pdf>.
- Casey 2000 Edward S. Casey. *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Cockrell 1997 Dale Cockrell. *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Edison 1878 Thomas A. Edison. "The Phonograph and its Future." *North American Review*, 126:527-36.
- Edison 1989a \_\_\_\_\_. *The Papers of Thomas A. Edison. Menlo Park: The Early Years*. Vol. 3. Ed. by Robert A. Rosenberg et al. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Edison 1989b \_\_\_\_\_. *The Papers of Thomas A. Edison: The Wizard of Menlo Park*. Vol. 4. Ed. by Robert A. Rosenberg et al. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gilbert 1967 Douglas Gilbert. *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*. New York: Whittlesey House.
- Hazeltine 1902 Mayo W. Hazeltine. *Orations from Homer to William McKinley*. Vol. 24. New York: P. F. Collier and Son.
- Hénaff and Strong 2001 Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong. "Introduction. The Conditions of Public Space: Vision, Speech, and Theatricality." In *Public Space and Democracy*. Ed. by Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp. 1-31.
- Johnson 1993 Nan Johnson. "The Popularization of Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric: Elocution and the Private Learner." In *Oratorical Culture in Nineteenth-Century America: Transformations in the Theory and Practice of Rhetoric*. Ed. by Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. pp. 139-57.
- Landow 1997 George P. Landow. *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lott 1995 Eric Lott. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mahar 1999 William J. Mahar. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Marston 2000                      Ward Marston. *In Their Own Voices: The U.S. Presidential Elections of 1908 and 1912*. CD 5202B-2.
- McLean 1965                      Albert F. McLean. *American Vaudeville as Ritual*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- Nasaw 1993                      David Nasaw. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. New York: Basic Books.
- “The Phonograph”                “The Phonograph.” *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1877. p. 4.
- Prescott 1877                      George B. Prescott. “The Telephone and the Telegraph.” *Scribner’s Monthly*, 15:848-58.
- Roediger 1991                      David R. Roediger. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso.
- Urban 2001                      Greg Urban. *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

## Visual Takes on Dance in Java

[\*eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Felicia Hughes-Freeland

### Introduction

This article addresses the questions of how performances have been represented in physical form (as verbal and visual texts) and of the role of indigenous concepts of performance. Rather than discuss historical examples of texts/products as others have done, I present some of my own “physical” forms of dance from my film and video work in Java. I argue that film is a valuable research tool as well as a mode of representing performance, with reference to the literature on the contribution of film/video to the development of cross-cultural understanding, in particular the writings of filmmaker David MacDougall (1995, 1997, and 1998). The examples are two film projects completed during twenty years of research into Javanese dance. *The Dancer and the Dance* is a personal view of women’s dance in Yogyakarta in the style associated with the sultan’s palace, filmed on 16mm with a proper budget in 1987 during a fellowship at the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield. *Tayuban: Dancing the Spirit in Java* is a video document of a village ritual and its performances, filmed on Hi-8 video with no budget in 1994 during a two-month field trip to Java supported by the British Academy. Both performances—and a collection of stills—are available in the eCompanion to this article at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

Using extreme contrasts of female performance I argue that a visual text—represented here by dance, film, and dance on film—offers different sorts of information from a verbal one. Rather than representing performance as a text, film is particularly helpful for representing performance as action or practice, as a phenomenological object that is contingent on historical and social factors and constructions, inseparable from the stuff of social events and action, and constituted by the contexts of practice and understanding. Film can reveal/represent dancing as the physical dimension of human existence that both embodies and imagines

social values, which addresses ethical and aesthetic aspects of social life. This article also raises questions about interpretation and reception: how much can we expect to understand from a film? Is it feasible to use images to challenge assumptions about cultural practices and to go beyond appearances?

### **An Approach to Film**

Filmmakers have been capturing dance on film for over one hundred years, but the potential of film and video to both document and represent dance research continues to be neglected in favor of other representational systems such as dance notation. Film and video have a valuable role in performance studies, but their role needs to be understood in the context of debates about cross-cultural understanding.

That most lucid writer on anthropology and film, the filmmaker and author David MacDougall, has suggested that we think of a film as an “arena of inquiry” rather than as an aesthetic or scientific performance (1995:128). He asks us to consider a film as “a human product and not a transparent window on reality” (1998:86). Anthropological film in these terms is not “a pictorial representation of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the grain of film-making” (*ibid.*:76). Filmmaking in anthropology itself is “performing culture” instead of what Talal Asad has called “the representational discourse of ethnography,” and provides a means to explore issues of power and representation in the discipline (Asad 1986:159).

If filmmaking “performs culture,” it aspires to capture in its images something of the style and ethos of the society being represented. This requires the audience to modify its expectations of such visual documents: they should not be looking for beautiful camerawork associated with Hollywood fiction or television travelogues; nor should they expect a film to be stuffed with information superimposed by means of the so-called “voice-of-God” commentary. The sound-images, which are the substance of a film, constitute an interpretation that is produced as part of a complex process of research, collaboration, learning, thinking, understanding, feeling, realizing, prioritizing, selecting, and crafting, all of which is the result of seeing and selecting. But the anthropological sound-images, while bearing the message of the film, have the possibility of incorporating ambiguity and incompleteness into that message. Rather than delivering clear-cut lessons or stories, films may instead become “sites of meaning-potential rather than sets of meanings sent and received, or the outside world seen through

representations” (MacDougall 1998:77, writing about Jean Rouch). Their content is open-ended, their sense emergent, and their meanings multiple, produced by the audience as they interact with the sound-images. To this extent then, watching a film is like watching a performance because it requires participation to close the loop of signification.

### **My Approach to Dance and Performance**

My approach to film rests on some of the principles I found in Javanese dance. I have been wary of treating dance as text, rather than as action or practice, because such treatment runs the risk of reification, producing a homogenizing and essentialized account of culture (see Ness 1992 and Day’s critique, 1995:130). Instead of assuming that dance is about meaning, and exploring dance-as-language, dance-as-symbol, or even dance-as-dance (the existing alternatives in the late 1970’s), I have prioritized local categories and connections about what movement is and what it means (or not) under particular circumstances.

A number of theoretical approaches from anthropology and philosophy support the analytical distinctiveness of performance, seeing it as being equal to or even having priority over text, and also as undermining any simple distinction between the symbolic and the real as a way of explaining the many different styles of human and social behavior. Bodily techniques, long overlooked by social science despite Marcel Mauss’s early writings (1973), have now been restored to the intellectual agenda. In philosophy, Wittgenstinians and phenomenologists alike have reaffirmed the relevance of embodied practices, and radically questioned the notion that humanity can only be understood rationally with reference to language as the work of the mind. David Best, for instance, has argued against the reduction of dance to meaning associated with the “text” model. Dancing is real action, not virtual or symbolic. Human movement “does not symbolize reality: it is reality” (Best 1978:137). Michel Foucault’s work (1984) on procedures in discipline, surveillance, and classification that center on the body—with power suffusing the capillaries of the body politic rather than being imposed by a state apparatus—has helped to rupture the distinction between the symbolic and the real. Foucault’s power-centered thinking has been complemented by a return to the ludic. The anthropologist Victor Turner started out analyzing physical performance functionally as “ritual process” (1969), but later became interested in the actuality of dance and theater as play and performance (1982). Turner inspired a number of scholars and performers, and for the past twenty years a general interest in performance from different

cultures has developed, and research into embodied forms of communication and not just language is now more acceptable than it once was (Hughes-Freeland 2001).

As a result of those developments, the analysis of action has been given a more holistic dimension and a breakdown has occurred in categories of objectivity and subjectivity. Take, for example, the attention given to metaphor in the 1980's. "Perhaps one reason the social sciences have been so bad at analyzing culture is because of the role of body metaphors . . . to move is to measure," wrote the British sociologist George MacRae (1975: 64).<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, the body has been identified as the key generator of metaphors. Indeed, it has been claimed that metaphors tend to come *from the body*, with cognitive maps and abstract schemata being oriented spatially with reference to the body (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This perspective has also blurred the boundary between putting on a show and "real" action, revealing the constructedness of everyday life and the world of "facts." Making sense of the world is a performance expressed through symbolic schemes referring back to the body. In fact, philosopher Mark Johnson has argued for embodiment as the precondition for a realist philosophy (1987:204).

### **A Moment on Metaphors**

As a participant in the "literature and performance" project listening to papers from many disciplines and from many parts of the world, I have been reconsidering the extent to which the relationship between performance and text has of necessity been an embattled one. Thirty years ago there was a battle because embodied performance was deemed marginal and not worthy of serious scholarship. Now that performance has gained respectability, it suffers from problems of overgeneralization. This situation in part arises due to the logocentrism that still prevails in western thinking despite strong arguments that communication is "a multiple, relative and emergent process" (Finnegan 2002:28). This is partly due to a failure to recognize how particular semantic contexts produce particular metaphors. The problem of overgeneralization is also due to constructing generalized models of action and behavior that fail to allow for variations in how particular groups of

---

<sup>1</sup> As John Blacking observed in the introduction to his pioneering book, *The Anthropology of the Body*, "from the dance of language and thought we are moved into thinking . . . body and mind are one" (1977:22-23).

people explain the relationship of different kinds of embodied performances to other forms of experience and representation and the “reality” that these constitute.

Metaphors operate at different levels. As Edward Schieffelin (1998) has reminded us, performance is a concept with a past in western thought. It is heavy with presuppositions that connect it to illusion, manipulation, and deceit. Performance is often used as a metaphor for disingenuousness, for action that is untrue. But as Schieffelin and others have demonstrated, what is true, what is false, and where performance sits is by no means clear-cut. Cultural factors determine proper forms of action, and in many cases being yourself or “behaving naturally” is socially inappropriate. The boundary between performance as an act in a circumscribed domain and action in particular social contexts, as the sociologist Erving Goffman taught us long ago, is highly permeable (Hughes-Freeland 2001).

Though recognizing that the body yields metaphorical expressions of cultural value, I have tried to avoid universalizing the performing body, the metaphors it generates, and the social effects that these produce by attending to the difficulty of translation.<sup>2</sup> For example, the English word “dance” is at once too specific and too general to translate Javanese categories.<sup>3</sup> The status connotations of Javanese language codes make it impossible to give a neutral and general translation of the English word “dance.” The word that describes palace dance movement is the polite Javanese word *běksa*. The low Javanese word *joged* means “dance” but is not usually considered appropriate for palace practices. Javanese speakers refer to specific forms and their performers (thus the Bědhaya is performed by a *bědhaya*, or by “the one who does dance movement” (*ingkang běksa*), or the character being danced. Such semantic niceties are familiar to those who contributed to these special issues, but they are often lost in performance and cultural studies.

---

<sup>2</sup> Dance anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler argues that context determines whether or not something is dance, as in the case of three “danced” forms in Japan (1978:47): “anthropologically they are not even part of the same activity systems. They are not ‘art’ or ‘reflection,’ and anthropologically they should be looked at as the movement dimensions of separate activities.”

<sup>3</sup> Similarly there is no general word for “music,” sound being identified according to its source: *gamělan* music is the product of *gamělan* instruments; vocal music is named for the singers (*pěsindhén*; *gerong*). The Indonesian term *karawitan* implies the practice of playing in such an orchestra. Similar observations have also been made of the Venda of South Africa (Blacking 1976:6, 27) and the Temiar of Malaysia (Roseman 1991:85).

To pursue the possibility of a truce between text and performance, metaphors could be understood as texts in miniature. Metaphors are of course language-specific, but my Javanese respondents enjoyed tussling with the problem of how to verbalize the materiality of action without resorting to metaphors of mind quite as much as any Anglo-American philosopher would do. During research I discovered that gestures in dance movement are not denotational. Although movement is accompanied by songs drawn from or referencing narrative texts, the dance movement had a minimal connection to the songs and texts. When movements did appear to mimic actions, such as putting on earrings and so forth, those movements normally did not represent that action but were interpreted as metaphors for something else, usually spiritual preparation (Hughes-Freeland 1991). Such metaphorical deductions follow the performance, they do not inform or motivate it. Asad has described how text came to be privileged over the corporeal in Christian ritual, once constituted by “apt performance . . . abilities to be *acquired*, not *symbols* to be interpreted” (1988:74-79). It would be futile to watch a Bědhaya performance in order to appreciate its textual sources or to identify what gesture corresponds to which key moment. The aptness of the performance of the movement is what is being observed. In regard to observers in research, there was a gendered response to the kinds of discourse produced by dancing. Women tended to focus on the aesthetic minutiae of physical execution, while men engaged in playful exegesis and puns, making metaphors out of movement.

Take for example, a metaphoric extension that comes from the well-known Javanese dancer and commentator Prince Soerjibrongto, who is often quoted by dance scholars for saying that rhythm is a measure of cultural competence (1970). The perception of extreme slowness of the rhythms of certain forms of Javanese palace dance have been perceived as quintessential to their cultural ethos. During the filming of a Bědhaya rehearsal for *The Dancer and the Dance* (Hughes-Freeland 1988), I wanted to represent the nature of that protracted rhythm, the slow inhalations and exhalations of the movement and music, and also the moments in the form when speed is of the essence, in complex transitions between floor patterns. Soerjibrongto’s concern with measure is a concern with evaluation and distinction. As a royal scion and a performer of the most prestigious dance-drama at its heyday in the 1920’s and 1930’s, his metaphor imbues dance with the power of the Javanese courts and their rulers. Dance is powerful because it belongs to those in power and sustains their power. The use of metaphors to generate identifications out of dance enhances the power of dance as a cultural resource. As Lakoff and Johnson also remind us, “people

in power get to impose their metaphors” (1980:157). And in Java, as noted, these people tend to be male.

As a cultural resource, however, dancing means different things to different interested parties and individuals. Even within the sphere of palace performance there are other experiences that may not become powerful metaphors enshrined in cultural truisms, that in turn segue into slogans selling holidays in the region as part of the packaging of Yogyakarta’s heritage attractions. To move may be “to measure,” but the mover does not have to know what is being measured or be able to talk about embodied understanding. Take, for example, the prize-winning female dancer, Susindahati, who is the subject of the first part of *The Dancer and the Dance*. In 1999 she was credited with excellent embodiment of dancing skills by the jury of local dancers, artists, and connoisseurs. But how did Susindahati “know” this excellence? In the film, she explains the hardest techniques of dancing, in particular *ngoyog*, the slow shift of weight from one foot onto the other when the body’s center of gravity is low, knees turned out, hips aligned beneath the shoulders, an almost imperceptible shift for an entire gong cycle of eight beats. She was able to transmit her “understanding” in terms of physical knowledge, as shown in the film—a literal measure of body-weight shift in relation to a specific measure of musical time. In a scene not included in the final version, Susindahati said that she knew that a dance philosophy existed, but laughingly said that she did not “understand” it. That understanding is for older people—or, to be more precise, normally for older men. My female dance teachers who were interested in the metaphysics of dance tended to quote Soerjobrongto rather than create their own metaphorical stories.

Metaphorical extrapolations provide one sense of “text,” but it is a text that is not commonly shared. Each individual may not understand the totality of the culture that may reveal itself to outsiders having the benefit of distance. Knowledge is partial because one is too close as well as too far. Dancing is powerful because it is a cultural practice situated in the self and revealed through the actions of the body. In Java, the complex but seamless choreographic patterns of group dances such as Bědhaya provide metaphors for social harmony that feed back into the significance of the dancing. The effect has both aesthetic and political power. Unlike other symbols, the body is itself “instrumental” (Ness 1992:10).

Dancing is embodied in the moment of action, whether in rehearsal or performance. But that performed movement is not simply of-the-moment, lived outside of time, without history and without a future. Performance is situated in relation to texts that may precede or follow it, depending on the context and the commentator. These kinds of performance are not versions

of texts alone. They simultaneously resist and generate interpretation. But performances generate other texts, or products, or works, inter-referentially or by bricolage. Javanese dance drama, for instance, references the shadow play, and other dramatic genres are identified by the source of stories from the Pañji and Damarwulan cycles, and *Sěrat Menak*. We could consider the pattern of relations between texts and performances as genealogical, but such a genealogy is itself subject to someone having the power to define. Definition and taxonomies themselves become phenomena to be accounted for (Hughes-Freeland 1997).

In the Javanese case there are manuscripts called *Sěrat Kandha*. These normally contain accounts of grand ceremonial occasions during the colonial period when distinguished visitors were honored by dances, which were prefaced by an oration explaining the nature of the circumstances, the names of the guests, the dance to be performed, and the song lyrics. In one instance, there is an attempt to identify the dance movement sequences on pages opposite the song lyrics, which themselves are related to the musical cycle (Hughes-Freeland n.d.). These manuscripts are housed in court libraries and are only accessible under the close scrutiny of the court librarians. During the colonial period, a number of “Programmes” were issued for *wayang wong* (“dance dramas”), which included photographs of key scenes and summaries of each scene with diagrams of floor patterns.

In Indonesia during President Suharto’s New Order (1966-98), books were published to celebrate and record prestigious dance events sponsored by the provincial government. These were “not for sale” and were distributed as special gifts. They included accounts of the performance as well as expert overviews by writers such as Soerjobrongto and Professor Soedarsono that became particularly powerful versions or statements about what Javanese dance is. In the past few years, since the accession of the tenth sultan (1999), the court itself has published commemorative booklets about key anniversary performances. Apart from these manuscripts and printed texts, the local government has also funded a program of video documentation in which old dances are reconstructed with the help of old manuscripts and filed for posterity. These texts feed into what people can say about palace dance, sustain a traffic in expertise and skill, and inform materials produced by state academies and private associations for the purposes of dance pedagogy.

Thus we can say that dancing extends beyond the moment of movement: it is a producer of movement and context. It is embodied action, and it is action that is referred to. It is way of making a world because it extends beyond movement, beyond the body, through the responses of actor-

dancers in relation to memory and expectations. Dancing dance and inscribing dance, whether in talking, writing, or visual forms, are both situated social practices. Dance is something that Javanese people *do*, and something Javanese people do things *with*.

Dancing is a significant embodied practice with metaphorical force in Java, but it has been underestimated, for example, in Anderson's analysis of the construction of national identities, in which he dismisses dance as "folk dance" with the emblematic status of flags, costumes, "and the rest," and credits languages with the power to generate "imagined communities building in effect *particular solidarities*" (1983:122). The disembodiment of national identities is of course central to the idea that nations are *imagined* communities, but surely dancing and other kinds of performance are more powerful signs of social identity than emblems and icons such as flags and anthems. Not only is dance a symbol of belonging but a form of social action performed by social actors, combining personal and social identity with national identity. Javanese court dance appears exemplary and enduring partly because of analytical distance and partly due to successful management by its practitioners: the process of making it happen is one of dispute, competition, and chance. It is produced by and produces a process that generates sense for particular people in particular situations. It is more than the sum of its parts. It is embodied practice that goes beyond itself, producing other kinds of social practices and understandings. It is constituted by different perspectives—of performers, experts, novices, audiences, insiders, and outsiders.<sup>4</sup> Court dancing is a social practice that provides a site for the exploration of control and selfhood, and the dynamics of variously situated codes of value, from the local to the national. Javanese often express their approval of a performance or a social situation in terms of "flowing water" (*toya mili*) and we are interested in exploring how dance *flows* from physical movement into a value system that then feeds back into dance and other styles of behavior.

---

<sup>4</sup> Susan Leigh Foster notes that dance is "bodily reality" and "corporeal play," as well as "a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience . . . which is vital to cultural production and to theoretical formulations of cultural process" (1996:xi). However, as Helena Wulff argues of ballet, the significance of dancing goes beyond the body, and is the effect of a series of framings (1998).

## Two Films

My two examples show two different contexts of performance recognized by Javanese people. The first film, *The Dancer and the Dance*, is about dance in the sultan's palace in the city of Yogyakarta, and uses the device of the portrait. The second film, *Tayuban: Dancing the Spirit in Java*, is structured around an event in a highland village of the province of Yogyakarta at which female performance takes place. Both films give some—if not all—of the context whereby certain forms of human behavior and skill become identified as dance, as art, as performance (Hughes-Freeland 1997). The films are built from long developing shots and a minimal use of interventionist commentary; the idea is to expose the audience to an event as a sound-image construct, not as pictures with explanatory words relentlessly superimposed. In addition to this basic approach, the first film also uses “talking heads” to provide information that guides the audience through the action sequences, and the second film has a long verbal introduction with photographs to preview the filmed action. But both films aim to keep the balance of actuality and artifice on the side of actuality, and refrain from intervening between the filmed sound-image and the audience response. I try to let others speak—the dancers, the experts, the observers—in order to give students of anthropology or dance the chance to acknowledge that objects of study are not constructed out of purely theoretical projects, defined clearly (and scientifically) in advance. Rather, they emerge in the research process, a situation that may or may not enable certain situations to be observed and responded to.

### **Bĕdhaya Gandakusuma in Rehearsal at Siswa Among Bĕksa**

In making *The Dancer and the Dance* I wanted to convey the experience of female dance in Java as performed in the Bĕdhaya, an elaborate ceremonial dance with origin stories referring back to the sixteenth century. The challenge was to move from the “word-and-sentence-base” of my doctoral research to “image-and-sequence-based anthropological thought” (MacDougall 1997:292), and to “bring it back alive,” as Herb DiGioia, the documentary tutor at NFTS (The National Film and Television School) instructed his students—or, to quote Richard Bauman's remark when this paper was presented, to create “the illusion of real presence.” After a series of plans and accidents (see Hughes-Freeland 1999) the finished film presented dancing through two characters: Susindahati, a

young dancer who is interested in physical technique and the action of dance, and Pak Sena, a former court scribe who has an interest in philosophy and meaning. During research, I had worked extensively with Pak Sena, but did not meet Susindahati until I was researching the film.

*Table 1: Outline of Narrative: The Dancer and the Dance*

1. Preparing for a performance
2. The love dance at a wedding
3. Susindahati at home
4. Susindahati at school
5. Susindahati explains the difficulties of dance
6. Pak Sena sings and talks about dance philosophy
7. Dance training at Siswa among Běksa
8. Pak Sena explains learning to dance
9. Bědhaya sample in rehearsal
10. Pak Sena interprets Bědhaya
11. Susindahati rides a motor cycle

The first part of the film is a portrait of Susindahati at home at the secondary school for performing arts. The focus is on her everyday life and her skill as a performer, along with her insights into what dancing means for her. In contrast to Susindahati's emphasis on the physical, a short interview with Pak Sena sets up the metaphysical perspective on performance. This stage establishes the second part of the film where the viewer loses the individual dancer in the dance and its abstractions. This passage opens with a sequence of dance training with a voice-over by Bu Yuda, a senior palace choreographer of female dance forms, and explains the aesthetics and the importance of "flowing water." Then we return to Pak Sena, who has been brought along to the rehearsal to provide an indigenous commentary on the dancing. He reminisces about how he learned to dance and gives instructions to western viewers on how to watch Javanese dance, using the sensibilities (*rasa*) not the eyes.

The dance rehearsal itself was filmed over four evenings. Bědhaya Gandakusuma lasted 90 minutes in real time. In the film we see ten minutes of the performance, intercut with close-ups of singers and musicians, filmed on the evening of the first rehearsal. Because of the cyclical nature of the music, it was possible to cut these in at the appropriate phase of the cycle, if not at the exact moment when the phases occur in the dance sequence. Bědhaya is structured as follows: a short oration (*kandha*); an entrance march, shown almost in its entirety in the film; a sung section; and the first section (*lajuran*), of which part is shown in the film, followed by a pause

when the dancers sit in a three-by-three formation (*rakit tiga*) and a song is sung. The second part includes a fight between the two lead dancers. The film shows a section of the fight, and then cuts, using the musical transition from the up-tempo rhythms for the confrontation back to the slower pace of the main theme when the fight comes to a close and one party surrenders.

My intention in filming the performance was to select samples that represent the different kinds of events that occur in a Bědhaya while giving an overview of the structure of the form. The audience is left to experience the dancing without any assistance from a commentary. Instead, at the close of the fight, I cut to Pak Sena's interpretation of it. I then return to the "flying" movement that always closes the second section of the dance and is followed by an exit march (not shown). The film ends with a night sequence of Susindahati riding pillion on her boyfriend's motorcycle along Yogyakarta's main thoroughfare.

The film is not intended to serve as a document of a Bědhaya choreography. It aimed to provide an experience of Javanese dance, and also to go beyond the appearances of the performance in order to communicate something of how Javanese people understand the dancing. Pak Sena gives an account of his version of different cultural references, drawing on the *Mahābhārata* and Islamic mysticism. He explains the fight through puns on the names of the main characters: "Janaka" (the young Arjuna in the *Mahābhārata*) symbolizing life in this world and "Supraba" (a nymph) symbolizing divine inspiration (from *praba*, meaning "light"). This is a personal account, and one of Pak Sena's own daughter is called Prabawati. Pak Sena's story is given not as a definitive account of what this Bědhaya means. (During research in Java respondents never prioritized the story reference when explaining the significance of the dance, and it is telling that the title of the choreography is named for the main musical theme, not the story.) The lyrics for this dance, written by Dinusatama, who is head of the dance association that produced it, are allusions to the sexual union between Arjuna and the nymph Supraba, which follows a successful attack on the disruptive demonic king, Niwatakawaca. The story occurs in a number of texts: in the Old Javanese *Arjunawiwaha* (Zoetmulder 1974:234-37) and also in three "detached" (*sěmpalan*) dance drama stories, *Ciptaning Mintarago*, *Samba Sěbit*, and *Srikandhi Měguru Manah*, performed during the reign of the eighth sultan (Soedarsono 1984:362-63, 367-69).

Because textual interreferentiality in Bědhaya is as elusive as it is complex, it was not the central focus of my research. After this initial doctoral fieldwork, however, I have observed that a different model is used, one more closely modeled on the way storytelling works in the shadow play,

with a puppeteer or narrator telling a story. This had been introduced into modern dance ballet (*sendratari*) and is influencing contemporary treatments of Bědhaya, with dancers enacting a story that is sung/chanted by a narrator or chorus. This development brings the dance movement and the sung references closer together in a more denotative scheme than was normal in the past. We can say that the relationship between performance and text is altering: the verbal text is influencing the choreography more directly than before, when the two ran mostly parallel, colliding only in the fight scene. This is the model wherein performance is brushed forward gently by the text and gains its own momentum. To put it differently, as Oliver Taplin said in discussion, “you don’t need to know the story to appreciate the performance”; or as Gerstle remarks, “the written text is only an aid to producing the blossom on stage” (2000:47).

### ***Tayuban* on Hi-8 Video**

My second example includes a female performance style, which to a non-Javanese appears very similar to the movement in the Bědhaya. In Java, however, the two are regarded as extreme opposites of female performance. Javanese people distinguish between the polite femininity embodied in court dance and the performance of professional dancers called *ledhek*. These women perform at village events called *tayuban*, often part of annual harvest festivals: food is distributed, and then men take turns dancing with the *ledhek*. The event is a series of transactions: between the dancers and clients, between the elders and the village spirit (*dhanyang*), between individuals and the community, between individuals and the spirit, and between the whole community and the invisible world. There is no word (yet) for this dancing as a genre. It is performed as a gift to the protective spirit in exchange for well-being, and is closely associated with the community identity that is represented by the coming together of villagers at these events, including those who have migrated to the city.

In this film I decided to give the audience more help. The film opens with a five-minute commentary that describes the research process and how the film came to be made, while a montage of photographs of fieldwork taken five years earlier provides the visual dimension. Thereafter, the film is shot observationally, with a few explanatory captions. There are also three interviews. The local religious expert explains the apparent inconsistency of spirit worship and Islam by noting different contexts: the village spirit helps you sort out problems in this life, while Islam helps you sort out your eternal salvation. The youngest dancer tries to answer questions about her

experiences in performance, while her mother and the dance troupe leader do their best to interrupt with their opinions. Finally, I interview my research assistant about his insights into *tayuban* gained from helping me with the research in 1989 and 1994. The intention is to show the different kinds of knowledge and understanding that can accrue to a single event.

*Table 2: Narrative Outline for Tayuban: Dancing the Spirit in Java*

1. Reflexive introduction with photographs
2. Afternoon: food distribution; interview with the religious official
3. Nighttime *tayuban*
4. Daytime *tayuban*
5. Visit to the home of the youngest dancer for an interview
6. Research assistant tells the anthropologist about his experiences at the *tayuban*
7. Commentary on the transformation of these village practices

The daytime *tayuban* scene is filmed to show the close link between performance and offerings to the spirit. It illustrates the rhythms of the proceedings and the different kinds of interaction that constitute the *tayuban* event. A sample of requests and dances is shown. The viewer sees the dancers kissing babies and powdering their faces as a means of protection and healing. Tethering ropes taken from sick animals are also brought to the event, and receive their own dose of face-powder.

This particular *tayuban* also had a non-ritual political dimension. Tensions between the young men of the community and the elders had been mounting the previous evening when the medium had cut short a karaoke session so that the *tayuban* could begin. As a result, the young men's tempers were running high, and a number of placative measures had been taken, including a shortened period of time for the elders to dance. The next morning the same thing happened, and as the familiar troublemakers stepped into the clearing to dance, the music changed to popular *gamelan* tunes, with a beat associated with more informal social dancing. The men pressed in on the women as is customary at *tayubans*, and we see an experienced dancer using a graceful hand gesture to fend off an ardent partner. We also see how the youngest dancer's movements alter from the acceptable style for women: she starts to move her hips, breaking the prescribed alignment with the shoulders that is also found in the palace styles, a moment described as "disco" by my companions at the event.

Visual records excel at communicating atmosphere and pace. The contrast between the rhythms of the different contexts and the fields of interaction prevalent during and around performance events can be

documented directly: the audience can get a sense of what it was like. In *tayuban* the “movement dimension” (Kaepler 1978) is of a different order from that of court dance. After dancing until 4:00 in the morning, and with only a few hours’ sleep, by noon the dancers’ movements are so minimal and unenthusiastic as to barely constitute performance. The energy-expending performers are the villagers who pay money to the local religious expert and the young men who use the occasion for a bit of social display and sexual bravado. But in this film I wanted to provide some information that would provoke further questions among audiences. I closed the film with an interview with my research assistant about the research and how we had “danced the village spirit” by paying money and making a vow so that his son would recover from a continuing cold. The broader context for the event was summed up in a closing section of commentary. It explains how governmental repression of *tayuban*, due to its sexual ethos, is giving way to its revival as part of the heritage preservation program that is also linked to development of the tourist industry. When state-sanctioned *tayuban* take place, the performers are graduates of dance schools and academies.

The films’ contexts also refer to gender relations, and I wish to comment briefly on the role of the gaze in the construction of the text. In feminist film criticism it has become a truism to speak of the male gaze. In the first film the all-female crew aimed to work with what we thought of as a “tactile camera.” During the opening sequences of the rehearsal, the camera is not *looking at* the formations—it is participating in them. We cannot *see* what the choreographic floor plans *look like*, because we are *in the dance*. The style of shooting was to use development shots, to follow the action rather than constructing elegant frames and, in so doing, the gaze ceases to objectify the women performers and instead affirms a shared movement with them. This was possible only because the performance was a rehearsal: had we been filming a finished performance with an audience, the camera could not have participated in this way in the dance.

The second film is shot differently and keeps a distance because of the nature of the event and of my role in it: for instance, during the night *tayuban*, I was required to sit with the high-status male guests. Of relevance here is an analysis of an Indonesian feature film, *Nji Ronggeng*, about a professional female dancer in West Java whose work involves her in a dynamic of attraction and repulsion similar to that of *ledhek* in the Yogyakarta highlands. It has been argued that the filmic gaze here does not conform to the masculinist look of Hollywood, which sees the female as the image of male desire. Instead, it gives agency to the woman, allowing her to “drive a wedge . . . between her body and male desire” (Hanan 1993:105). Though this argument could be said to overstate the impermeability of the

cultural boundary around Indonesian cinema, it is an interesting example of another kind of textual field that can be generated out of filmic performances when they travel across cultures. This argument, like my films, is produced for audiences outside of the society that produced the original performances. But whereas my films start from concepts based in the society of origin, Hanan starts with film theory concepts. This is where anthropology and other disciplines differ, and why both “text” and “performance” have to be questioned and used critically.

Anthropology can also impose stringent limits on the extent to which an interpretation is admissible. Rethinking my original partisan view against text, I could formulate a longer argument about the contentious relationship of *tayuban* to female court performance. Although polite Javanese aesthetics and *mores* in Indonesia put *tayuban* outside the pale of Javanese culture, particular respondents provided strong evidence to suggest that this exclusion is relatively recent and closely linked to deliberate attempts to differentiate the cultural identity of the Yogyakarta principality from its neighbor, Surakarta. This gives rise to the more speculative view that the performance of women at *tayuban* is the real pretext for what became Javanese palace dance and today’s Indonesian classical dance (Hughes-Freeland n.d.). This view, however, is external to the field of local interpretation, and in a sense invokes text here as a metaphorical distancing from the empirical processes and evidence that I normally insist should support what I write. In that sense, text offers a temptation away from the path of anthropological rigor.

## Conclusions

Films cannot replace the written word, but they can reveal blind spots in our understandings of different social and cultural situations and practices. In the examples I have described, film presents in a way that words do not the experience of two contexts of female performance in Java, in particular its ethos and tempo. MacDougall reminds us that “the unsaid is the common ground of social relations, communication, and ethnography. It is also the domain of the image” (1998:274). Looking at films and understanding their complex images and visual metaphors involves some of the same problems that arise when regarding culture as a text, particularly the role of such images (and indeed visibility) crossculturally (*ibid.*:266; 268-69). I made my films for western audiences as part of a project to improve their understanding of performance practices in Java. They are not straight

documents of dancing. They do not simply re-present it. They are partly translations, but they also represent forms of knowledge that emerged through the making of the films (and also prior knowledge). They are also autobiographical insofar as they represent my attempts to understand particular practices and events that regularly occur in Java. They are not, of course, the only way to represent performance. New technologies have emerged since those films were made, and I am now exploring ways of providing different kinds of information using both verbal texts about performance and sound-image text representing performance in different modes, starting with an eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org). I hope to develop resources that start from the visual image, rather than from the verbal.

The films I have discussed support my argument that practices such as dance are made real by the ways in which those who are interested in it *engage* with it and *constitute* it. Palace dancing in Java is a resource that provides a set of references that social actors use to create, whether seriously or momentarily, sets of identifications that provide a rationale that may or may not be used to account for another set of actions. Dance itself is situated among cultural references on which it may (or may not) draw. These references include what we might call “texts”: the repertoire of forms themselves, the stories associated with those forms, the basic movement sequences, the various interpretive styles for speaking about movement, ranging from practical aesthetics to speculative metaphysics. The trajectory that incarnates the particular range of chosen versions from these resource bases creates a particular reality that results from a set of identifications. They may repeat previous identifications, reconfigure them, or generate new versions. These identifications could be said to originate in the encounter of the individual with the cultural resources available to him or her. Ultimately, some of these identifications contribute to the rhetoric of nation-building, cultural politics, and the politics of identity in which local ethnic groups within the nation-state struggle for survival and recognition. In the context of Indonesia, what is considered Javanese is emergent and dynamic and part of a system of practices, social actions, and relations situated in time and place. Dance is itself a form of social action and a reference within a field of social discourse—available to some, rejected by others, and a single reference point amid a number of others.

I noted above that there are changes in the way embodied performance is constituted in relation to a prior verbal text. In the late 1990’s there was an increase in local documentation of classical dance using either a single camera or a three-camera set-up. This was happening at the same time as an increased diversity of performance styles was receiving palace

patronage. There has been more change in the performance culture of the court and its patronage in the past decade than in *tayuban*, despite pessimism about its imminent decline in the late 1980's. Changes are occurring in the local knowledge base and in those places where responsibility lies for determining policy about performance. The strong amateur base for palace performance is being replaced by trained professionals with academic qualifications. Indigenous conceptions of performance are changing—as they always have.

I will end with a couple of general points. First, when we use the word “text,” we commit ourselves to a framework of interpretation developed by post-structuralists that excludes motivation and authorship. I have gone against the grain of this approach by discussing my films not as semiotic products but as the result of intentions, in the authorial mode. This is because of the proximity of the production: it is still in personal, not historical, time. If we are to take into account indigenous criteria in text-construction, or the creation of versions using prior references in different ways, we also need to avoid generalizing that creativity as a cultural collectivity and producing a kind of “semiotic orientalism” (Hughes-Freeland 2001:146). Second, following from this, the workshop question about “the relationship of physical texts to performances represented” risks obscuring or compressing the very important processes of production that link performance to its other versions. I have concentrated here specifically on two research films coming out of performance. I would suggest that similar processual data would be central to elucidating more generally how performance is produced out of prior texts and in turn generates subsequent texts.

*University of Wales, Swansea*

### References

- Anderson 1983                      Benedict O’Gorman Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Asad 1986                              Talal Asad. “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology.” In *Writing Culture*. Ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 141-64.

- Asad 1988 \_\_\_\_\_ . "Towards a Genealogy of the Concept of Ritual." In *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in the Social Anthropology of Ritual Presented to Godfrey Lienhardt*. Ed. by Wendy James and Douglas H. Johnson. Oxford: JASO. pp. 73-87.
- Best 1978 David Best. *Philosophy and Human Movement*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Blacking 1976 John Blacking. *How Musical is Man?* London: Faber and Faber.
- Blacking 1977 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Anthropology of the Body*. Association of Social Anthropologists, 15. London: Academic Press.
- Day 1995 Anthony Day. "In Search of Southeast Asian Performance." *Review of Malaysian and Indonesian Affairs*, 29:125-40.
- Finnegan 2002 Ruth Finnegan. *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnecting*. London: Routledge.
- Foster 1996 Susan Leigh Foster. "Introduction." *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*. London: Routledge. pp. xi-xvii.
- Foucault 1984 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gerstle 2000 C. Andrew Gerstle. "Performance Literature: The Traditional Japanese Theatre as Model." *Comparative Criticism*, 22:39-62.
- Hanan 1993 David Hanan. "Nji Ronggeng: Another Paradigm for Erotic Spectacle in the Cinema." In *Culture and Society in New Order Indonesia*. Ed. by Virginia Matheson Hooker. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press. pp. 87-115.
- Hughes-Freeland 1988 Felicia Hughes-Freeland. *The Dancer and the Dance*. 16mm/VHS, 44 min. © National Film and Television School/Royal Anthropological Institute. London: Royal Anthropological Institute.
- Hughes-Freeland 1991 \_\_\_\_\_. "Classification and Communication in Palace Performance." *Visual Anthropology*, 4:345-66.

- Hughes-Freeland 1993 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Golek Menak and Tayuban: Patronage and Professionalism in Two Spheres of Central Javanese Culture.” In *Performance in Java and Bali: Studies of Narrative, Theatre, Music, and Dance*. Ed. by Bernard Arps. London: School of Oriental and African Studies. pp. 88-120.
- Hughes-Freeland 1996 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Tayuban: Dancing the Spirit in Java*. Hi-8/VHS, 30 min. © Felicia Hughes-Freeland and University of Wales, Swansea. London: Royal Anthropological Institute.
- Hughes-Freeland 1997 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Art and Politics: From Javanese Court Dance to Indonesian Art.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 3:473-95.
- Hughes-Freeland 1998 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Introduction.” In *Ritual, Performance, Media*. Association of Social Anthropologists, 35. Ed. by Felicia Hughes-Freeland. London: Routledge. pp. 1-28.
- Hughes-Freeland 1999 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Dance on Film: Strategy and Serendipity.” In *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography*. Ed. by Theresa J. Buckland. Basingstoke: Macmillan. pp. 111-22.
- Hughes-Freeland 2001 \_\_\_\_\_ . “Dance, Dissimulation and Identity in Indonesia.” In *An Anthropology of Indirect Communication*. Ed. by Joy Hendry and C. W. Watson. Association of Social Anthropologists, 37. London: Routledge. pp. 145-62.
- Hughes-Freeland n.d. \_\_\_\_\_ . “Embodied Communities: Dance Traditions and Change in Java.” Unpubl. MS.
- Jackson 1996 Michael Jackson, ed. *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Johnson 1987 Mark Johnson. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kaeppler 1978 Adrienne Kaeppler. “Dance in Anthropological Perspective.” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 7:31-49.
- Lakoff and Johnson 1980 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- MacDougall 1995 David MacDougall. "Beyond Observational Cinema." In *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Ed. by Paul Hockings. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. pp. 115-32.
- MacDougall 1997 \_\_\_\_\_. "The Visual in Anthropology." In *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. Ed. by Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp. 276-95.
- MacDougall 1998 \_\_\_\_\_. *Transcultural Cinema*. Ed. by Lucien Taylor. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MacRae 1975 George MacRae. "The Body and Social Metaphor." In *The Body as a Medium of Expression*. Ed. by Jonathan Benthall and Ted Polhemus. London: Allen Lane. pp. 59-73.
- Mauss 1973 Marcel Mauss. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society*, 2:70-88.
- Ness 1992 Sally A. Ness. *Body Movement and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Roseman 1991 Marina Roseman. *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schieffelin 1998 Edward L. Schieffelin. "Problematizing Performance." In *Ritual, Performance, Media*. Ed. by Felicia Hughes-Freeland. Association of Social Anthropologists, 35. London: Routledge. pp. 194-207.
- Soedarsono 1984 Soedarsono. *Wayang Wong: The State Ritual Dance Drama in the Court of Yogyakarta*. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Gadjah Mada University Press.
- Soerjobrongto 1970 Gusti Bendara Pangeran Harya (G. B. P. H.) Soerjobrongto. *The Classical Yoganese Dance*. Yogyakarta: Lembaga Bahasa Nasional Tjabang II.
- Turner 1969 Victor W. Turner. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Turner 1982 \_\_\_\_\_. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.

- Wulff 1998                      Helena Wulff. "Perspectives toward Ballet Performance: Exploring, Repairing, and Maintaining the Frames." In *Ritual, Performance, Media*. Ed. by Felicia Hughes-Freeland. Association of Social Anthropologists, 35. London: Routledge. pp. 104-20.
- Zoetmulder 1974                P. J. Zoetmulder. *Kalangwang: A Study of Old Javanese Literature*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

## **Moving Performance to Text: Can Performance be Transcribed?**

**Edward L. Schieffelin**

### **Introduction**

Transcription is the production of a written version of material originally presented in performative form. In its highest aspiration, it would be the attempt to record transparently and objectively in writing every significant detail of a performance, including the tone and emphasis, pacing and synchronization, and momentum and intensity of events, in the order in which they occur. A transcript differs considerably from a script—even a script with actor's and director's notes. A script is an outline, a prescriptive guide, for the production of a performance—for what a performance may be. It mandates an indefinite number of possible performances. A transcription, by contrast, is a record of a specific performance event. It is, in this sense, a kind of historical document whose purpose is to record every detail of something that has already actually occurred. One might say that a script prescribes the performance, the performance interprets these prescriptions in playing them out, and the transcription attempts to detail the result in writing. Because a transcription records actual rather than prescribed events, it aspires to be the ultimate form of entextualization of performance.

It is interesting, then, given the quality and uniqueness of famous performances, that transcription is regarded as an inferior genre among the many literatures that relate to performance. The bookstores of the National Theatre, the Barbican, or the Globe bulge with scripts, commentaries, and histories relating to great performance pieces, but no transcripts. My main purpose in this paper is to explore the production and use of this orphaned form of performance-related text and to consider what kind of a representation of a performance a transcript is.

In what follows I will restrict myself largely to discussion of the transcription of verbal and aural components of performance materials. This restriction is not to slight the special complexities of visual transcription but for simplicity, because encompassing the special issues of visual transcription would not add to the general points I wish to make.

What is special about the transcription of verbal art performance? What are we trying to get at in moving a performance to text in this way? To start with, transcription entails much more than the transfer of the verbal content of a performance into text. For me, and I speak as a cultural anthropologist rather than a historian or theorist of the arts, a performance is first and foremost a living event. When it is over, it is gone. There may be another similar performance tomorrow if it doesn't rain, but that is another performance.

The transcription of a performance, if it is to capture its performative qualities, is always more than the entextualization of the verbal or musical content. What seems to me to be of central interest in a performance, especially when studied cross-culturally, is its *mode of process*: how it works, how it brings about the effects that its participants intend. While this is not the only focus in performance studies, all other concerns—of history, genre, form and practice, aesthetic sensibility and theory, production complexities, dramatic means, and so on—all converge around, or ultimately refer to, the strategic processes by which a performance works. What does it mean to say, in a given culture, that a performance works? For scholars of non-western literatures, as well as for anthropologists, this issue begs the question about the culture within which the performance is embedded, from which it arises as a creative entity, and which it in turn addresses. For an anthropologist, the approach to all these questions, including those about performance, must be ethnographic.

An ethnographic perspective views any performance, in the first instance, as a social event. From this perspective, a performance works only because it has a relationship with (and an effect upon) others: in effect, an "audience." Thus, insofar as a performance is addressed to a responsive audience, it must be investigated as, in an important sense, co-created in its working with that audience. This immediately problematizes the boundaries of performance for transcription—for if performance is a responsive (rather than purely presentational) genre, must the audience be considered part of the performance? This may not seem much of a problem in the context of ordinary western art theater, where by convention the audience retains a relatively quiet, passive-attentive posture; it is easy enough to believe the performance is restricted to the stage. But such is not the case for many forms of cabaret performance or modern experimental theatre—let alone for

highly interactional genres such as preaching in Black American churches, or many highly performative ceremonial and ritual contexts in non-western settings. Is the “audience” here part of the performance or part of the contingent context? This is one of the questions the making of a transcript is forced to address.

The situation is further complicated for anthropologists when a genre that is considered a “performance” by an outside observer (a ritual, for example) is seen by its practitioners as quite the opposite. The rather dramatic Bosavi spirit séance, whose transcription I will be discussing shortly, was considered by its indigenous audience to be the very opposite of a “performance” (in the western theatrical sense). Either the spirits who came up and spoke were really present or they were not. In fact, those gathered about the medium were highly alert to the possibility that the medium might be “acting,” in the western sense. If so, if the medium and not the spirits produced the spirit voices, then the séance was fraudulent and the audience was being deceived. Given that séances were important means for dealing with such politically explosive issues as illness, death, and witchcraft, this kind of deception could be a very serious matter.

In such a situation, I deem it impossible to find a universal, properly bounded definition of performance that would indicate the domain we are to transcribe. My approach is not to engage with this problem on definitional grounds but to seek a working perspective. For the purposes of my own research, I would simply observe that (1) however one characterizes “performance” it is a contingent event, and (2) any human social event that involves expressive and communicative aspects can be usefully subjected to performative analysis—that is, analysis in terms of its performative aspects.

It follows that a transcription of a performance event may legitimately (and, I would assert, should in principle) incorporate audience activity and any other occurrence that may affect the expressive structure or content of the event. In the Bosavi spirit séances I studied, which took place at night, even small noises of the darkness outside the longhouse sometimes had dramatic consequences for the way a séance was carried out—and had to be incorporated in the transcript. It is a “performative event” then, that we are to transcribe—and that includes anything that affects or gives context to the performative activity, whether or not, by western standards, it might count as part of a “performance” (Schieffelin 1998).

Once we decide upon the performative event that we wish to transcribe, a new set of issues present themselves. Live performances themselves are hardly ever transcribed as they occur. The content and flow of an ongoing performance is much too rich and fast-moving to be written down simultaneously. It must be rendered in a form that can be slowed

down, repeatedly viewed, and minutely considered—in short, in a form that holds still long enough to be converted into text. The process of transcription thus begins with the making of a recording—on tape or video—of the performance event, and it is the recording, not the performance itself, that is transcribed.

## **Recording**

Making a recording is rarely a fully straightforward process. Quite apart from the usual technical issues of making sure the recorded material is clear and audible enough to be transcribed, there is the problem of covering the performance space. The space of many indigenous performance events may not be well defined, may change in size, density, and orientation, and may travel from place to place. Indeed significant aspects of the performance may occur in several places at once with considerable overlap. How to record this for problem-free transcription is challenging and calls for careful planning and (ideally) prior experience with the kind of performance to be recorded.

Besides this, performances often take place in a number of registers among different subgroups or interactants and via a number of different media. For purposes of completeness, the researcher usually has to simultaneously track more than one of these, and recording equipment must be set up accordingly.

In addition to all of this, the presence of a recordist and his or her equipment and possible assistants must be factored in. There are some who argue that if the recordist remains sufficiently unobtrusive the performance will unfold almost exactly as it would in a “pristine” state—that is, in the absence of equipment and recordist. Although this may sometimes seem to be the case, it is best to avoid this assumption. In my experience, it is impossible for a recordist and his or her equipment to completely escape the awareness of the participants and not affect the performance in some way. It is best to make a virtue of one’s presence by acknowledging that the performance one is recording is one at which there is a recordist present. How the recordist is accommodated by the performance, then, becomes an interesting part of the way the performance takes place.

It should be clear by now that recording for transcription unavoidably will involve a number of compromises depending on the interests of the researcher and the contingencies of the particular situation. Without expatiating further on these problems, it is of interest to see how they were worked out in a particular case. I will describe my own experience with

recording and transcribing Bosavi spirit séances not just because it is familiar to me but because I believe that it represents an example of particular complexity that involves many of the kinds of choices a researcher of performance is likely to encounter.

When I began studying Bosavi spirit mediumship, I was impressed with the lively, highly interactive, and occasionally raucous nature of the séances. The fast-moving nature of these performances, and their detailed developmental structure, required recording and transcription if they were to be given detailed analysis.

Fortunately for me these performances took place in nearly complete darkness so that the visual component of the activity was insignificant and, I hoped, could safely be ignored. I also hoped my presence in the darkness would be forgotten and that the performance might truly proceed as if I were not there. But that was not to be. Every now and then some solicitous soul would ask if I was OK or still listening, or comment on my presence to others. The worst moments came from my indigenous research assistants who, in moments of intensity, occasionally called out to people not to all speak at once lest the conversation prove impossible to transcribe. These incidents were few and far between, and most of the time people seemed to ignore my presence—but never enough for me to feel that my presence was fully irrelevant to the performance.

If the darkness removed the necessity for dealing with the complexities of the visual aspects of performance, it created other problems. A Bosavi spirit séance takes place in a communal longhouse. The spirit medium lies down on a sleeping platform and other members of the community group themselves around him—some sitting close up, others just behind them, while others sit further in the background. Those closest to the medium generally form the active chorus for the spirit's songs. Those further away may contribute questions to the spirits, but they also pass comments and commentary about the performance among themselves in the darkness. Who sits with whom and how near they sit to the medium has some effect on the way the conversation goes. This audience repositions itself over time as people shift around in the darkness, sometimes moving closer to the medium if some topic of interest to themselves comes up or changing position to be near new conversation partners. Given the importance of the audience in co-construction of the performance, these movements and changes of grouping seemed important to track. I could diagram the initial positions of the gathered people before the séance began, but once the fires were put out and the séance was under way, the movements of audience members in the pitch blackness were difficult to follow. Only an infrared video camera would have made this possible, a technology not available to me at the time.

A major technical issue for my recording was the correct positioning of the microphone. For me, the problem was catching both the dialogic interaction between audience members and spirit voices next to the medium and also the conversations among audience members in the background—which often contained much useful commentary and critical observation that affected the performance process (Schieffelin 1995). In order to get all of this, I usually positioned myself in the second tier of the grouping around the medium—close enough to hear even the most minute of spirit voices, but also able to pick up conversations going on at the periphery behind me. From this position I could often pick up spirit speech that people further away could not hear, but also record the important audience background conversation while the spirits and chorus were engaged in the midst of song. In this way I was able to identify the role of multiple, differently focused points of awareness in the development of the performance as a whole.

### **Transcription**

Once a recording is completed, transcription can begin. The first issue to confront in listening to my tapes was what to include in the written-down text and what to leave out. My experience in recording had already suggested that I could leave out virtually nothing. Coughs, laughter, cat-calls, dog-fights, small noises of the night, and even (on one occasion) the sound of a fart—all had the capacity to affect the way the performance went, and so had to be included. The most prodigious and time-consuming task was simply untangling what was being said by the individual voices among the multiply overlapping conversations and spirit songs in the longhouse. The whole was made more complex by the fact that the performance was entirely held in a Papuan language that I knew well but whose finer nuances I could not always penetrate despite nearly five years of field experience.<sup>1</sup> Translation had to be undertaken as transcription went along.

I always transcribed with three Bosavi informants seated around the tape-recorder to help me hear—two of whom had attended the séance, and one who had not. The first two could use their memory of the events and their native ear to help decipher the conversations in the Bosavi language, while the third provided a fresh ear and outsider's perspective. We had to

---

<sup>1</sup> Many field workers employ assistants from among the indigenous people to transcribe their tapes for them. Bosavis at the time were non-literate, so I had to transcribe the tapes myself.

cover the tape inch by inch often with multiple listenings and considerable discussion about the words that we were hearing as well as how they were meant. As a piece of work calculated simply in terms of brute force, transcribing these séances was a real bear.

But the brute work of being able to hear, let alone separate, the conversations for writing down was only one problem facing this transcription process. Another, potentially more difficult question was the level of performative detail it was necessary to transcribe. It is one thing to simply transcribe the words—it is another to transcribe them performatively. This is of particular importance for verbal art performances such as oral poetry, where meter and rhythm, changes in pitch and tone, speed of delivery, and other speech effects are of the essence and must be encoded in the transcript—but, in principle, speech effects are important in any performance with a verbal component. This was certainly true for Bosavi spirit séances. There was a good deal of emotional expression among the audience members throughout the performance, as well as verbal performance effects from the medium: each spirit that came up had a different and distinctive voice, and audience members sometimes could identify it by its speech before it had given its name.

In principle, transcription aimed at recovering this kind of linguistic detail in a meticulous manner entails splitting the performative activity into various levels of analytically distinguishable speech effects and transcribing or annotating them separately in parallel with the lexical text. On the linguistic level alone, there are numerous paralinguistic features such as intonation, pitch, loudness, rapidity of delivery, and so on that may be important in the performance. Documenting this accurately in a transcript involves an immense amount of work and training. I managed to accurately transcribe the points of conversational overlap and the background speech that accompanied the songs, but the encoding of all the finer details of speech production, although I could hear them, was simply beyond me.

Yet it was crucial that the effect of these performative elements of the language not be lost. I decided upon an ethnographic approach to resolving the problem. My fundamental aim in making a transcription of a spirit séance was to understand how Bosavi spirit mediums and their audiences co-constructed the imaginative reality of the spirit séance and worked within it to performatively pursue particular agendas. What were the genre conventions and what strategic moves were available to the players within them? How did audience and medium maneuver their agendas through the developing performance? These questions meant that it was more important for me to note that a speech effect could be identified at a particular place, and that it had a particular significance to those present (and for the

performance) than it was for me to transcribe it with full paralinguistic accuracy and detail in the text. So I turned from meticulously transcribing performative paralinguistic to detailed annotation of indigenous perception of performance effects.<sup>2</sup>

I began asking my assistants what they perceived was going on at points where either I or they noted interesting inflexions of speech or emotional expression. I wanted to know what people were reacting to, why they reacted that way, and what the outcome was in the development of the séance. I found that my informants were able to give me a knowledgeable running commentary and evaluation of the performance all the way through. They knew what was going on beneath the words, what people seemed to be up to, and they could give the reasons for their perceptions. In addition, they provided canny reflections on the performance based on memory and hindsight as well as material on the tape: noting what they had thought was going on at the time and what they thought about it now and why. They also brought to the discussion a well-informed knowledge of the séance genre. I recorded their comments and interpretations in extensive annotations to the transcript in the places where they occurred. Where there was disagreement I recorded the difference of opinion or detailed the course of discussion if they reached a resolution.

What emerged from this approach was an enormous wealth of séance lore, insightful perception, thoughtful interpretation, and performative insight from experienced séance attenders, which could explain the speech effects at various places in the transcript, but in no way could have been deduced from a meticulous transcription of paralinguistic. The performance did not reside in the “objective facts” of the event but in the working understandings, strategic moves, and developing situation of its participants—much of which developed at a level above, or at least outside, the level of the words of the transcript. We will return to this problematic point.

---

<sup>2</sup> This approach does entail a loss and would not be sufficient for those scholars who wish to study the details of the linguistic means by which particular speech effects and performative effects are brought about. In this transcription I had to restrict myself mainly to identifying and annotating the existence of performative effects and understanding their significance and consequences.

### Context of the Performance

The context of a performance is one of the important aspects that makes it what it is. I do not mean here the theater or longhouse, nor, at this point in the discussion, do I mean *Tradition*: the genre values, conventions, and expectations that people bring to these performances (although these are very important). I mean rather the social, historical, and ethnographic features that place the performance in its local ethnographic and historical context and are significant to its meaning. It is, for example, necessary to know something of the particular social and political situation of Athens in the fifth century B.C.E. in order (nowadays) to understand why audiences of Aristophanes thought his plays were funny.

Bosavi séances were largely concerned with curing the sick and identifying witches—inevitably issues of considerable local importance, which frequently had significant political repercussions throughout the local communities. Séances occurred at particular junctures and in specific contexts of local circumstances. What went on in séances often played a strategic part in local social and political events. Indeed, in Bosavi at least, many of these performances did not make full sense outside the ongoing developments of the local situation. An important part of the meaning and role of these performances was only to be found by investigating the circumstances that surrounded their being staged. Indeed, a great deal about the unspoken undercurrents of the local social and political situation arose in the performance itself, and could be tracked by annotating the transcript about the allusions and references that arose in spirit songs, and why particular participants raised particular issues. I often had to elicit a vast amount of local history and sociology in order to fully appreciate how and in what way the performance did its work, or why it had the effects on particular audience members that it did. As noted earlier, a great deal of it was elicited for annotation of the transcript during the transcription process itself.

At the same time, and apart from social and political issues, séances were also sources of enjoyable entertainment for Bosavis and subject to aesthetic evaluation by villagers who had developed considerable sophistication in judging the fine points of these performances. I elicited considerable material from informants about these matters, to the point where it was possible to develop an outline of Bosavi criteria of aesthetic judgment and gain an insight into their understanding and appreciation of these performances. This, of course, was an important goal of performing an ethnographic transcription in the first place.

The completion of a fully translated and annotated transcript of a Bosavi séance was, as I have indicated, an immense amount of work. On average it required about 100 hours to transcribe and annotate each hour of performance. Although transcription is always a tedious process, I would think that this amount of time is unusual as such things go. Part of the reason was that I could not give the task over to a research assistant. But I also chose to transcribe it myself because I wanted to develop a deep familiarity with the material. In the end, had I done otherwise, I would have missed most of what turned out to be the really interesting performative content. The annotations of the transcript were as valuable as the transcript itself, and even a detailed paralinguistic transcription would not, of itself, have picked up what the Bosavis found significant and interesting—it would only have signaled that there was perhaps something interesting there to investigate.

### **Pitfalls of Detailed Transcription**

Once the transcript is completed, one of the attractions that it holds for the researcher, if not the general reader, is that it seems to provide a highly detailed and meticulous record of what went on in the performance that can be used to revisit and minutely scrutinize its terrain and discover and reflect upon the means of its inner workings. As such the transcript can be an extraordinary tool for the close analysis of the performative process. While a good transcript can afford this opportunity, trusting the transcription has some serious pitfalls that have a lot to do with accuracy and detail. Although there are a number of problems here, I will restrict myself to discussing only three, all of which have to do with the dangers of reading too much into the transcript.

One we have already touched on is the problem of unilluminating details—that is, when details of the transcript indicate that something is potentially there but not what it is. The main example is places where the transcript indicates points of paralinguistic intensity or transition, but not what they signify. It is only through additional work with an informant that it is possible to determine whether such conversational markers are perceived by the speakers themselves, whether they have performative significance, and if so, what that significance is. This is not revealed in meticulous linguistic transcription by itself.

A second problem is that a carefully detailed and documented transcription often reveals events or complexities in a performance that were not apparent to the participants (or all of them) at the time. In my recordings of Bosavi séances, there were several instances where verbal material

appeared on the tape that nobody seems to have heard during the performance. There were also many instances where linguistic materials were heard by only a restricted number of people during the performance, or were heard but misunderstood. In addition, my transcription informants sometimes saw significances in the material in hindsight that had not occurred to them during the performance itself. Such insights by hindsight can potentially throw a new light on what was going on in the performance, but do they really replace what people thought was happening at the time? Many questions arise here. Can something that was patently not perceived during the performance be said to have had performative effect? What part does performative material that was mistakenly understood at the time play in the way the performance actually unfolded?

So it is necessary to observe caution in working out performance dynamics based on details uncovered in the transcript that participants were not aware of while the performance was going on. In the end, resolving these issues comes down largely to a careful judgment based on a combination of informant discussion and transcript. At the same time, the transcription of unheard detail suggests an interesting line of research, not well pursued in performance studies, namely the study of how a performance proceeds through the imperfections and miscommunications of its interactions with its audience. A detailed and well annotated transcript will have something to contribute to this.

Finally, one of the most difficult aspects of performativity to recover in a transcript is the pace, or dramatic timing of events in relation to one another, and this affects the points at which one performative move may be perceptually distinguished from another. The difficulty of transcribing timing opens the way for another potential problem made possible by a detailed transcript. I call this the fallacy of misplaced detail—or the Rodney King problem. Rodney King, it will be recalled, is a black American man who was picked up by the Los Angeles police for acting suspiciously and was found to be drunk. He was beaten mercilessly for a prolonged period by the police for, as they said, resisting arrest. Fortuitously for King, the beating was recorded on videotape by a bystander and became the basis for a controversial and celebrated trial in which King sued the police for racially motivated brutality and use of excessive force. The tape shows a beating savagely delivered by several policemen to a man who at first briefly seems to resist, and finally appears to be trying to protect himself with his arms as he is beaten mercilessly to (and on) the ground.

A simple viewing of the tape (which is less than five minutes in length) would seem to leave the viewer in no doubt that it is simply a brutal beating. The defense, however, took the jury through the tape frame by

frame, showing that the way that King's raised arms and movements during the beating could be interpreted at each point where he received another blow as representing a vigorous and dangerous move, which was appropriately interpreted at each point by the police as a continued aggressive resistance justifying a continued use of force. The defense won the case in what many observers concluded was a serious miscarriage of justice. Here, the minute, piece-by-piece breakdown and analysis of the event contradicted what was plainly visible to everyone who saw the brief and confusing action on the video as a whole. The defense succeeded in persuading the jury that the event consisted of, or could legitimately be viewed as, a large number of small incidents linked together consecutively rather than as a single performative flow. With the flow removed, the whole was reduced effectively to less than the sum of its parts. Or worse: some would argue that the evidence was actually falsified by this way of breaking it down and presenting it.

This kind of problem can also bedevil the interpretation of a detailed transcription of any performance no less than it did the Rodney King tape. What one can interpret from minute consideration of details teased out of the transcript—but lost to the participants in the flow of events at the time—does not by itself necessarily provide a basis for a better understanding of what was “really” going on. It can simply be mistaken.

### **A Note on Using Transcriptions**

The foregoing suggests that the transformation of performance events into an objectified textual format brings with it a particular impoverishment of the material. This is not because a transcript can never contain everything. On the contrary, impoverishment can result from excess. Rather it is because, in the end, there are a number of qualities intrinsic to the flow of performance that cannot really be transformed into text, or rather, which become significantly altered when that is attempted. This is particularly true with the dynamic, evanescent qualities of performance—pace and rhythm, movement and trajectory, tension, climax, and release. While appropriate marks are placed to indicate and qualify various aspects of these features in the transcript, the sense of the flow of performance itself, with its qualities of emergence and participation, is lost. The more transcription strains to encompass those effects, the more it must engage complex analytical processes if it is to record them in text at all. As we have seen, the transcription breaks the flow of moving events into a series of constitutive elements, themselves split into several registers of perception according to

different domains of analysis (linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, and so on) each of which may entail several levels of annotation. Paradoxically, then, as transcription tries to become more objective, neutral, and transparent to its material, it is forced to become more analytic and interpretative.

In my view, it is useless to worry about these problems. The issue is how to creatively get around them, and this cannot best be done using the transcript as text alone. I suggest that a transcript is most useful for researching performance when it is read alongside of, or in conjunction with, the recording of the performance from which it was made, allowing each to enhance and play off each other. Here the transcript is used to track and clarify the detail of what is going on, while the tape recapitulates and renews the sense of performative flow. It is through the emergent play between the transcript and recording used together that work with a transcript of performance becomes most useful and revealing.

*University College London  
University of London*

### References

- Schieffelin 1995                      Edward L. Schieffelin. "On Failure and Performance." In *The Performance of Healing*. Ed. by Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman. London: Routledge. pp. 59-90.
- Schieffelin 1998                      \_\_\_\_\_. "Problematizing Performance." In *Ritual, Performance, Media*. Association of Social Anthropologists, 35. Ed. by Felicia Hughes-Freeland. London: Routledge. pp. 194-207.

## Mediators of Modernity: “Photo-interpreters” in Japanese Silent Cinema

Isolde Standish

The film critic and theorist Kaeriyama Norimasa,<sup>1</sup> writing in the trade journal *Kinema Record* in August 1915—for the benefit of foreign readers he wrote in English—, defines the role of *benshi/katsuben* as that of “photo-interpreters.” The case of the *benshi* thus provides an excellent example of the processes of modification and alteration to the introduction of new technologies, and the adaptation of local populations to the accompanying introduction of new worldviews.

In this article I shall explore two avenues of thought in relation to the role played by the *benshi* in the history of early Japanese cinema. First, following on from Kaeriyama Norimasa, I shall argue that the *benshi* functioned as mediators of modernity through their interpretation of foreign films for Japanese audiences. Second, I shall explore their role within the domestically produced melodramatic genres (*shinpa*-derived traditions of “women’s weepies” and the *matatabimono* “men’s weepies”) as vehicles through which characters were given a greater sense of psychological depth, while exploring how their inclusion as a central element in the film experience impacted the development of cinematic conventions in these genres. For the discussion of narrational norms and the *benshi* within the melodramatic traditions of early cinema, I have drawn heavily on a set of video releases of Japanese films covering the decade from the mid-1920s to

---

<sup>1</sup> The article is in fact attributed to “a bystander.” However, it is reasonably safe to assume that it was written by Kaeriyama Norimasa (1893-1964). Kaeriyama was an intellectual who had graduated from the Tokyo Engineering University (Tokyo Kōtō Kōgyō Gakkō), wrote extensively on cinema, from aesthetic questions through to ventilation systems for film theaters. In 1917, after an extensive study of American sources, he published a book entitled *The Production of Narrative Cinema and the Laws of Photography (Katsudo Shashingeki no Sōsaku to Satsuei)*. That same year he began working for Tenkatsu Film Company in the import department. Tenkatsu was at the time experimenting with the production of Japanese films for export.

the mid-1930s produced by the Matsuda Film Company (Matsuda Eiga-sha) in the early 1990s. These releases come complete with *benshi* narration by Matsuda Shinsui (1925-1987) and Sawato Midori.

### Mediators of Modernity

The best criticism, and it is uncommon, is of [the] sort that dissolves considerations of content into those of form (Sontag 1983:103).

While I do not want to take an overtly technological determinist line, there are various implications that need to be considered in relation to cinema as a western technological invention, and the historicity of the juncture in time when it was invented. Cinema began in the age of Freudian psychoanalysis, which also saw the rise of nationalism and the emergence of consumerism. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1996:152) remind us,

the first film screenings by Lumiere and Edison in the 1890s closely followed the “scramble for Africa” that erupted in the 1870s, the Battle of “Rorke’s Drift” (1879) which opposed the British to the Zulus . . . , the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, the Berlin Conference of 1884 that carved up Africa into European “spheres of influence,” the massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890, and countless other imperial misadventures.

Relatedly, Comolli<sup>2</sup> has argued that the development of the camera obscura as a “machine” is not neutral, but comes imbued with certain ideological assumptions that underpinned its development (Bordwell, Staiger, et al. 1999:250): “[T]echnology is produced in large part by a socially derived conception of [the] world and how we know it . . . [Comolli] finds the origin of cinema not in scientific inquiry but in nineteenth-century

---

<sup>2</sup> I am very much aware of the fact that Bordwell (1997) in his study of film style has found “empirical inaccuracies and conceptual shortcomings” in Comolli’s analysis of depth of field and codes of “realism.” As he explains (162): “However we conceive of linear perspective, we can go on to ask what *alternative* system of representation the camera could have produced. It is one thing to say that orthodox cinema reproduces only one conception of reality; it is something else to show that there are other realities to which cinema, or other media, could give access.” However, I would suggest that Comolli’s main premise—that the development of technology, in this case photography and cinema, grew out of the particular “realist” vision of western science and philosophy—is in fact correct. As I argue elsewhere (2005) the Japanese did produce other media, such as the screen and hanging scroll, that depicted an alternative “realist” perspective commensurate with an eastern-derived worldview.

ideological pressures to represent ‘life as it is’ and in economic desires to exploit a new spectacle.” This desire, to represent “life as we know it is,” stems from the Renaissance project that attempted to reproduce “reality” through mimesis. The invention of the camera and the development of photography was a direct result of this aim, an aim compatible with a western ideological/aesthetic tradition, which, since the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, sought to distance humanity’s understanding of the natural world and civil society from a purely metaphysical and religious context, and to locate that understanding in the “real,” this worldly study of the “sciences.” As the landscape painter John Constable remarked, “painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature” (quoted in Ernst Gombrich 1996:29). The development of the camera was a progression in this ideological/aesthetic tradition that pursued art as “science.” This development freed artists from the need to represent “reality” and can be related to the reactionary development of expressionist and impressionist art movements of the twentieth century. The transference of the drive to (re)present “reality” to the world of film extends to the presentation of “historical authenticity” as Anthony Smith reminds us in his study (2000) of the relationship between historical paintings and historical films.<sup>3</sup>

Comolli’s analysis of “deep focus” clearly links the development of camera lenses to western “pictorial, theatrical and photographic” codes and representational styles (1986:433). The lenses and focal lengths (f35 and f50) selected were those that clearly corresponded to “normal vision” (1986:433):

These lenses themselves were thus dictated by the codes of analogy and realism (other codes corresponding to other social demands would have produced other types of lenses). The depth of field which they allowed was thus also what authorized them, was the basis for their utilization and existence. It wasn’t therefore just supplementary effect whose use could be passed up as a matter of indifference. On the contrary, it was what *had* to be obtained, and it had been necessary to strive for its production.

---

<sup>3</sup> “A . . . passion for archaeological fidelity in rendering period accessories became a staple of Hollywood epics. Biblical, Greek, Roman, medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian costume and furnishings became the distinguishing features and hallmark of the ‘real’ historical epic, sometimes requiring considerable research, as for the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. Eisenstein’s enthusiasm for authentic recreation of period furnishings, costume and armour was perhaps even greater” (Smith 2000:54). Mizoguchi is similarly renowned for his research on the Genroku period (1688-1704) and the demands he made on set designers and carpenters for authenticity in his epic *Genroku Chūshingura* (1941-42).

Since the Japanese in the early days of cinema were dependent on the importation of film stock, cameras, and projection equipment from the west, it follows that they were constrained by the ideological motivations that led to the development and use of specific technologies and the rejection of others. As the reminiscences of Ōbora Gengo (1899-1975),<sup>4</sup> a cameraman working in 1912, confirm, the imported film stock from the United States relied heavily upon natural light and the best lens to use with this stock was f35 (quoted in Satō 1995:51).

Comolli tackles the question of the relationship between cinematic style and technological innovation from the ideological or collective perspective; Gombrich, in a different context, tackles the question of the development of pictorial style (the language of art) from the psychological perspective of the individual artist. Both approaches are compatible, as they provide methodological tools to analyze the place of the artist and/or work of art in the sociohistorical context of their production and reception. The study of the role of the *auteur* is decentered to make way for a study of the artist and/or work as a part of a collective tradition. Gombrich, drawing on the findings of psychologists' studies of human perception, argues that individual artists do not begin the act of creation from the object as seen, but from an internalized schema held in the mind's eye. In other words, through cultural habituation, we all hold mental conceptualizations of the basic forms of objects. The artist begins with this conception and then fills in the distinguishing features that will increase the mimetic effect to the actual object before him/her. In distancing his position from that of cultural determinist, Gombrich goes on to define the "art" of the artist in his/her ability to extend and indeed challenge existing schemata (1996:264): "I believe . . . that the artist's gift is of this order. He is the man who has learnt to look critically, to probe his perceptions by trying alternative interpretations."

The representation of "scientific naturalism" had never been a priority of the traditional Japanese visual arts. Rather the Muromachi (1338-1573) and Tokugawa period (1600-1868) screen paintings, with the sky and clouds that act as a barrier or dividing line separating the human world from the heavenly are representations of the world and universe according to Confucian precepts.<sup>5</sup> Similarly the seasonal *kakejiku*, hanging picture scrolls

---

<sup>4</sup> Ōbora Gengo later went on to become a director.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that this conception of the division between the Heavenly and Earthly continued in the titles of various versions of *Chūshingura* that bear the subtitle *Chi no maki* and *Ten no maki*. Also, in the latest Shōchiku (1994) production of

that adorned the walls of the affluent classes, depicting humans in miniature proportions to the landscape, reflect a mode of seeing the world based on an eastern view of man's significance in relation to the natural world. Within this basically Confucian conception of "reality," deep focus, which selectively privileges people and, at times, objects, is superfluous.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, at a simplistic level it can be argued that when the Japanese adopted film technology they also imported with it an inherent way of representing the world, a conceptual mode that was not neutral, but ideological (in its broadest sense). As David Bordwell argues, drawing on a quotation from a speech made in 1934 by A. N. Goldsmith, the President for the (American) Society of Motion Picture Engineers (Bordwell, Staiger, et al. 1999:258):

"Showmanship," realism, invisibility: such canons guided the SMPE members toward understanding the acceptable and unacceptable choices in technical innovation, and these too became teleological. In another industry, the engineer's goal might be an unbreakable glass or lighter alloy. In the film industry, the goals were not only increased efficiency, economy, and flexibility but also spectacle, concealment of artifice, and what Goldsmith called "the production of an acceptable semblance of reality."

As my study of popular Japanese narrative cinema in the early part of the twentieth century demonstrates,<sup>7</sup> these qualities of "spectacle, concealment of artifice" and "an acceptable semblance of reality" came to dominate the local product.<sup>8</sup> However, this is not to argue that local Japanese socio-cultural practices did not have an equal or greater influence on these films.

The centrality of the *benshi* to the Japanese film experience up to the mid-1930s is a case in point, whereby the intervention of the local into the content of the foreign acts as a medium to facilitate understanding. The vocabulary used in Japanese discourse clearly distinguishes the role of the

---

*Chūshingura gaiden Yotsuyakaidan*, the cloud effect is retained in the filming style of the ghost story segments.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of style and perception in world art, see Hagen 1986.

<sup>7</sup> See Standish 2005:ch. 1.

<sup>8</sup> As with all aspects of cinema studies, one can only generalize as there are always exceptions to the rule. Kinugasa's 1926 film *A Page of Madness* (*Kurutta ippeiji*) clearly draws on German Expressionist modes of representation and not those of Hollywood.

film narrator in films derived from kabuki (*kyūgeki*) and melodramatic traditions, who provides literally the shadow dialogue (*kage zerifu*), from the *benshi*'s role as mediator, “photo-interpreter,” in relation to imported films. The following article published in August 1915 in English, for the benefit of foreign readers, in one of Japan's early film trade journals, *Kinema Record*, defines the role of *benshi/katsuben* as a “photo-interpreter” (Kaeriyama 1915:5; errors in spelling and grammar reproduced in the following quotation are as in the original):

We are sure our foreign readers may wonder at the word “Photo-interpreters.” Indeed they are found only in the picture-theatres in Japan. What do you think is their business? Why as the word “Photo-interpreter” “may convey its meaning to some extent, they interpret the spectators the picture-drama's synopsis before the picture appears on the screen or while the picture is shown moving on the white cloth. Sometimes they act as dialogists for the players in the picture and some of them make dialogue so skillfully as if the players in the picture were really speaking. So in some cases the moving picture plays shown to the Japanese spectators are not the *silent drama* at all the *ture play* with the help of these photo-interpreters. It is, therefore, natural that we have many eloquent photo-interpreter and often the spectators is influence by the dialogue by them. So important has become their position in the picture-theatres of Japan.

Such being the case, any photo-play-house in Japan has two or three “interpreters” at least, so the total number reach to above three thousand in all throughout Japan, the number of photo-play-house being more than nine hundred. Most of them are educated and have the knowledge of a foreign language—English at least. Because they must read and explain the spectators the synopsis in a foreign language shown at the beginning of every scene. As you know the picture-theatres in Japan exhibit chiefly the pictures made in foreign countries and owing to this fact the need of some interpreters sprang up to make the spectators understand what was the scene and what was taking place. Such has gradually developed and has made the present “Photo-interpreters.”

Despite the exaggerations (such as the number of cinemas in Japan at the time), from the translation of the terms *benshi/katsuben* as “photo-interpreters” and the subsequent explanation of their role it is clear that the *benshi* played an instrumental role as mediators between the new and foreign films and their Japanese audiences. Western commentators on Japanese cinema have generally attributed the inclusion of *benshi* in the early silent Japanese cinema experience to “the traditions and peculiarities of Japanese culture” (Anderson 1992:261) and cited their existence as proof of Japan's difference from western cinematic traditions. Anderson, in his seminal essay on *katsuben*, saw their role as “(1) *an extension of an indigenous narrative*

*practice which I call commingled media, and (2) a modern variation of vocal storytelling traditions” (idem, italics in original). However, in their analysis of the *benshi* tradition, Komatsu and Musser make the following astute observation (1987:83): “The *benshi* cannot be characterized in terms of an oppositional or alternative practice vis à vis Western and particularly Hollywood cinema but rather as an accommodation with these dominant Western cinemas.”*

As Gombrich’s study indicates, the artist interprets the world in terms of known schemata, but the beholder or spectator is equally complicit in the act of creation in his/her capacity to collaborate with the artist to make sense of, or read, the image. The *benshi* were crucial as intermediaries in this process. Not only did they attempt to explain the often new and unfamiliar “schemata” that drove the creative side of the foreign narratives; in the early days at least, they also explained the principles of film technology itself. What one has, as the case of the *benshi* illustrates, is a process of modification and alteration to a new technology and related worldview, which through the passage of time and adaptation conformed to and informed local taste. Therefore, with a globalized worldview, a deterministic view of form (the technology and techniques of filmmaking) has to be tempered with an understanding of the “content,” which is often derived from local storytelling traditions.

### **Melodramatic Narrational Norms and the *Benshi***

Genres such as those derived from the *shinpa*-traditions and the *matatabimono* films of the early-Japanese cinema can be described in western film studies’ terms as melodramas. Generally speaking, the melodramatic narrational mode is structured to convey the inner states of the characters and, as such, it subordinates all else to emotional impact. All the cinematic aspects of filmmaking—*mise-en-scène*, lighting, setting, camera placement, and “point-of-view”—work to convey the inner states of the protagonists and we, the spectators, are encouraged to focus on the protagonists within the various developing situations of the *syuzhet*<sup>9</sup> rather

---

<sup>9</sup> In analyzing dominant narrative and stylistic trends, it is helpful to draw on Bordwell’s (1990) exposition of the Russian Formalists’ theoretical divisions of narration into three concepts of *fabula*, *syuzhet*, and style. *Fabula* refers to the story, “[m]ore specifically, the *fabula* embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field . . . . *Syuzhet* (usually translated as ‘plot’) is the actual arrangement and presentation of the *fabula* in the film” (*ibid.*:49-50). It is from the information given in the *syuzhet* that the spectator makes

than on a single character. This is quite different from the structure of films based on, for example, the “goal-oriented hero” of the *chanbara* film, where we are clearly encouraged to identify with the main characters, whose actions motivate the causal chain of events making up the *fabula*. The melodramatic narrational mode is omniscient, in that we, the spectators, know more about the emerging situation than any one character, and thus the narrational mode supports a situation rather than a character-centered perspective. In the pre-“talkie” films of the late 1920s and the 1930s, the *benshi* and the inclusion of inter-titles were important devices through which omniscient narration was conveyed. The *benshi* also provided a “stream of consciousness” narration that, increasingly combined with the sophisticated use of subjective cinematic techniques such as point-of-view, flashbacks, hallucinations, and imaginings, endowed protagonists with a degree of psychological depth that went far beyond inter-titles in terms of dramatic impact.

This role of the *benshi* as voice-over narration of inner states was used to great effect in the development of the *matatabimono* (the wandering *yakuza* or masterless samurai) film, which could be alternatively subtitled as “men’s weepies.” The *matatabimono* film is closely related to the *chanbara* genre; its main difference is that the principal protagonists, although they are men of action, are given, primarily through the *benshi*’s “stream of consciousness” narration, an inner psychological depth denied to their *chanbara* counterparts. This “stream of consciousness” narration successfully overcomes the contradiction that men of action should not show their feelings. The *benshi* provides a soliloquized articulation of the man of action’s emotions. Similar techniques were later adapted to the 1960 *nagaremono* (drifter) films where voice-over narration of inner thoughts and the inclusion of verses from sentimental songs sung by the hero on the soundtrack conveyed inner states. In films of the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as *Orochi* (1925), *Hōrō zanmai* (1928), and *Banba Chūtarō mabuta no haha* (*The Mother He Never Knew*, 1931), what can be described as the *benshi*’s many cadenzas are clearly built into the structure of the films. Shots of poignant scenes of the heroes’ contemplative musings are held for lengthy

---

inferences, hypothesizes, and ultimately constructs the *fabula*. Style, within this context, is clearly allied to the *syuzhet*, as it refers to “the films’ systematic use of cinematic signifiers” (*idem*). In other words, it is an integral component of a film’s ability to express the *fabula*. This theory of narration allows us to isolate the various components of narrative and to historicize their development both in terms of theme and style. It is also useful because it acknowledges the role of the spectator in actively piecing together the components of the *syuzhet* and allying these to a given film’s stylistic norms, both extrinsic (in terms of genre, star persona, and so on) and intrinsic, to create meaning.

periods, clearly allowing sufficient time for the *benshi*'s extemporization. In this way the emphasis of the causal chain of events is shifted from the hero's actions, as in the *chanbara* films, to his emotional states. In *Orochi* (1925) it is clearly the hero Heizaburō's (Bandō Tsumasaburō) sense of the injustices of a society that favors privilege above honesty and merit, while in *Hōrō zanmai* (1928), in the first instance, it is the hero's love for his wife and his desire to avenge her death. Finally, in *Banba Chūtarō* (1931) it is Chūtarō's sense of loneliness from not having a mother and a family that drives the causal chain of events that make up the *syuzhet*. To illustrate this point I shall draw on a typical scene of an attempted rape taken from *Orochi*. Scenes of attempted rape or the threat of physical harm to women were central to the Hollywood melodramatic tradition from the early 1910s and were taken up and incorporated into various Japanese popular genres<sup>10</sup> at the time. However, unlike their western counterparts Japanese filmmakers, due to the *benshi*, were freed from the restrictions of inter-titles for character exposition.

*Orochi*, produced by the actor Bandō Tsumasaburō's own production company (Tsuma Prodakushon) and based on a screenplay by Suzukita Ryokuhei and directed by Futagawa Buntarō (1899-1966), was, as Suzukita has stated in an article in the journal *Shinario* published in 1954,<sup>11</sup> an attempt to elevate *jidaigeki* (*kyūgeki*) to attract audiences from the "educated" classes. The principal strategy used was to give Heizaburō a degree of psychological depth through the expression of inner conflict denied other samurai heroes, such as those portrayed by Arashi Kanjūrō,

---

<sup>10</sup> In Hollywood, this tradition was established in films such as *The Cheat* (Cecil B. De Mille, 1915), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *Birth of a Nation* (1915, both W. D. Griffiths), to name but a few. The "serial-queen" genre also featured both images of a powerful womanhood as well as extreme examples of violence to women (see Singer 2001: espec. ch. 8). In European cinema, we find similar narrative conventions in films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926).

<sup>11</sup> "Essentially I had different aspirations and opinions to the other young authors who aspired to write screenplays at this time. Anyhow, at this time audiences who patronized *jidaigeki* (*kyūgeki*) were from the socially lower classes. If I pressed them into viewing films of a higher artistic merit, they would probably stop coming. Therefore, in the first instance it was necessary to gradually induct audiences into the peculiar delights of *jidaigeki*. Somehow, it had to be moderately entertaining to capture the public. It was here that I adopted a similar doctrine of *hanpō shugi* developed by the founder of the *shinkokugeki* theatre movement Sawada Shōjirō. In *jidaigeki* films I incorporated elements of detection and a sense of resistance neither of which had ever been used before and I incorporated a sense of realism into the action scenes." (Suzukita, quoted in Satō 1995:23-24).

whose star persona, like that of Onoe Matsunosuke, was constructed to appeal to young boys through action. The depiction of Heizaburō's inner self was achieved using cinematic techniques and, more importantly, through interior monologues, given expression by the *benshi*.

A scene towards the middle of the film exemplifies this: Heizaburō's *yakuza* friends kidnap a girl with whom Heizaburō has fallen in love because she physically resembles his first love Namie, the daughter of the head of the Chinese Classics School from which he was expelled. The *yakuza* leave him alone in the room with her as she pleads with him not to rape her. In a sequence of ten shots Heizaburō, after roughly attempting to undo her *obi* and forcing her cringing into a corner to the left of the screen, proceeds to advance menacingly towards her. During this sequence of reverse-shots devoid of inter-titles, the *benshi*, Matsuda Shinsui, voices Otsu's pleas as direct dialogue, but in the case of Heizaburō he voices his inner conflict, his desire for Otsu, and his conscience that mitigates against this act of violence:

***Benshi:*** A fiendish voice asks Heizaburō what are you going to do? [As a social outcast] you don't have to do what society considers right.

The camera cuts between medium close-up shots of Otsu as she pleads and then back to frontal shots of Heizaburō as he slowly moves with each reverse-cut shot closer into the camera until his face, slightly to the left of the screen, fills the frame focusing on his eyes. At this point, in extreme close-up, Heizaburō moves his eyes slightly, signaling his return to consciousness and his realization that he must resist this "fiendish voice." In the next shot the camera pulls back, framing Heizaburō again in medium close-up and signaling his retreat from Otsu and the resolution of his moral dilemma. This sequence ends as it began with a shot of the *yakuza* huddled outside by the sliding door listening to what is going on in the next room.

Naturally, cinematic techniques play an important role in the depiction of inner states, and to illustrate this point I shall draw in detail on the example of *Orizuru Osen* (*The Downfall of Osen*), produced by Daiichi Eiga. A late (1935) *shinpa*-derived melodrama employing many of the conventions of the pre-"talkie" style and directed by Mizoguchi Kenji, it is based on the short story "Osen and Sōkichi" by Izumi Kyōka. The film's framing through flashback, told as a story from the main protagonists' point of view through the sophisticated use of cinematic techniques and complex parallel plot structures, makes it exemplary within the *benshi*-driven, *shinpa*-derived tradition.

Contained within the highly sophisticated structure of the *fabula* are two parallel lines of action, the relationship between Osen and Sōkichi and

an attempted crime, a fraud scheme perpetrated against a group of Buddhist monks. The film begins *in medias res* before moving to a series of flashback sequences, which establish the action of the film as past memory. Despite the implied subjectivity of the opening sequences, the parallel structure of the *syuzhet* presents an omniscient survey of the events. The parallel plotting structure of the narrative impedes the revelation of *fabula* events; as one scene ends on a question, the *mise-en-scène* shifts to the other plot line, suspending our knowledge and thus providing dramatic intrigue and drawing the spectator into the drama by apparently telling all, while retarding some information. The question follows: how does this apparently contradictory structure work?

The opening sequences at the train station are crucial, being comprised of a series of flashback sequences that apparently frame the body of the narrative within Sōkichi's point of view. Because of delays, Sōkichi stands waiting on a crowded platform while, unbeknownst to him, Osen sits in the waiting room. He is held in medium close-up as he stands gazing out to the right of the frame; this is followed by a cut to a point-of-view shot of a Shintō shrine on a hill, the object of Sōkichi's gaze. This sequence of shots is repeated, allowing sufficient time for the *benshi's* "stream of consciousness" cadenza. This is followed by a shot of leaves being blown in the wind, an intrinsic norm established in these opening sequences that triggers flashback sequences. This same shot will be used in the final scenes of the film; however, in this instance it is from Osen's point of view. During the opening sequences, Osen is highlighted by the key light, sitting in a dazed state and likewise gazing out of the frame to the right. The point-of-view cut between Osen, held in medium close-up, and the Shintō shrine visually links Osen and Sōkichi, as does the camera via a right track along the platform where Sōkichi is standing to the waiting room and a medium close-up of Osen. They are linked through framing, lighting, and camera movement, and despite their different physical positions on the platform (he is standing and she sitting some distance away in the waiting room), the point-of-view shot of the shrine is taken from the same angle. Both are thus visually conjoined as the main characters of the film. As the film moves into the main narrative with a flashback from Sōkichi's point of view, the camera follows his gaze from the *genkan* of the antique shop and, entering the house, peers behind the screen. The camera tracks forward along the corridor before a sharp swish pan left as it focuses on Osen. After this the narrational mode shifts to omniscience and the introduction of the crime plot.

Thus two narrational strategies are used: one, the subjective, supporting the Osen/Sōkichi plot through the *benshi's* "stream of

consciousness” narration, point-of-view, and flashback sequences that are centered on Sōkichi’s psychological motivation in his relationship with Osen; and two, the omniscient narrational style characteristic of the crime plot. Despite the inclusion of flashback sequences from Osen’s point of view in the opening scenes, in neither of the plot lines is her character given much in the way of psychological depth—that is, until the final sequences, when she is in the hospital, where super-impositions reveal her deranged mental state. In the early scenes, via the dual plot structure, various questions are raised about her moral status, and it is the investigation into her and her relationship with Sōkichi that motivates the causal chain of events that maintains, in large part, spectator interest.

From the first scene, Sōkichi’s character as an important man is established, first by his attire and demeanor; this is then confirmed when a group of university students greet him. On the other hand, Osen’s character as a woman of dubious moral character is also established when a group of drunken revelers make lurid aspersions that are voiced through the *benshi*. The visual linking of the two main characters through cinematic devices, point of view, framing, lighting, and camera movement sets up a contradiction in relation to the norms of social expectations. What type of woman is Osen and how can she and Sōkichi be connected? For most of the film Osen is held at a distance and her actions are observed either from Sōkichi’s point of view or through the omniscient narration. The narrative during the rest of the film sets out to disprove the initial inferences drawn from these opening scenes and structures her character as a “good” woman, despite her apparent circumstances. This is done through both the crime plot—she is opposed to the villains’ plan to cheat the monks, and it is she who eventually foils their plans and has them arrested—and through Sōkichi’s recollections. She is a fallen woman, but thanks to Sōkichi’s memories of her and the depiction of her role in foiling the crime, providing objective “empirical” support for Sōkichi’s subjective memories, we are encouraged toward a realization that circumstances, and not some intrinsic evil, have drawn her into this state.

The *benshi*’s “stream of consciousness” narration is central both to the subjective portrayal of Sōkichi’s memories of his relationship with Osen and to the provision of background information about his circumstances before he came to Tokyo. The *benshi* also helps to guide the spectator through the complex temporal disunity of the ordering of *syuzhet* events. Visually, windswept leaves denote an intrinsic norm that cues subjective states. However, these cues are established much more quickly in the spectators’ minds with the aid of the *benshi*. Broadly speaking, due to the inclusion of the *benshi* within the structure of silent films, we can make a distinction

between a “behavioralist” style of filmmaking exemplified in the Hollywood continuity system, which, under the guidance of Kido Shirō, was taken up by the Shōchiku Studios from the mid-1920s, and a melodramatic style based on the psychological exposition of character’s inner states through the *benshi* cadenza. European cinemas, in attempts to re-establish their film industries after World War I, and to distinguish their products from the Hollywood style, attempted to express similar psychological states through the adaptation of expressionistic and impressionistic styles. While the Soviets experimented with theories of “montage” within “intellectual” film circles, increasingly influenced by foreign films, the role of the *benshi* came to be seen as an impediment to the artistic expression through the purely visual.

### **Calls for Reform and the *Jun’eiga Undō***

Up until the mid-1920s Japanese cinema audiences were divided into the “educated,” who patronized foreign films and spurned local productions, and women and children, who respectively patronized films derived from the *shinpa*-melodrama tradition and the *kyūgeki/chanbara* tradition. These latter groups were referred to disparagingly as “nursing mothers” (*komori onna*) and “runny-nosed brats” (*hanatare kozō*).<sup>12</sup> This division in audiences was reflected in a tension between filmmakers who were influenced by western cinematic techniques and those who were content to stay within the bounds of the existing studio system. The innovation and implementation of new techniques required investment and was at first resisted by Nikkatsu. Equally the *benshi*, who had installed themselves as the principal attraction of the cinema, resisted change. They found it difficult to adapt their narration to films with fast editing. D. W. Griffith’s 1916 multi-plot film, *Intolerance*, was screened in Japan, giving *benshi* a clear indication of the difficulties to be resisted. The inclusion of dialogue inter-titles was similarly seen as a threat to their autonomy and role as an instrumental component of the overall film experience. In the debates in Japan at this time the *benshi* were seen as one of the elements that were impeding Japanese filmmaking practices. Writing in the trade journal *Kinema Record* in 1916, Kaeriyama

---

<sup>12</sup> Onoe Matsunosuke, who moved to Nikkatsu and had by 1923 become a major star, was the idol of the “runny-nosed brats.” He was affectionately known as *medama no Matchan* because it was thought at the time that he had unusually large eyes, and in the best kabuki tradition glaring at one’s opponent was an instrumental part of a climactic fight scene.

Norimasa summed up the mood of progressive filmmakers and “educated” audiences under the title “Why are Japanese Productions So Uninteresting?” (16; my translation):

As moving pictures are pantomime (*pantomaimu*), the audience must be made to feel the emotions through an actor’s facial expressions. However, under the current system, as they have the support of the *benshi* dialogue the audience can follow the plot, but, if we were to watch these films in the ideal situation without *benshi* narration, I doubt we would understand what was being expressed.

By the late 1910s, as the above quotation indicates, there was a call among serious filmmakers, and among “educated” audiences increasingly exposed to imported films, to explore the expressive possibilities of cinema. Kaeriyama Norimasa was one of the first to call for a reform of the domestic film industry as part of a bid to produce Japanese films for export. It is hard to make a definitive pronouncement on the merits or demerits of the *benshi* system when so little of their work is available, and the tapes that do survive (such as the Matsuda Company video series) are of exemplary quality. This, perhaps, is one of the principal reasons that mitigated against their survival in an industry that was increasingly being structured along Taylorist lines of production. The human element of the *benshi* resisted product standardization. Certainly when we compare in purely cinematic terms the scenes such as the attempted rape scene described above in *Orochi* with a similar scene in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* when Rotwang attempts to murder Maria (Brigitte Helm) or the murder of the heroine (Lillian Gish) by her father in *Broken Blossoms*, the *Orochi* scene seems crude by comparison. In terms of camera movement, Heizaburō physically moves in towards the stationary camera to bring his face into an extreme close-up and as he appears to pull away, it is in fact the camera that pulls back altering his position within the frame. In world-cinematic terms, these crude camera movements are indicative of films from the early to late 1910s and not from the mid- to late 1920s. This technique of filming extreme close-ups was also used in the 1927 film based on the novel by Mikami Otokichi, *Hyakumanryō hibun (The Million Yen Secret)*, and again in a 1928 episode of the *Kurama Tengu*. However, when we consider the psychological depth that the *benshi*, Matsuda Shinsui, brings to this scene through his articulation of Heizaburō’s thoughts, we see that a complex shift in spectator identification is possible, in that our sympathies are directed to Heizaburō rather than his victim—unlike the two western examples stated. Likewise, in *Osen* the sophisticated temporal disunity through which Sōkichi’s memories are

structured, it can be argued, is only possible through the inclusion of the *benshi*.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the *benshi*'s initial role was to facilitate the audiences' understanding of the causal, spatial, and temporal relations of cinema, a new and novel storytelling technology; and that the *benshi* were able to hold their position much longer than the film "lecturers" employed in American cinemas precisely because, as Komatsu and Musser astutely point out (1987:88): "The *benshi*'s position required them to mediate between Japanese audiences that were comparatively unfamiliar with Western representational methods and some Japanese producers who wanted to embrace the most extreme practices of Western cinema." Furthermore, economic factors contributed to the central position held by *benshi* in the Japanese cinema experience. Due to the relatively small number of prints sold, it was uneconomical for American and European producers to translate inter-titles into Japanese. Equally, Japanese cinemas tended to be large, unlike the American nickelodeons, and this bigger audience helped offset the cost to Japanese distributors of employing *benshi*. Having established themselves as an essential part of the filmgoing experience, they proceeded as performers to consolidate their position, often vying with the film itself for top billing status. Their importance to the domestically produced cinema can be seen in the actual structuring of certain genres to incorporate the *benshi* cadenza within the film itself. However, the arbitrariness of performance ultimately mitigated against their continued role, as sound technology brought with it the product standardization that ensured quality and increased studio control over the products they produced.

*School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London*

## References

- Anderson 1992
- J. L. Anderson. "Spoken Silents in the Japanese Cinema; or, Talking to Pictures: Essaying the Katsuben, Contextualizing the Texts." In *Reframing Japanese Cinema: Authorship, Genre, History*. Ed. by Arthur Nalletti and David Desser. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 259-311.

- Bordwell 1990 David Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge.
- Bordwell 1997 \_\_\_\_\_. *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 1999 \_\_\_\_\_, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge.
- Comolli 1986 Jean-Louis Comolli. "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field [Parts 3 and 4]." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. Ed. by Philip Rosen. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 421-43.
- Gombrich 1996 E. H. Gombrich. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Hagen 1986 Margaret Hagen. *Varieties of Realism: Geometries of Representational Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaeriyama 1915 Kaeriyama Norimasa. "Our Monthly Notes by a Bystandre (sic)." *Kinema Record*, 5.26:5.
- Kaeriyama 1916 \_\_\_\_\_. "Why are Japanese Productions So Uninteresting?" *Kinema Record*, 4.34:16.
- Kaeriyama 1917 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Production of Narrative Cinema and the Laws of Photography (Katsudo Shashingeki no Sōsaku to Satsuei)*. Publisher not given.
- Komatsu and Musser 1987 Hiroshi Komatsu and Charles Musser. "Benshi Search." *Wide Angle*, 9:72-90.
- Satō 1995 Tadao Satō. *Nihon eigashi 1896–1940*. Vol. I. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten.
- Shohat and Stam 1996 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam. "From the Imperial Family to the Transnational Imaginary: Media, Spectatorship in the Age of Globalization." In *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*. Ed. by Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 145-70.

- Singer 2001 Ben Singer. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contents*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smith 2000 Anthony Smith. "Images of the Nation: Cinema, Art and National Identity." In *Cinema and Nation*. Ed by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie. New York: Routledge. pp. 45-59.
- Sontag 1983 Susan Sontag. "Against Interpretation." In *A Susan Sontag Reader*. New York: Vintage. pp. 95-104.
- Standish 2005 Isolde Standish. "Cinema, Modernity, and the Shōchiku Tokyo Studios." In her *A New History of Japanese Cinema: A Century of Narrative Film*. New York: Continuum International Publishing. pp. 29-79.
- Thompson and Bordwell 1994 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. London: McGraw-Hill.

### Filmography

*Banba no Chūtarō mabuta no haha (The Mother He Never Knew)*. 1931. Directed by Inagaki Hiroshi and starring Kataoka Chiezō.

*Genroku Chūshingura (The 47 Ronin)*. 1941-42. Directed by Mizoguchi Kenji.

*Birth of a Nation*. 1919. Directed by D. W. Griffith.

*Broken Blossoms*. 1919. Directed by D. W. Griffith and starring Lillian Gish.

*The Cheat*. 1915. Directed by Cecil B. De Mille.

*Hōrō zanmai (The Dedicated/Committed Wanderer)*. 1928. Directed by Inagaki Hiroshi and starring Kataoka Chiezō.

*Hyakuman-ryō hibun (The Million Yen Secret)*. 1927. Directed by Makino Shōzō and starring Arashi Kanjūrō.

*Intolerance*. 1916. Directed by D. W. Griffith.

*Kurama Tengu*. 1928. Starring Arashi Kanjūrō.

*Kurutta ippeiji (A Page of Madness)*. 1926. Kinugasa, Teinosuke.

*Metropolis*. 1926. Directed by Fritz Lang and starring Brigitte Helm.

*Orizuru Osen (The Downfall of Osen)*. 1935. Directed by Mizoguchi Kenji and starring Yamada Isuzu.

*Orochi (The Serpent)*. 1925. Directed by Futagawa Buntarō and starring Bandō Tsumasaburō.

## **Plato, Memory, and Performance**

**Naoko Yamagata**

It is now widely recognized among classicists that in the culture of classical Greece, that is, in the fifth to fourth century B.C.E., the element of “performance” played a prominent role in various aspects of daily life. The term “performance culture” is often applied to classical Greece, especially to Athens, in reference to many areas where the citizens conducted their activities in public, such as dramatic and poetic competitions, athletic competitions, and debates in the democratic assembly and in the law court. All these activities that took place in public were highly competitive, though in different contexts, and demonstration of one’s excellence in performance mattered a great deal in them.<sup>1</sup>

Connected to this is another distinctive characteristic of life in classical Athens: that is, the still predominantly oral presentation of poetic works and political and philosophical ideas. Despite the gradual spread of alphabetic writing,<sup>2</sup> the importance of oral communication in the intellectual life of Athens persisted well into the classical period.<sup>3</sup> However, this was also undoubtedly a period of transition when the increasing importance of

---

<sup>1</sup> For classical Greece as a performance culture, see Hall 1998. The term “performance culture” to cover various public activities appears to be further justified by the similarity of “audience” reaction in different categories of performance, as documented in Wallace 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest evidence for the Greek alphabet dates from the eighth century B.C.E. For a brief history of the Greek alphabet, see “Alphabet, Greek” in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996:66.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Havelock 1963 for the most influential expression of this observation. See also Harris 1989: ch. 4, espec. 72-73.

writing had begun to affect the way people published or otherwise disseminated their works and ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I am going to take Plato's writings, especially his philosophical dialogues *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, as a snapshot of this transitional period to examine in some detail what was happening to the hitherto mostly oral culture. I have chosen these two dialogues in order to see how Plato represented the performance of poetry and of rhetorical speeches, respectively. By doing so I hope to gather some evidence for how performance was recorded, memorized, and retrieved, and how such retrieval or representation was regarded by the Greeks in the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. at the time of Socrates and Plato. What forms did those representations take and how did they compare with the "real thing," that is, the live performances?

Plato's dialogue *Ion* provides the best evidence for how Homer's poetry was performed in Plato's day because of its subject matter: Socrates' conversation with Ion, a leading rhapsode of Homeric poems. Socrates' tone is ironic throughout, friendly but often teasing, as he plays along with Ion's overconfidence in his ability and value as a rhapsode.<sup>5</sup> Ion, on the other hand, does not seem aware of Socrates' irony, taking his double-edged compliments at their face value. The gap of awareness between the two interlocutors gives this dialogue a humorous touch, which veils Plato's attack on the claim of poetry as a vehicle of truth.

Almost as soon as the dialogue opens, Socrates challenges Ion in a most courteous and ironic way (530b-c). He says that he is envious of the rhapsodes like Ion for their art (*tekhnê*), which allows them to dress up and look glamorous,<sup>6</sup> and to have intimate knowledge of many fine poets,

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Thomas 2003. For detailed examinations of the issues relating to literacy and orality in classical Greece, see Thomas 1989 and 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Rhapsodes (*rhapsôidoi*) in Plato's time were performers who recited epic poetry, especially that of Homer; unlike poets (*poiêtai*), they did not compose poems by themselves. However, the term was applied to poet-performers in earlier periods. Cf. Gentili 1988:6-7.

<sup>6</sup> This is an indirect reference to one of the performance aspects of the rhapsode's art, costume. Costume as a significant element in the performance of poetry and even oratory can also be glimpsed in Plato, *Hippias Minor* 368b-d, where the sophist Hippias' works on display include not only poetry and prose speeches, but also self-made jewelry, clothes, and the shoes he is wearing. See also Plato, *Hippias Major* 291a for the mention of Hippias' fine clothes and shoes. All this is in stark contrast with Socrates' well-known neglect of his appearance and comfort, especially with his barefootedness (see, e.g., Plato, *Symposium* 220b).

especially Homer. He goes on to say that a good rhapsode would necessarily have proper understanding of the poet's words because he has to interpret the poet's thought for the audience. That, he says, is worthy of envy.

In these words, Socrates is setting out his program of discrediting the rhapsodes, and through them Homer himself, as educators of Greece.<sup>7</sup> In the course of the dialogue, Ion is reduced to admitting that, although rhapsodes have some knowledge of all the matters Homer addresses, such as how to drive a chariot or how to be a commander of an army, they can only be inferior judges to the experts in each technical matter concerned. Ion is supposed to be a leading performer of Homeric poems as well as a critic of Homeric poetry at the time (530c-d), but apparently cannot even pinpoint the nature of *his* own expertise. The only honorable way out for him in the end is to agree to Socrates' view that the rhapsode can perform or praise Homer's poems well, not as a result of his skill (*tekhnê*) or knowledge (*epistêmê*), but by divine dispensation, or more simply, by being divine (*theios*) (541e-42b).

Plato's Socrates introduces his idea of poets and rhapsodes as divinely inspired beings in his striking simile of the magnet and iron rings. The Muse is likened to a magnet that attracts iron (533e-34a):<sup>8</sup>

The result is sometimes quite a long chain of rings and scraps of iron suspended from one another, all of them depending on that stone for their power. Similarly, the Muse herself makes some men inspired (*entheous*), from whom a chain of other men is strung out who catch their own inspiration from theirs. For all good epic poets recite all that splendid poetry not by virtue of a skill, but in a state of inspiration and possession. The same is true of good lyric poets as well: just as Corybantic worshippers dance without being in control of their senses, so too it's when they are not in control of *their* senses that the lyric poets compose those fine lyric poems. But once launched into their rhythm and musical mode, they catch a Bacchic frenzy: they are possessed, just like Bacchic women, who when possessed and out of their senses draw milk and honey from rivers—exactly what the souls of the lyric poets do, as they say themselves.

It must surely be significant that similes, which are very common literary devices in Homer, are employed here to convince Ion, the professional

---

<sup>7</sup> For the idea of Homer as the educator of Greece, cf. Plato, *Republic* 606e and Verdenius 1970. For Homer's continuing influence on ancient Greeks and Romans, especially on education and rhetoric, see North 1952.

<sup>8</sup> The quotations from *Ion* in this article are taken from Saunders 1987 with occasional modification and some transliterated Greek words inserted as necessary.

performer of Homeric poems. Later on, the chain is further extended to include rhapsodes and other performers who catch inspiration from the poets, and through them their spectators (535e-36b). It is notable that Socrates compares the inspired state of the poets to a Bacchic frenzy (*bakkheousi*) in which the affected person is “possessed” (*katekhomenoi*) (534a).

The idea of poetry as a product of divine inspiration has a long tradition, evident since the oldest poets in Greece, Homer and Hesiod. After all, Homer begins his *Iliad* with the line “Sing Goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles.” The line implies that it is the goddess Muse who does the singing, and the poet is merely her mouthpiece.<sup>9</sup> Socrates turns this very convention against the poets to undermine their claim to any skill (*tekhnê*).<sup>10</sup> He says that the poet (*poiêtês*) has to be inspired (*entheos*) and out of his mind (*ekphrôn*), with his sense (*nous*) no longer within him, in order to be able to compose his poems (*Ion* 534b). To enhance this view Socrates paints a convincing picture of the psychology of epic performance (535b-c):

When you give a performance of epic and stun your audience, and you sing (*âidêis*)<sup>11</sup> of Odysseus leaping onto the threshold and revealing himself to the suitors and pouring forth his arrows before his feet, or of Achilles rushing at Hector, or one of those piteous episodes about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam, are you, at that moment, in control of your senses? Or are you taken out of yourself, and does your soul, inspired as it is, imagine itself present at the events you describe—either at Ithaca or Troy or wherever else the scene of the epic is set?

To this Ion can only agree (535c), saying that when he says something piteous, his eyes fill with tears, and when singing something frightening or

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the opening lines of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, where the poet also calls to the Muse(s) to relate the poem. In the *Theogony* Hesiod describes how he met the Muses on Mt. Helicon and received the gift of poetry from them (22-34). For further Homeric and Hesiodic references on divine inspiration, see Sperduti 1950: espec. 224-25 and 228-29.

<sup>10</sup> The words *tekhnê* (“skill”) and *epistêmê* (“knowledge”)—used synonymously in this dialogue—are denied to poets or rhapsodes in Socrates’ analysis. See Murray (1996:108) on *Ion* 532c6.

<sup>11</sup> This word alludes to the mode of delivery of epic poetry. The poems were apparently melodiously chanted with (originally) or without (by Plato’s day) the accompaniment of the lyre. Cf. “Rhapsodes” in Hornblower and Spawforth 1996:1311-12.

terrible, his hair stands on end and his heart thumps. When Socrates asks if he is aware that his audience is similarly affected, Ion agrees again (535e):

Yes, I'm very well aware of it. At each performance, I look down on them from up there on the platform as they weep and look at me with dire emotion in their eyes, in amazement at my story. You see, I have to pay a lot of attention to them—since if I make them cry I shall laugh all the way to the bank, whereas if I provoke their laughter it's I who'll do the crying, for loss of my money.

We may detect a touch of cynicism on the part of Plato here. On the one hand, he is presenting a deliberately exaggerated picture of the divine poet or performer who composes or performs in the state of “madness.” On the other hand, he paints a realistic picture of a professional performer fully aware of the audience's reaction and its financial result.<sup>12</sup> The power of performance and an audience's fascination with it obviously existed, as it does today, but this was an age of reason that no longer believed in divine inspiration as depicted in Homer, or not literally at any rate. It is perfectly possible that the idea of Muse-inspired poetry was more or less the “official” view maintained by the Greeks since Homer even down to Plato's day, but the idea that poets compose and performers perform in a state of “divine madness” where they lack control of their senses is not a common view in ancient Greece, and more likely to be a Platonic “myth.”<sup>13</sup> On the evidence of this dialogue, it is hard to think that Plato sincerely believed that poets composed or performed in a frenzied state. Even Ion himself protests that he is not “possessed and frenzied” (*katekhomenos kai mainomenos*, 536d) when he is commenting on Homer's poetry.

The exact nature of divine inspiration in ancient Greek literature is a subject of much debate. In Homer, there is no sign of divine madness or frenzy in the cases of the bards Demodocus and Phemius. In fact Phemius says that he is “self-taught” but the songs are “planted by the gods” (*Od.* 22.347-48), suggesting the co-existence of divine inspiration and human

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Weineck 1998:30: “he is quite conscious of manipulating his audience, and his own passions are diametrically opposed to those of his listeners instead of being ‘magnetically’ related to them.”

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Murray 1992:34. The earliest extant source of the notion of the frenzied poet is Democritus (mid-fifth to mid-fourth century B.C.E.; in Diels 1952:fr. 17 and fr. 18), but it appears that Plato is the author most responsible for propagating the idea. Cf. Dodds 1951:82; Tigerstedt 1969:espec. 66-67.

technique.<sup>14</sup> Penelope Murray (1999:32) observes that Demodocus' art is also described in the *Odyssey* (8.44-45) as both god-given and the product of his own mind (*thûmos*). Pausanias (9.29.2) records an old tradition in which there were three Muses, Meletê (Study), Mnêmê (Memory) and Aoidê (Song) whose names also seem to point to both divine and human aspects of the Muses' art. As Detienne puts it (1996:41), "*Meletê* designated the discipline indispensable to any bardic apprentice: attention, concentration, and mental exercise." This seems to indicate the important part played by the conscious human effort in the creation and performance of poetry, far from the image of the frenzied divine poet who is "out of his mind," and also incidentally points to the close connection between memory and poetry (cf. Murray 1999:36).

Anthropological studies have also taught us to be aware of different sorts of "divine" or trance-like inspiration found in various cultures around the world. Ruth Finnegan (1988:73-75) describes Eskimo poets' deep poetic concentration during composition and cites an example from the southern Pacific where the poet is believed to receive divine inspiration to compose his "rough draft," which is subsequently polished in consultation with others. From these as well as from other examples from the Pacific, Finnegan (*ibid.*:95-102) observes the recurring emphasis on divine inspiration as well as memorization in the composition of songs and dances. This seems to me to be akin to Homer's notion of a poetic inspiration that does not work without conscious human endeavor.

Felicia Hughes-Freeland's (1997) description of the Javanese dance theory of Joged Mataram appears to shed further light on the nature of trance-like performance. According to the theory, "the experienced dancer ceases to experience the doing of the movements: the acquired habits of movement have their own momentum independent of the performer's intention" (61) and "one is not aware of self or the audience, and one is aware of one's fellow-dancers and the pillars on the stage to the extent that one does not collide with them" (64-65). This sort of balance between the performer being absorbed in the performance on the one hand and yet being conscious of the practicalities on the other, I imagine, could be found in almost any of the performing arts. In light of such comparative evidence, perhaps Plato's description of Ion's experience, which combines the "inspired" state and the pragmatic consciousness of the audience reaction, is not so cynical as it is realistic.

The *Ion* incidentally provides us with the main evidence for how Homer was memorized and received in the late fifth to early fourth century

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Maehler 1999:7 and Macleod 1999:46.

B.C.E. While they are debating whether the rhapsode can be an expert on everything that Homer treated in his works, Socrates and Ion produce some quotations from Homer as pieces of evidence. The first example regarding chariot-driving is produced by Ion (537a-b, quoted from *Il.* 23.335-40), but Socrates never needs Ion's help again, for he himself produces all the rest of the examples from Homer (three from the *Iliad* and one from the *Odyssey*; 538c-d, 539a-d). To make Socrates outdo the professional in reciting Homer is surely Plato's deliberate irony.

Another remarkable point about this sequence is that Ion's and the first three of Socrates' Homeric examples are each slightly "misquoted" or at any rate noticeably different from the extant texts that we have. For example, the first line of Ion's quotation (537a8-b5) reads:

***klinthênai de, phêsi, kai autos euxestôi eni diphroi***

Lean over, he says, yourself also in your well-polished chariot.

Whereas the corresponding line in Homer (*Il.* 23.335) of our extant text reads:

***autos de klinthênai euplektôi eni diphroi***

Yourselves lean over in your well-plated chariot.

So Plato makes Ion insert "he [i.e., Homer] says" and "also" into his quoted passage, changes the word order, and replaces *euplektôi* ("well-plated") with *euxestôi* ("well-polished"). This variant reading is not found in any other manuscript tradition and the word order is so radically different that it is very unlikely to be a result of scribal errors. It is more likely to be Plato's own "version" as a result of his citing from memory. And yet the line, with the words jumbled up and with the addition of one little word, *kai* ("and"), still scans correctly as hexameter, which makes it sound like a genuine Homeric line.

The deviation from our text is even more pronounced in Socrates' first quotation at 538c:

***oinôi pramneiôi, phêsin, epi d' aigeion knê tûron  
knêsti khalkeiêi, para de kromuon potôi opson.***

**of Pramneian wine, he says, and over it she grated the cheese of a goat,  
with a grater of bronze, and then an onion as relish for the drink.**

This in fact is a mixture of *Il.* 11.639-40:

**oinôi pramneiôi, epi d' aigeion knê tûron**  
**knêsti khalkeiêi, epi d'alphita leuka palune,**

**of Pramneian wine, and over it she grated the cheese of a goat,**  
**with a greater of bronze, and sprinkled white barley over it,**

and of *Il.* 11.630:

khalkeion kaneon, ***epi de kromuon potôi opson***

a bronze basket, **and then an onion as relish for the drink.**

The proximity of the two Homeric passages, occurring within the same context (Hecamede serving food and drink to Machaon), and the presence of the word for bronze in both are likely to have triggered this confusion. Again, this variant is not attested in any other manuscript tradition, and highly unlikely to be a scribal error. It is most certainly Plato's misquotation—"une défaillance de mémoire" as Labarbe puts it—but again the lines scan as hexameter verse, thus sounding like genuine Homeric lines.<sup>15</sup>

What are we to make of such variations? Ion does not appear to notice these "errors," either his own or Socrates', despite the fact that he is supposed to be a leading expert in Homeric verse. Nor does it seem to matter to Socrates, who introduces his quotations by saying "he [Homer] puts it more or less like this" (538c). The most likely explanation is that Plato was not himself aware of making these mistakes, having quoted the Homeric lines from memory. This casual attitude to literary quotations is very common in Plato's writings, reflecting no doubt the usual way people quoted Homer and other authors in their daily conversation. We might expect that professional rhapsodes in real life would have had a more accurate knowledge of Homeric verses than Plato, but it is not inconceivable that the sort of slight variations as we have seen in Ion's quotation above could have naturally occurred in live performances. Comparative evidence seems to

---

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Labarbe 1949:104. Cf. Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.7, where the second half of *Il.* 11.630 is quoted correctly with *epi*. Plato refers to the same episode in *Republic* 405e-06a, but misremembers the characters involved, substituting Eurypylus and Patroclus for Machaon and Hecamede. Cf. Murray 1996 on *Ion* 538c1. The other quotes by Socrates in the rest of the sequence have less radical variations. For further details, see Labarbe 1949:88-136.

suggest that such inexact reproduction of verses is not uncommon in oral poetry, and we might be witnessing here one of the last stages of the oral transmission of Homeric texts in Plato's dialogues, albeit only in quotations.<sup>16</sup> We can also infer that educated Athenians such as Socrates and Plato knew enough Homer by heart not only to remember much of the texts correctly but also to recast, albeit inadvertently, original lines with different words or in different word order and still make them say roughly the same thing and scan as hexameter. Here is a hint of creative memory driven by the rhythm of the hexameter, which was no doubt drilled into the Greek mind from an early age.

At this point it may be useful to have a general overview of Plato's uses of Homer. Plato's attack on poets, especially Homer, is well-known, but in fact his direct criticism of Homer is confined to only three dialogues, the *Republic*, where Socrates famously banishes poets from his ideal state (607a), *Hippias Minor*, and *Ion*, which we have just seen. Out of 35 canonical dialogues (including the ones that are not thought to be by Plato himself), 30 of them contain Homeric references, either mentioning Homer as the poet *par excellence* or his characters as examples, or quoting or referring to his poems as a source of information of great authority that everyone knows and draws on.<sup>17</sup>

It is ironic that despite his aspiration to replace Homer with philosophy as the new curriculum of education, or rather because of it, Plato had to use Homer to authenticate his arguments and to make his philosophical dialogues lively and natural. It was natural because Greeks in those days were educated with Homer's texts and they quoted from them all the time.<sup>18</sup> Hence, references to Homer formed a large part of the art of conversation and indeed of Socratic dialectic, too.<sup>19</sup> The complete poems of Homer no doubt were available both as written texts and through public

---

<sup>16</sup> For the fluidity of oral poetry, see Lord 1960:99-123.

<sup>17</sup> For the most comprehensive survey to date of Homeric quotations and references, see Labarbe 1949.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Symposium*, especially the case of Niceratus, whose father Nicias made him learn the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.5). Cf. Verdenius 1970.

<sup>19</sup> It appears that Socrates was particularly fond of quoting Homer, judging not only by Plato's evidence but also Xenophon's, who reports that Socrates was accused of constantly quoting a certain passage from Homer, *Il.* 2.188-91 and 198-202 (*Memorabilia* 1.2.58).

performances, but the memorized texts (or parts of texts) had their own life, as it were. They had their mini-performances in daily conversations.

I turn now to my second text, Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is a dialogue between Socrates and his friend Phaedrus on at least three main topics. At first the subject is a speech by Lysias, which prompts two speeches by Socrates on the nature of love. Then they discuss the nature of rhetoric and, finally, the contrast between written and spoken words. What is of particular interest to our current investigation is the preamble, where Phaedrus talks about the ways in which he can reproduce a speech by Lysias, the leading orator at that time.<sup>20</sup> When he first meets Socrates while out walking, Phaedrus talks as if he has been listening to Lysias' speech delivered by the orator himself ("I have been with Lysias," he says), but it turns out that he has actually been reading a written text of the speech that advises young men not to yield to sexual advances from those who are in love with them, but rather to ones from those who are not. Socrates sees through Phaedrus' coded language and unmasks the real situation (228a-b):<sup>21</sup>

[that] he wasn't content with a single hearing of Lysias' speech but made him repeat it a number of times, and that Lysias willingly complied. But even that didn't satisfy Phaedrus, and in the end he took the manuscript and went over his favourite passages by himself. Finally, exhausted by sitting at this occupation since early morning, he went out for a walk with the whole speech, I could swear, firmly in his head, unless it was excessively long. His motive in going outside the walls was to be able to declaim it aloud.

A number of interesting observations can be made about this passage. Lysias presumably had a written version of his speech, but it was clearly meant for oral delivery.<sup>22</sup> Phaedrus as a member of the audience may request to hear it more than once and try to memorize it or he may obtain the manuscript from the author and read it. What he subsequently does seems to imply that after studying the speech, what he then wanted to do was to deliver it by himself, hopefully to some audience of his own. This seems to

---

<sup>20</sup> The dramatic date of the *Phaedrus* (presumed to be sometime in the late fifth century B.C.E.) cannot be determined, as the pieces of internal evidence contradict one another. The date of composition is likely to be at a later stage of Plato's career. Cf. Nehamas and Woodruff 1995:xiii-xiv and Rowe 2000:13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Translations from the *Phaedrus* in this article are taken from Hamilton 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Thomas (1992:124): "In public oratory, Greek orators fostered the appearance of improvisation and spontaneity, even if they had a text."

imply that the speech must be performed in order to be fully appreciated, even by the audience on the receiving end.

What happens next in the dialogue is equally interesting. Phaedrus says that he has not learned the speech by heart, but he can summarize the argument point by point for Socrates (228d). Clearly he would have preferred to perform a version of the speech orally by himself. But Socrates spots that Phaedrus is hiding the manuscript itself under his cloak, and insists that he would rather hear “Lysias,” that is, the text itself, read aloud to him (228d-e).<sup>23</sup> So here are two ways of thinking: (1) speeches have to be delivered live but (2) the authentic authorial voice retrieved from the fixed text is more desirable than a second-hand re-creation of the performance by someone else.

We are witnessing here an interesting phase of oral culture, when written texts have arrived as an optional memory aid and yet the purely oral mode of memorizing and reproducing the oral performance is very much alive and appears even to be preferred by keen learners. As we have seen in *Ion*, allowance seems to be made for a degree of inaccuracy in the case of recall from memory—as long as you get the gist right.<sup>24</sup> But this new technology—writing—has made it possible to produce the “author himself” in the form of the fixed text, and with it we can see the arrival of the new concept of authenticity.<sup>25</sup>

But Lysias’ speech, read out by Phaedrus, is not the end of the story. It triggers Socrates’ own speech (237a-41d) first to outdo it along the same lines of argument (you should yield to those who are not in love with you), and then another speech (244a-57b) to reverse the conclusion (you should yield to those who are in love with you). Unlike Lysias’ written text, which has no room for expansion, we are given the picture of Socrates “actually” improvising and composing the speeches to respond to immediate questions. Plato takes enormous trouble to set the scene (230b-c) on a hot summer day, with Socrates and Phaedrus sheltering in the shade of a plane tree under

---

<sup>23</sup> Sheid and Svenbro (1996:124-25) observe the sexual connotation of the “reader” and the “writer” being under the same cloak, and the implication of this passage that the written words become a complete “text” only when woven with a live voice.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Thucydides 1.22, for the same attitude towards oral memory, which he utilized to write his set speeches. For lack of precision in oral style, see Gagarin 1999:166.

<sup>25</sup> For the formulation of writing as a technology, see Ong 1988:espec. 80-82, and for writing’s effect on the mode of thinking, especially Plato’s, see Havelock 1963.

which runs a cool spring sacred to a river god and some nymphs. They lie down, listening to the cicadas' chorus over their heads.<sup>26</sup>

It is in this setting that Socrates hears Lysias' speech read out to him and then gives his own in response. He describes himself as "inspired" (or "beside myself"; *enthousiasô*, 241e5) and his style is often poetic, even addressing the Muses as he begins his first speech (237a7) and launching into hexameter verse at the end of the speech (241d1).<sup>27</sup> Although these two instances show a very heavy hint of Socratic irony, there is no doubt that Plato is trying to bring some element of poetic inspiration into his creation as well as to recreate some essence of the live performance of Socratic dialectic. A little later in the dialogue (245a) Socrates speaks of poetic inspiration in terms similar to those in *Ion*, though in this instance with no obvious irony: "But if a man comes to the door of poetry untouched by the madness of the Muses, believing that technique alone will make him a good poet, he and his sane compositions never reach perfection, but are utterly eclipsed by the performances of the inspired madman."

What was the motive for Plato to write this dialogue dotted with many poetic expressions? Is it merely play, by which he is confessing that he has a soft spot for poetry? Is he being ironic or seriously trying to present Socrates as an inspired teacher whose art of philosophy is the true art of the Muses that we must follow? And why did Plato write anything at all? As is well known, Plato's attitude toward writing was deeply skeptical. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates relates a myth reputedly from Egypt (274c-75b): the god Theuth invents writing but the king of Egypt denounces it as something harmful that damages rather than improves one's memory, and that also can give a large quantity of information without proper instruction, which fills the learners with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom. After telling this story, Socrates goes on to express in his own words the inadequacy of writing (275d)—it cannot answer any queries, can be misunderstood without the author to explain it, and is available even to unsuitable readers.

These were the very problems that Plato himself faced when committing his thoughts to writing, and he gives this warning in his *Seventh Letter*, widely considered to be written either by himself or by a source close

---

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis of the significance of the dialogue's setting, see Ferrari 1987:espec. 1-36.

<sup>27</sup> This incidentally provides further evidence for the extent to which educated Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries were imbued with poetry, especially with Homeric verse.

to him. Concerning his philosophical quest, he says (341c-d; Hamilton 1973:136):

No treatise by me concerning it exists or ever will exist. It is not something that can be put into words like other branches of learning; only after long partnership in a common life devoted to this very thing does truth flash upon the soul, like a flame (*phôs*) kindled by a leaping spark (*pûros*), and once it is born there it nourishes itself thereafter. Yet this too I know, that if there were to be any oral or written teaching on this matter it would best come from me, and that it is I who would feel most deeply the harm caused by an inferior exposition.

Here is the same attitude toward writing as we have seen in the *Phaedrus*. The written text cannot answer any queries, but if it has to be committed to writing at all it has to come from the author himself.<sup>28</sup> That certainly explains why Plato did write his works, albeit reluctantly, but why did he write dialogues in particular? This is a complex question that may never be adequately answered, but one of the possible answers will be his need to convey that “flame” (*phôs*) as he calls it in the *Seventh Letter*, something that one simply cannot put into words. Ideally we should have a live performance of philosophical discussion either with Socrates or with Plato in order to catch that flame from them. So the second-best thing for the author was to attempt to simulate the live performance of dialectic as best as he could to foster the *habit* of doing philosophy in the souls of the readers.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Plato is also aware that in order for his dialogues to have life, to pass on the “flame,” his writing itself will have to have that “flame” in the first place. He is aware that his dialogues need to have something of the magical quality that Homer and other great poets possess, something more than the sum total of questions and answers, doctrines and fancy myths.<sup>30</sup> He is trying to capture and pass on something beyond

---

<sup>28</sup> However, see Edelstein (1966:83) for the subtle difference in attitude to writing between the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Thomas (1992:127): “The texts were reminders, mnemonic aids, for what was more accurately propagated and understood through the living performance, from the teacher himself.”

<sup>30</sup> Plato as an inspired poet is eloquently described in the following words of von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff regarding the *Phaedrus* (1920:486; trans. by Nicholson 1999:88): “Why then does he write, and why does he write this very dialogue? As he tells us himself, it is play. And why does he play? Anyone who grasps this dialogue as a whole has no difficulty in seeing the answer. He has to write; he is driven by something unconscious, an inner force. This too is a divine madness. The poet within drives him to

technique. In committing his words to writing in a dialogue form, Plato could expect his works to be partially learned by heart, or at least read aloud,<sup>31</sup> which could bring out some essence of his teacher Socrates' "performance," that is, his discussions with his friends. In this sense, we can interpret the format of the dialogue as Plato's invitation to performance.<sup>32</sup> Whether you simply retrieve it mechanically from the pages or from memory, as Phaedrus did with Lysias' speech, or join in by thinking aloud as Socrates did afterwards is left up to us.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

From our Platonic evidence taken mainly from the *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, we can make a number of observations. In Plato's day, Homeric epics had more or less definitive written texts that were available for learners to memorize. Not only professional rhapsodes, who were able to recite the entire Homeric poems from memory, but also some laypersons knew all or sizeable portions of them by heart. Proper recitals had theatrical elements that added to the audience's fascination. However, Homeric texts were more casually quoted as an encyclopedic source of knowledge and wisdom either

---

write, and no matter how low he may set the value of poetry, he lets poetry flourish just as, now, he has let rhetoric flourish. On one condition: one must have recognized the truth and be prepared to defend it (278c), one must have that goal before one's eyes and seek with all one's might to accomplish in words that which will please the gods (273e). Wisdom belongs to God alone, but we can all become lovers of wisdom."

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Ryle 1966 for the view that most of Plato's dialogues were composed to be orally delivered. For evidence indicating that written texts were normally read aloud, see Thomas 1992:4.

<sup>32</sup> Clay (1992:117) points out the effect of the dialogue form that invites the reader to be "the audience of a philosophical drama" and to "imitate—or impersonate—the speakers of a dialogue." For a comprehensive discussion of ancient evidence relating to Plato's dialogues as performance texts (either for recitation or theatrical performance), see Charalabopoulos 2001. For dramatic elements in Plato's work, see Tarrant 1955.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding these choices, see Notopoulos (1938:478): "The memory which Plato advocates, it will be seen, is not the memory of the written word, which is simply a static and retentive memory, but the creative memory of the oral literature which is vital and synonymous with thinking itself" and Ferrari (1987:214): "what matters most is that we do philosophy rather than merely go for its effects, follow Socrates rather than Phaedrus." Also see Sayre (1988:108-9) for the view that Plato's dialogues invite the reader's active participation in the discovery of the truth.

in daily conversation (as Plato depicted) or in writing (as in Plato's own) and on such occasions a considerable degree of departure from the texts was permitted, though the sense of the "fixed" text evidently existed.

Further evidence suggests that education in Plato's day largely consisted of memorizing Homer. That education then furnished some (such as Plato and Socrates) with the ability to spin out a line or two in hexameter verse. It is likely that the internalized rhythmic patterns have a certain momentum that facilitates words to come out in verse, a process that the Greeks might have associated with inspiration. Cross-cultural evidence also seems to be consistent with the observation that memorization is at the basis of "inspired" poetic creativity.

From the *Phaedrus* we can also learn that orators delivered their speeches live even when they had the option of composing and keeping the text in writing or reading from a written text. The mode of reception, however, is varied. It is acknowledged that the author's live performance is the ideal since the audience can pose questions directly to the author. Members of the audience may try to memorize as much of the speech as they can and pass that on to another audience orally, or obtain its written text and either learn it by heart to deliver it or to read the text out for themselves or for others. In other words, literary texts, both poetic and rhetorical, are primarily something to be performed, something to be brought to life with the help of living voice. This is undoubtedly the habit that Plato could count on in his contemporary readership when he wrote his philosophical dialogues. Plato's dialogues are like Homer's poetry or Lysias' speeches in this respect, though they are not meant for mere oral reproduction of "fixed" texts, but rather to invite and inspire living performances of philosophy.

*The Open University*

### References

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Charalabopoulos 2001 | Nikolaos Charalabopoulos. "The Stagecraft of Plato: The Platonic Dialogue as Metatheatrical Prose Drama." Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University. |
| Clay 1992            | Diskin Clay. "Plato's First Words." <i>Yale Classical Studies</i> , 29:113-29.  |
| de Jong 1999         | Irene J. F. de Jong, ed. <i>Homer: Critical Assessments</i> . Vol. 4. London: Routledge.  |

- Detienne 1996 Marcel Detienne. *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*. Trans. by Janet Lloyd. New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Orig. publ. as *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque*, 1967).
- Diels 1952 Hermann Diels. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Rev. by Walther Kranz. Berlin.
- Dodds 1951 Eric R. Dodds. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Edelstein 1966 Ludwig Edelstein. *Plato's Seventh Letter*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ferrari 1987 Giovanni R. F. Ferrari. *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Finnegan 1988 Ruth Finnegan. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gagarin 1999 Michael Gagarin. "The Orality of Greek Oratory." In *Signs of Orality: The Oral Tradition and Its Influence in the Greek and Roman World*. Ed. by E. Anne Mackay. Leiden: Brill. pp. 163-80.
- Gentili 1988 Bruno Gentili. *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece: From Homer to the Fifth Century*. Trans. by A. Thomas Cole. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hall 1998 Edith Hall. "Literature and Performance." In *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece*. Ed. by Paul Cartledge. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 219-49.
- Hamilton 1973 Walter Hamilton, trans. *Plato: Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Harris 1989 William V. Harris. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Havelock 1963 Eric A. Havelock. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hornblower and Spawforth 1996 Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds. "Alphabet, Greek" and "Rhapsodes." In their *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 66 and pp. 1311-12.

- Hughes-Freeland 1997 Felicia Hughes-Freeland. "Consciousness in Performance: A Javanese Theory." *Social Anthropology*, 5:55-68.
- Labarbe 1949 Jules Labarbe. *L'Homère de Platon*. Liège: Faculté de philosophie et lettres.
- Lord 1960 Albert Bates Lord. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Rev. ed. 2000.)
- Macleod 1999 Colin W. Macleod. "Homer on Poetry and the Poetry of Homer." In de Jong 1999:42-56. (Orig. publ. in 1983.)
- Maehler 1999 Herwig Maehler. "The Singer in the *Odyssey*." In de Jong 1999: 6-20. (Orig. publ. in German in 1963.)
- Murray 1992 Penelope Murray. "Inspiration and Mimêsis in Plato." In *The Language of the Cave*. Ed. by Andrew Barker and Martin Warner. *Aperion*, 25. Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing. pp. 27-46.
- Murray 1996 \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Plato on Poetry: Ion, Republic 376e-398b, Republic 595-608b*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murray 1999 \_\_\_\_\_. "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece." In de Jong 1999:21-41. (Orig. publ. in 1981.)
- Nehamas and Woodruff 1995 Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, trans. *Plato: Phaedrus*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Nicholson 1999 Graeme Nicholson. *Plato's Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- North 1952 Helen North. "The Use of Poetry in the Training of the Ancient Orator." *Traditio*, 8:1-33.
- Notopoulos 1938 James A. Notopoulos. "Mnemosyne in Oral Literature." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 69:465-93.
- Ong 1988 Walter J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge. (First publ. 1982.)
- Rowe 2000 Christopher J. Rowe. *Plato: Phaedrus*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips. Rev. ed. (First publ. 1986.)

- Ryle 1966                      Gilbert Ryle. *Plato's Progress*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Saunders 1987                 Trevor J. Saunders, trans. *Plato: Early Socratic Dialogues*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Sayre 1988                     Kenneth M. Sayre. "Plato's Dialogues in Light of the *Seventh Letter*." In *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*. Ed. by Charles L. Griswold, Jr. London: Routledge. pp. 93-109.
- Sheid and Svenbro 1996     John Sheid and Jesper Svenbro. "The Cloak of Phaedrus: The Prehistory of the 'Text' in Greece." In their *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric*. Trans. by Carol Volk. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 111-30.
- Sperduti 1950                 Alice Sperduti. "The Divine Nature of Poetry in Antiquity." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 81:209-40.
- Tarrant 1955                 Dorothy Tarrant. "Plato as Dramatist." *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 75:82-89.
- Thomas 1989                 Rosalind Thomas. *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas 1992                 \_\_\_\_\_. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas 2003                 \_\_\_\_\_. "Prose Performance Texts: *Epideixis* and Written Publication in the Late Fifth and Early Fourth Centuries." In *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*. Ed. by Harvey Yunis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 162-88.
- Tigerstedt 1969              Eugène N. Tigerstedt. *Plato's Idea of Poetical Inspiration*. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennicae.
- Verdenius 1970              Willem J. Verdenius. "Homer, The Educator of the Greeks." *Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, 33:3-27.
- von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1920     Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. *Platon*. Berlin: Weidmann.

- Wallace 1997                      Robert W. Wallace. "Poet, Public, and 'Theatrocracy': Audience Performance in Classical Athens." In *Poet, Public and Performance in Ancient Greece*. Ed. by Lowell Edmunds and Robert W. Wallace. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. pp. 97-111.
- Weineck 1998                      Silke-Maria Weineck. "Talking about Homer: Poetic Madness, Philosophy, and the Birth of Criticism in Plato's *Ion*." *Arethusa*, 31:19-42.

## Shellac, Bakelite, Vinyl, and Paper: Artifacts and Representations of North Indian Art Music [\*eCompanion at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org)]

Lalita du Perron and Nicolas Magriel

### Introduction

Short songs in dialects of Hindi are the basis for improvisation in all the genres of North Indian classical vocal music. These songs, *bandishes*, constitute a central pillar of North Indian culture, spreading well beyond the geographic frontiers of Hindi itself. Songs are significant as being the only aspect of North Indian music that is “fixed” and handed down via oral tradition relatively intact. They are regarded as the core of Indian art music because they encapsulate the melodic structures upon which improvisation is based. In this paper we aim to look at some issues raised by the idiosyncrasies of written representations of songs as they have occurred within the Indian cultural milieu, and then at issues that have emerged in the course of our own ongoing efforts to represent *khyāl* songs from the perspectives of somewhat “insidish outsiders.”

*Khyāl*, the focus of our current research, has been the prevalent genre of vocal music in North India for some 200 years. *Khyāl* songs are not defined by written representations, but are transmitted orally, committed to memory, and re-created through performance. A large component of our current project<sup>1</sup> has been the transcription of 430 songs on the basis of detailed listening to commercial recordings that were produced during the period 1903-75, aspiring to a high degree of faithfulness to the details of specific performance instances. The shellac, bakelite, and vinyl records with

---

<sup>1</sup> An AHRB-funded (Arts and Humanities Research Board) project, “Songs of North Indian Art Music” (SNIAM), carried out by the two authors in the Department of Music at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In the present article, where the first-person singular is used, it refers in discussions about text and language to Lalita du Perron and in musical discussions to Nicolas Magriel.

which we are working are among the most outstanding artifacts of twentieth-century Indian musical culture.

Published representations of Indian art songs have typically been skeletal abstractions, only loosely related to actual performance practice. This phenomenon is to some extent exemplary of the gulf between theory and practice in the Indian musical tradition. The written representations found in Indian music books are neither thoroughly descriptive nor successfully prescriptive. There is usually not enough detail to approximate the features of actual performance, some of the symbols are used inconsistently, and neither the performance instances nor the name of the performers are identified, so there is no possibility of verification by comparison with live or recorded musical examples. Similarly, in terms of prescriptiveness, these transcriptions supply only vague guidelines for performance: important stylistic information such as tempo, the details of ornamentation, and the scope for variation are omitted. On occasion written representations have been misleading, inconsistent with the realities of performance practice and significantly colored by personal and social exigencies.

Traditionally, reading music has not had a significant role in either performance or musical pedagogy; in fact, it seems probable that previous to the published codifying of music that took place during the twentieth century, the use of the *sargam* syllables (*Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni*) was not a common feature of either performance or musical pedagogy. We learned from one of his students that Mallikarjun Mansur, one of the great singers of the twentieth century, had difficulty following *sargam* syllables and never used them in the course of teaching. My (Nicolas Magriel's) teacher, the eminent vocalist and music scholar Dilip Chandra Vedi, likened the use of *sargam* in performance, a widespread contemporary practice, to spelling. "If you're making a speech, you don't spell out every word!" he used to exclaim.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Oral Tradition and Musical Representation**

Hindustani art music is an oral tradition. Music has always been learned by imitation. To this day, in the traditional teaching setting, notes are almost never written down, although song-texts are sometimes written down, and these serve to some extent as associative triggers for the recall of melodies. Teaching exclusively by example ensures that music is imbibed in

---

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication, Delhi, 1978.

the deepest levels of a future performer's being, his most corporeal memories. In its heyday Indian art music had little of the self-consciousness that can be associated with the "creating" of art and the "image" of an artist. For traditional hereditary musicians, even today, music is just what they do, one of the things they do—like talking or eating.

Oral tradition ensured the exclusivity of musical knowledge, keeping it securely in the hands of hereditary musicians, predominantly Muslim, who were employed in the courts where they entertained, taught their disciples, and sometimes innovated and enriched the collective musical repertoire. *Khyāl* developed in this courtly context, which by the end of the nineteenth century was widely perceived as decadent and disreputable.<sup>3</sup>

In the early years of the twentieth century, the nationalist movement inspired a renaissance of interest in traditional performing arts reflected in a widespread appropriation of these arts as symbols of national pride. Efforts were made to "clean up" these arts, especially to disentangle them from the stigma of courtesan culture. In the musical realm, a trend was set in place whereby the educated middle classes perceived themselves as rescuing music from the exclusive world of hereditary musicians and the morally suspect realm of the courtesan's salon. This trend was inspirational to much of the paramount musical scholarship of the twentieth century.

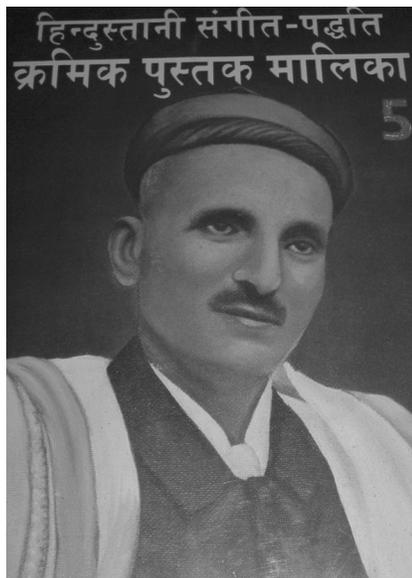


Figure 1: Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande

---

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of this situation, see du Perron 2000, Kippen 1988, and Bor 1986/1987.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Maharashtrian lawyer Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande endeavored to revitalize and democratize the North Indian musical milieu by codifying contemporary music theory, establishing a standardized system of musical notation, and collecting some 2,000 songs that were published in the six-volume *Kramik Pustak Mālikā* (1917-1936; see Bhatkhande 1970). It is a monumental work that for the first time brought songs that had been the closely guarded property of hereditary traditions into the public domain.

Bhatkhande's accomplishments reign supreme in the theoretical canon of Hindustani music. He is, nevertheless, widely accused of having distorted musical material so as to bring it into line with his theories. His representations of song texts are often inaccurate, partially because he was not himself a native Hindi speaker. The texts of many songs were altered so as to excise those aspects perceived as being vulgar and render them more appropriate for teaching to respectable people. And the words are represented phonetically without indication as to where one word ends and the next begins; they are not presented as discrete poems, separate from the music. This appears to indicate scant regard for the poetic or cultural value of the texts themselves.

Song transcriptions in the works of Bhatkhande and in those of other pedagogues such as Maula Baksh, Vishnu Digambar Paluskar, Mirasi Bua, and Vinayak Rao Patwardhan are abstractions; an *idea* of each song is communicated. Attempts at thoroughly descriptive notation have not occurred. This to some extent represents a trend in Indian thought that sees the idea of something as being more real or more important than the thing itself. Many of Bhatkhande's notations are simplified and "regularized," rendering them useful for teaching relatively disengaged pupils in music schools, but unhelpful for communicating the dynamics, ornamentation, and syncopation that characterize actual performance. The exigencies of musical style are left free to be determined by the training and imagination of each musician who uses these books.

Every *khyāl* composition in Bhatkhande's work is presented in the bipartite form of *sthāyī* followed by *antarā*; this is not entirely consistent with performance practice during the last 100 years. Many of the compositions on the recordings with which we are working comprise only one section—a *sthāyī*. Some of the musicians with whom we have worked in India speak of a *sthāyī* as a kind of complete composition, as a stand-alone entity embodying a *rāg* (melody type) and a concise poetic statement. In some nineteenth-century literature entire songs are identified as being *sthāyīs*. Beside the possibility that *sthāyī* was sometimes seen as a genre in

its own right, known reasons for omitting the *antarā* were economization of time (particularly in the case of three-minute 78 rpm recordings), a desire to hide the *antarā* (protecting intellectual property), or simply that singers did not know or had forgotten *antarās*.<sup>4</sup> Omitting the singing of an *antarā* grew more common in the second half of the twentieth century as a result of an

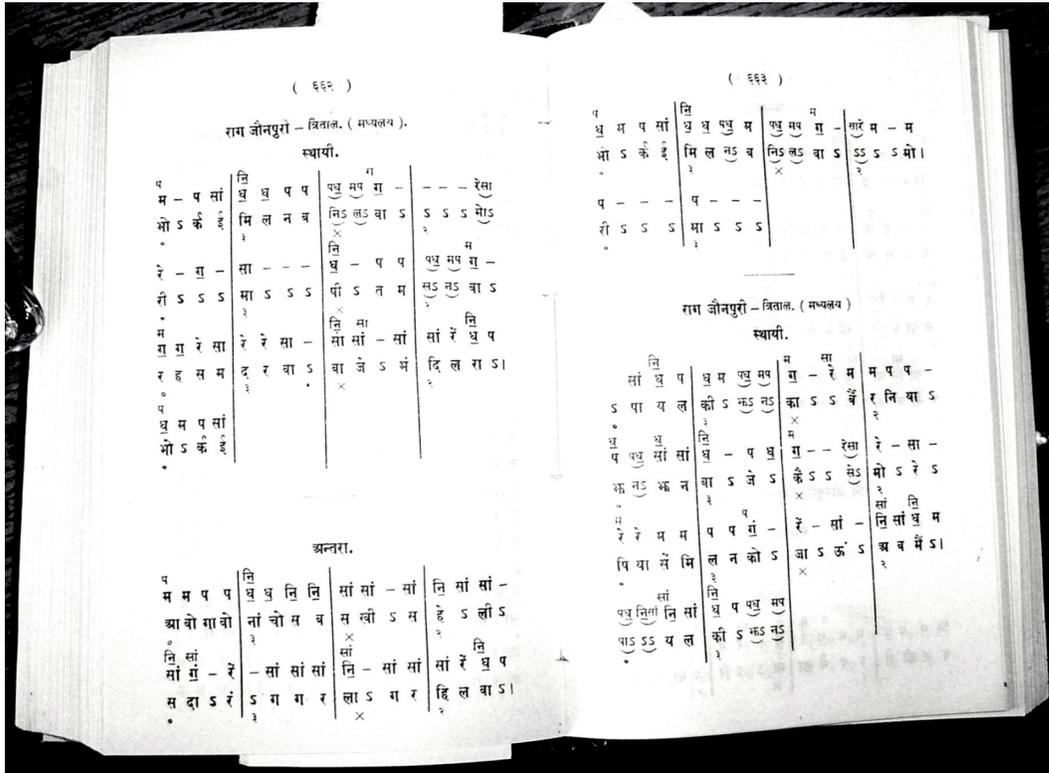


Figure 2. A typical page in Bhatkhande's *Kramik Pustak Mālikā*, showing both halves (*sthāyī* and *antarā*) of one song and the first half of another song, both in "Rāg Jaunpurī." The song text is represented syllabically underneath the notes, but not as a discrete poem separate from the music. Each pair of lines on the page (music and text) comprises one cycle of the rhythmic cycle, in this case the sixteen-beat *tāl tīntāl*. Each column represents one of the four four-beat divisions of the *tāl* (time cycle). In these examples, Bhatkhande has started the first poetic line at the left side of the page; the first beat of the *tāl* cycle, the *sam*, is marked by X in the middle of the page.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the most prominent singers of the twentieth century, particularly those from the Kirana and Patiala *gharānās*, either began their careers as accompanists or were descended from instrumentalists who accompanied vocal music on the bowed *sāraṅgī*. It is commonly said that these artists were particularly ignorant of songtexts, especially the texts of *antarās*, which are typically sung only once, without repetition, in performance.

increased bias towards pure melodic improvisation rather than text-based improvisation. We have observed that *antarās* included obligatorily are sometimes of lesser poetic interest than the *sthāyīs* with which they are paired, and can even be unrelated in meaning. This raises the question of what Lalita du Perron (2000) dubbed “floating *antarās*” and what the eminent musician and scholar Amit Mukerji refers to as “*sarkārī*” (“government”) *antarās*.<sup>5</sup>

### Poetry on Paper

Even though traditional Indian musicians are unlikely to write down songs at the time of their learning, they may write the song texts later to supplement memory and for posterity. Modern music students who have been trained to use writing as a means of study in the contemporary education system commonly write down the lyrics of the compositions they are learning. A typical format of transcription is to write down the name of the *rāg* or melody type at the top of the page followed by the basic scale or tonal material of the *rāg*. The page is then divided into two sections, one for each part of the song—*sthāyī* and *antarā*. The words of the song are dictated by the teacher and written down by the students. This usually occurs at the very outset of learning the composition so that the students are familiarized in advance with the entire text that they will be singing.

My (Lalita du Perron’s) teacher Girija Devi is a popular singer of both *khyāl* and *ṭhumrī* and a native Hindi speaker from Benares in North India. Many of her pupils come from regions of India outside of what is known as the Hindi-belt. Some of the sounds of Hindi may prove as treacherous for Indian non-Hindi speakers as they are for foreigners. It is not always easy for students to follow the teacher’s dictation and get the words down on paper correctly. Furthermore, almost all North Indian songs are composed in one or a mixture of Hindi’s many regional dialects, and even native speakers of standard Hindi may find themselves lost when confronted with the poetic idiom commonly used in musical texts. When a student has written down the wrong word or phrase, this is usually picked up upon during singing practice, and the student is corrected. However, at this point the student does not necessarily make the correction in writing, for the written text is no more than a superficial *aide-memoire*, and s/he is by this time engaged in the process of vocalizing and trying to follow the teacher’s utterances. Hence

---

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication, Mumbai, January 2005.

the many notebooks that are treasure troves of Hindustani song texts are not necessarily reliable repositories of lyrics; in personal songbooks inaccuracies are likely to be perpetuated and compounded, further proliferating the “Chinese whispers”-like phenomenon that already characterizes the oral transmission of songtexts.

In the course of my research I have seen dozens of singers’ and music students’ personal songbooks. Peoples’ attitudes towards their songbooks vary: some just give you their book, pen, and paper for copying, and go off to make tea. Others flick through their books for ages looking for a song that—to be generous—they may feel to be a real gem or—less generously—they consider uninteresting enough to pass on to a foreigner.

While working through songbooks I have also found that, perhaps seemingly paradoxically, the more educated vocalists in the urban centers of India have more of what we could tentatively call “mistakes” in their texts. By “mistakes” I mean phrases or words that do not make very much sense. A good example of such linguistic confusion is a text in “Rāg Toḍī”: “laṅgara kaṅkariyā jina māro” (“rascal, do not throw pebbles”). The word *jina*, an adverb meaning “do not,” is used in conjunction with an imperative verb, in this example *māro* (“throw”). Although this adverb is common in the dialects, it does not exist in Modern Standard Hindi. A well-educated vocalist and music teacher in Mumbai assured us that the text read “laṅgara kaṅkariyā jī na māro,” in which the adverb *jina* had become *jī* (“Sir”) and *na* (“not”). When I suggested the text should include the word *jina*, I was disdainfully told: “There is no such word.” At such a moment being a foreign researcher can be problematic. I felt it would be rude to point out to a well-respected and established scholar that there are dozens of Hindi dialects in which *jina* is a perfectly normal adverb. By contrast, traditional musicians without scholarly inclinations have much less trouble with the dialects of the texts because they already tend to be more comfortable with Hindi in its non-standard forms.

Published representations of song texts are often compromised by the fact that the people interested in writing down song texts from performance are most often educated musicologists who are not necessarily able to grasp the idiom in which most songs are written, since they are neither linguistically equipped nor from their own backgrounds familiar with Hindi dialects. They may have religious or political agendas that color their semantic perceptions, and, after all, they are primarily interested in the musical aspect of performance.

Bhatkhande himself was not a native speaker of Hindi and, as previously mentioned, did not provide song lyrics separate from the isolated

syllables that sit below the notation. It can therefore be difficult to decipher the texts, as is illustrated by the following oft-quoted, although admittedly facetious, example of a text in the “Rāg Mālkauns”: *paga lāgana de mahārāj* (“let me touch your feet, king”). Reading this sequence of syllables somewhat differently, the text could be interpreted as *pagalā gande mahārāj* (“crazy dirty king”), which is certainly not the text as originally composed.

One issue that arises when a performed genre is transcribed is the question of what actually constitutes a “line.” In many songs, the poetic line (insofar as it can be identified) often does not run concurrent with the musical line as defined by one cycle of the *tāl* (a time cycle). It is certainly the case that the act of writing impinges upon the ambiguity that is an inherent part of an oral tradition. A line of writing on a page suggests a “fixity” that is simply not there in performance. When there is a strong final rhyme-scheme the issue of lines becomes slightly easier to disentangle, as one may assume the rhyming words to appear at the end of a line. However, in a genre like *khyāl* where the primary unit is usually a word or short phrase, much recourse to mid-sentence or leonine rhyme can also be encountered.

Although there is no prescribed format to adhere to when writing down the words of a song, there do appear to be conventions that are followed in private notebooks and published anthologies alike. These conventions seem to dictate that repetitions occurring in performance should not be written down, and that most lines should be of more or less the same length as the first line. The length of the first line then becomes an important factor in deciding the shape of the written text. Where there is a rhyme scheme, it can dictate a template for the shape of the lines, but often there is only limited rhyme, which does not necessarily clarify the shape of the written text. However, the first line of most texts is readily identifiable, as it is the dominant line that is subject to frequent repetition in performance, particularly in the case of the medium- and fast-tempo *khyāls* in which improvisation is always built around and punctuated by repetitions of the first line.

I have identified three prominent contingencies for the interaction between poetic text and *tāl*:<sup>6</sup>

1) Songs in which the *sam* (the first beat of the *tāl*) falls on a poetically meaningful word, for instance:

---

<sup>6</sup> These conditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

“Rāg Yaman Kalyān,” performed by Bhimsen Joshi:  
*e rī ālī piyā bina* (“hey my friend, without my lover”)  
 The *sam* is on *pi* of *piyā* (“lover”). Consequently the vowel becomes lengthened in performance.

“Rāg Gauḍ Sāraṅg,” performed by D. V. Paluskar :  
*piyu pala na lāgī morī ākhiyā* (“love, I don’t get a moment’s rest”)  
 The *sam* is on *lā* of *lāgī* (“get”).

“Rāg Dhanāsrī,” performed by Vilayat Hussain Khan:  
*tero dhyāna dharata hū dina raina* (“I focus my attention on you night and day”)  
 The *sam* is on *dhyā* of *dhyāna* (“attention”).

## 2) Songs in which the *sam* falls on a syllable that would not have stress in written poetry:

“Rāg Durgā,” performed by Mallikarjun Mansur:  
*catura sugbara āvo re* (“clever beautiful one, please come”)  
 The *sam* is on *ra* of *sugbara* (“beautiful”).

“Rāg Mārū Bihāg,” performed by Bhimsen Joshi:  
*tarapata raina dina* (“I toss and turn day and night”)  
 The *sam* is on *na* of *dina* (“day”). The vowel lengthens in performance.

## 3) Songs in which the *sam* falls in the middle of a verb:

“Rāg Darbārī Kānaḍa,” performed by Amir Khan:  
*kina bairana kāna bhare* (“what enemy of mine is telling you things?”  
 [literally “filling your ears”])  
 The *sam* is on *re* of *bhare* (“filling”).

“Rāg Chāyanaṭ,” performed by Omkarnath Thakur:  
*bharī gagarī morī ḍhurakāī chaila* (“that rascal threw down my full waterpot”)  
 The *sam* is on *kā* of *ḍhurakāī* (“threw down”).

“Rāg Hamīr,” performed by D. V. Paluskar:  
*surajhā rahī hū* (“I am getting tangled up”)  
 The *sam* is on *jhā* of *surajhā* (“tangled”), in this case part of a verbal phrase. (We consider this composition in its entirety later).

It is also common to find that a word or phrase relating semantically to the first line is part of the second musical line or vice versa. For instance, in the text in “Rāg Kedār”—“tum sugbara catura baiyā, pakarata ho bālamā” (“you are beautiful and clever, catching hold of my arm, lover”)—the word

for “arm” (*baiyā*) is in the first line of music although it semantically belongs to the second line. In performance this actually makes for quite odd listening as it sounds as if the “arm” is being addressed in the continuously repeated phrase “you are beautiful and clever, arm.” At one stage in an early listening, a singer with whom we were working wondered if the word should not be *bhaiyā* (“brother”), but that option was soon discarded as unsuitable to the romantic overtones of the lyrics. In any case, the confusion was resolved when the word *pakarata* (“catching hold”) appeared.

Some singers are, by their own admission, not particularly poetically oriented; others sometimes denigrate the poetic value of the lyrics that they perform. The lyrics’ suitability to *khyāl* is often cited as lying in a particularly appealing combination of vowels and consonants (especially as found in the Braj Bhāṣa dialect of Hindi) rather than in either the content or composition of the poetry. In the last 50 years it has become fashionable to perform *vilambit* (“slow”) compositions at extremely slow tempos—as slow as eleven beats a minute. At such a speed the words’ syllables are delivered in such a disjointed fashion that much of their syntactic and poetic value is lost, so it is not surprising if singers emphasize a text’s aural value more than its poetic value. The ultimate cavalier attitude to song texts was nicely expressed by one famous singer when asked how he coped if he forgot a song’s *antarā* in mid-performance. “I just sing my phone number” he replied.<sup>7</sup>

There are of course instances when the singer really does not care, and also perceives the audience to be similarly uninterested in the poetic significance of the text being performed. The following story suggests that this is, at least partially, a matter of education, illustrative of the idea that “the public gets what the public wants.” In January 2003 I had been working on song-texts with Sunanda Sharma, a Delhi-based vocalist. At an evening concert in Amritsar in March of the same year she decided, perhaps inspired by our work, to announce the lyrics of the *khyāl* she was about to perform, and to explain the meaning and context. This is not common practice: most vocalists either do not mention the words of a composition at all or mention the first line by way of identification. Sunanda’s efforts, however, turned out to be enthusiastically received by the audience. The next day, when she gave another concert, she did not refer to the words of the song, and began her exposition having simply announced the name of the *rāg*. The audience stopped her performance, demanding to know what the lyrics were and what

---

<sup>7</sup> Vidyadhar Vyas related this anecdote at a Seminar on Musical Forms, National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai, January 2003.

they meant.<sup>8</sup> After the concert she expressed her amazement and delight at the audience's sudden interest in poetry, and decided that she would from then on include a brief discussion of the lyrics of songs in her performances.

Although both musician and audience can engage actively and enthusiastically with the lyrics of a *khyāl* text, the fact remains that in musical performance, poetry is of secondary importance. In *khyāl* the text is subservient to the music, and although the words may help set the mood they are not what “makes” a performance. How, then, do we address this fact in our transcription? To be sure, when we see three or four lines of poetry on a page we are drawn into a relationship with the words that is not necessarily representative of what these words mean to a performer. The relationship between lyrics and performance in *khyāl* makes us question the applicability of valuations of the weighting of individual words, as conventionally applied to written poetry. In *khyāl* the word or short phrase is the predominant unit. Representing a song-text on paper is potentially misleading as the textual symmetry on the page is rarely mirrored in performance.

What do vocalists do with the words of the song they are performing? The clarity of enunciation in performance varies from the researcher's dream text, clearly enunciated and intelligible, to garbled and seemingly confused deliveries. Sometimes, when the words are particularly unclear, it is difficult to glean whether a phrase consists of freeflowing improvisation or an actually meaningful sequence of words. Two contrasting reasons emerge for why singers place a low premium on enunciation: in a climate in which, due to the opening of music schools and the publication of music books, music was already being disseminated beyond its traditional realm, musicians were reluctant to make their song repertoires freely available to anyone who could purchase a disc, or even those who could listen to a disc on the radio—the medium via which the early phonographic industry exerted its greatest influence. Many artists either truncated their performances (for instance, by omitting *antarās*) or mumbled the words of songs so that they could not be gleaned from the recording. In the case of female vocalists, a gender-specific situation emerges. By emphasizing their serious interest in the musical abstractions of *khyāl* and denigrating the importance of words, the “new”

---

<sup>8</sup> The lyrics of *khyāl* are to a certain extent comprehensible to speakers of modern Hindi, but the Hindi dialectic in which they are written often necessitates some clarification. In this particular case the audience would have been linguistically disadvantaged by being predominantly Panjabi-speakers. Audiences in Bengal and Maharashtra, two of the states of India with thriving North Indian musical cultures, are also disadvantaged in understanding these songs by not having Hindi as their first language.

women artists distinguished themselves from the courtesans who actively engaged with their texts and acted them out while batting their eyelids at their patrons. By way of contrast, those vocalists who enunciated song lyrics clearly may have done so out of a desire to display their erudition and distinguish themselves from the stereotype of the uneducated and somewhat bawdy hereditary musician.

Typically the structure of *khyāl* performance is that the memorized song is performed in its entirety at the outset. This is followed by gradually accelerating melodic improvisations that return periodically to iterations of the song's first line. One of the anomalies with which we are working is that sometimes a singer presents almost none of a song's wording at the time of its "intact" presentation, but then proceeds to deliver melodic improvisations that confidently articulate the entire song-text. In our endeavor to represent the song's performance, should we transcribe the song as sung or the song as we conjecture it would be were the entire text to be included? The latter consideration will be reserved for the analytical section. We deem it more important that our song collection reflect the realities of performance practice than that we produce a neat standardized anthology of songs.

### **Music on Paper**

The techniques and functions of musical transcription have long been a subject for heated debate among ethnomusicologists. What is the purpose of notation? Should it as accurately as possible represent what actually happens in a musical performance in terms of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics? Or should it describe what is likely to have been taking place in the performer's mind, representing not the sound itself but the cognitive basis for the sound, those aural events that are intellectually significant to the performer himself? Should it represent sound in such a way as to communicate a clear picture to the educated outsider, an aid for achieving some understanding of an alien musical culture, or is it important that transcriptions be understood and verified by members of the musical culture that produced the sounds being studied? Is transcription primarily a way of memorializing past performances or a way of potentiating future ones? Is our intended audience made up of musicians, scholars, or the general public? Which is more important: accuracy of detail or accessibility?

While Indian music books offer skeletal abstractions of songs, we are dedicated to showing what actually happens in performance, including a good measure of stylistic nuance; hence I (Nicolas Magriel) am constantly

negotiating the somewhat problematic interface between what Indian musicians actually do and our understanding of what they *think* they are doing, the parameters according to which music occurs in their minds. I also must continuously reappraise the balance between accuracy (sometimes very complicated) and readability (sometimes unduly abstract) as I transcribe and retranscribe one song after another.

The main drawback of all notation systems in representing Indian music is that, whether one uses *sargam* or dots on a staff, there is a tendency to boil the music down to discrete pitches and discrete durations. The broader, more complex tonemes (to use Van der Meer's term),<sup>9</sup> which are the real units of Indian musical cognition, encompass not only sustained pitches but also the slides and touches by which those pitches are approached. Representing these tonemes via the analogue of discrete tones has an inevitably reductive effect on how people conceptualize the music. The linking of notes via subtle manipulations of the infinite gradations of inter-tonal space is the emotional essence of Indian music, the focal-point of pathos without which the music becomes a rather dull one-dimensional exercise—considering also that there is none of the harmonic and textural variety that sustains Western art music. So it is regrettable that even the Indian *sargam* system of notation has no facility for representing the ever-present sliding tones of Indian music.

Because our present study should have great relevance and usefulness for musicians and scholars associated with the art music tradition of North India, we have chosen to utilize a modified form of *sargam* notation. The modifications that I have introduced enhance *sargam*'s accuracy with regard to time values, the details of ornamentation, and the balance between sound and silence in musical performance. The musical examples in this article are executed in a cipher analogue of *sargam* notation.<sup>10</sup>

Nowadays *sargam* syllables are an important element of melodic cognition, and are often present in a musician's mind at the time of performance: there is a psychological unity between the syllable and the relative pitch that it designates. To represent Indian music without employing *sargam* syllables would exclude native musicians and scholars from understanding, utilizing, or being able to criticize our work, and would render our work accessible to only a pitifully small group of outside

---

<sup>9</sup> "Visions of Music," unpublished paper presented at ESEM (European Seminar in Ethnomusicology) conference, Vienna 2003.

<sup>10</sup> My musicological work has necessitated the creation of three fonts: one for *sargam*, one for its cipher analogue, and a matching one for text.

scholars. We have found that fully uninitiated Western scholars are able to learn the note nomenclature of Indian music in an hour or two, so they will not be unduly handicapped by our approach.

One paramount drawback of staff notation in representing Indian song compositions is that it does not easily lend itself to a cyclical representation of time. As we have seen in Figure 2, in the prevalent form of Indian notation each cycle of the *tāl* occupies one line. In accord with the sixteen-beat *tāl*, *tīntāl*, the page is divided into four columns, each representing a four-beat *vibhāg* or division of the *tāl*. All *vibhāgs* are equal in duration; hence this system supplies us with a very clear visual analogue of the passage of time as well as of the cyclical nature of the music. Staff notation, by way of contrast, relies entirely on the note heads and beams to indicate durations: a measure containing a whole note (breve) is visually much shorter than a measure containing four quarter notes (crochets) although it is equal in duration. Furthermore, modern software for generating staff notation, although extraordinarily complex and sophisticated in many ways, stubbornly resists being manipulated into supplying equal-sized measures or fixed numbers of measures per line. It is also unable to automatically generate the measures of complex time signatures, for instance the alternate measures of two and four beats required by the common ten-beat *tāl*, *jhaptāl*.

In ethnomusicological works, and in some modern Western art music, sliding between notes (*mīṇḍ*) has commonly been represented by a diagonal line between two note-heads. The disadvantage of this system is that the diagonal line has no time value of its own. If, for instance, it connects two minims, we have no way of knowing whether the slide begins at the inception of the first minim, or halfway through its duration, or at the beginning of the second minim's duration, and we have no way of knowing whether the slide stabilizes on the second tone at the beginning, middle, or end of the second minim. I have made some, albeit imperfect, headway in solving this problem, by enclosing in parentheses the notes or the dashes that indicate prolongation. The following table represents such contingencies with regard to a slide from *Re* to *Ga*, between the second and third degrees of a *śuddh* (major) scale. Each example comprises four beats. The individual beats are separated by spaces. Each beat can be subdivided into any number of notes or prolongations. I have utilized the Western slur symbol to unite notes that are sung within the same syllable of text.

2 — 3 —	2 and 3 are sung in separate syllables—not linked.
$\overbrace{2 \quad \text{—} \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	2 and 3 are linked by the same syllable; transition is rapid.
$\overbrace{2 \quad (\text{—}) \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	The second half of 2's duration is occupied by a slide up to 3.
$\overbrace{2(\text{—} \quad \text{—}) \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	Three quarters of 2's duration is occupied by a slide up to 3.
$\overbrace{2 \quad \text{—}(\text{—}) \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	One quarter of 2's duration is occupied by a slide up to 3.
$\overbrace{2 \quad \text{—} \quad (\text{—})3 \quad \text{—}}$	One quarter of 3's duration is occupied by a slide from 2.
$\overbrace{2 \quad \text{—} \quad (\text{—}) \quad 3}$	2 is stable for two beats; one beat is occupied by the slide to 3.
$\overbrace{(2 \quad \text{—} \quad ) \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	Nearly all of 2's duration is occupied by a slow slide up to 3.

Figure 3. Representations of various slides from the note 2 to the note 3

This system gains further specificity by representing smaller divisions of the beats and intermediary semitones as in the following examples:

$\overbrace{2 \quad (\text{—}) \quad 3 \quad \text{—}}$	2 is stable for a quarter beat; the slide stabilizes on the 3rd beat.
$\overbrace{\underline{2} \quad \text{—} \quad (\text{—}) \quad 3}$	A slide occupies the 3rd beat and three quarters of the final beat.
$\overbrace{2 \quad (\text{—} \quad \text{---}) \quad 3}$	2 and 3 are stable, each for a quarter beat, at the beginning and end.
$\overbrace{2 \quad (\text{—} \quad \underline{3}) \quad 3}$	Slide accelerates when it reaches the region of flattened 3.
$\overbrace{2 \quad (\underline{3} \quad \text{—}) \quad 3}$	Slide decelerates taking longer to cover the semitone from $\underline{3}$ to 3.

Figure 4. More complex representations of slides from the note 2 to the note 3

In the last two examples above, the flattened third degree (identified by an underscore) serves as a signpost in mid-slide, indicating the point at which the slide has covered a half of its whole-tone distance. Because it is enclosed in parentheses, the reader understands that  $\underline{3}$  does not represent a discrete stable tone—just a tendency to linger in the neighborhood of that tone. This innovation in *sargam* notation gives an indication of the acceleration and deceleration of the slides that connect tones in Indian music, and this is crucial for conveying something of the music's emotional flavor. The following figure summarizes:

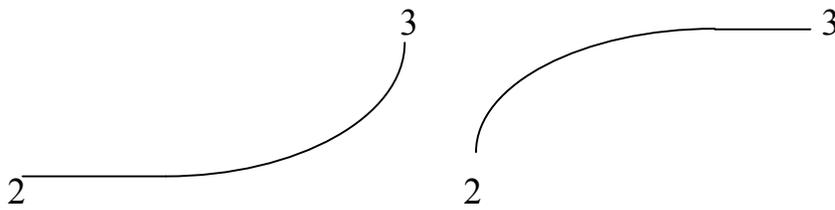


Figure 5. Contrasting curves of sliding steps between two pitches

Does a slide linger close to the first tone, then ascend rapidly to the second, or does it move abruptly up to the region of the second tone and then extract maximum tension from the dissonance of near-unison with that tone? This issue is at the core of *rāg* aesthetics, and although we can do the intricacies of inter-tonal space full justice only by utilizing an electronically generated melodic line, I have found that the above method offers a useful approximation. We can at least attenuate the practice among both Indian and Western scholars of avoiding coming to grips with what is, to my mind, the most seminal feature of Hindustani music.

*Kans* are the small, often rapid “touches” by which notes are approached from above or below. In representing such ornaments, I often have to make decisions that balance rhythmic accuracy with straightforward clarity and emic faithfulness. If I understand a grace note as occupying exactly an eighth of a beat, giving it a distinctly different feeling from a neighboring grace note that occupies a quarter of a beat, and if I deem this different feeling to be musically significant, in some way essential to the gestalt of the song in question, then I am tempted to represent the first as in Figure 6:

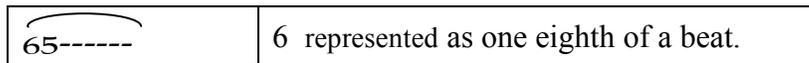


Figure 6

As we have seen earlier, hyphens represent prolongations: we understand clearly that the ornament *Dha* takes up one-eighth of the entire note/beat. The second would be represented as in Figure 7:

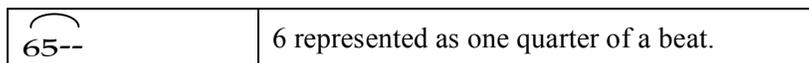


Figure 7

In this example the ornament 6 occupies a quarter of the beat. But this presentation has disadvantages: (1) it is difficult for the uninitiated to read,

(2) it takes up a lot of space,<sup>11</sup> and (3) it is most certainly over-articulated in relation to what is happening in the performer’s mind. The performer probably thinks *Pa* and the rest is a matter of spontaneous “feel”—so even the standard Indian representation shown in Figure 8 could be considered over-detailed.

°5	6 represented as a superscript grace note.
----	--

Figure 8

But this type of representation is a good choice particularly for fast songs where the duration of a rapid ornament is automatically taken care of by “feel.” In fast songs more ponderous ornaments are best accounted for by representing the ornament parenthetically occupying an entire beat (as occurs many times in Figure 11 below). A further useful refinement of the superscript approach is to italicize the superscript ornament when it comes before the beat (as determined by the *tablā* accompaniment); this distinction is mainly relevant to slower compositions.

°5	A rapid approach from the region of 6 occurs just before the beat.
----	--

Figure 9

“Tongues” indicate that a note is approached from above or below from an indistinct or minusculely distant position in tonal space:

°2	2 is approached from an indistinct distance above.
°2	2 is approached from indistinct distance below.
‘2	2 is approached from a tiny distance above.
‘2	2 is approached from a tiny distance below.

Figure 10. “Tongue” ornaments

According to one school of thought, ornamentation is an essential element of style: a composition is inevitably sung in a certain style, but style is not inherent in the song composition itself. This is one important reason why a significant number of professional musicians, even if they can read them

---

<sup>11</sup> As we are portraying songs against the grid of *tāl*, the cyclical rhythms to which the songs are set, each division of the *tāl* must occupy the same amount of space. If most of the notes are unornamented, this approach would leave us with a lot of blank paper and feeling guilty about rainforests.

(which is not always the case), distrust written representations of songs and rarely refer to them. But our primary intention remains to document, as accurately as possible, what songs actually sound like in performance and to document musically important features of the oral tradition that do not normally find their way into print.

The following transcriptions represent unique single instances of performance of each song, so it needs to be emphasized that our intention is not to proffer “correct” versions of song compositions. All manner of ornamentation of the notes, spacing of the words, timing, and a variety of other parameters could be correct according to oral tradition, even according to a single performer’s conception of what is possible. Indeed, the same song might be sung in varying ways within a single performance. An important part of our analytical task involves focusing on the range of variation that we encounter. But by capturing specific instances of performance, we are able to communicate many of the stylistic specialities that individual artists showcase in their treatments of songs. In some cases we have transcribed several artists’ interpretations of the same song. These demonstrate startling degrees of variation both in musical and textual features, and affirm the remarkable fluidity of the oral tradition. This degree of analytical detail is beyond the scope of the present paper, but we would like to offer a few examples of our style of representation, including both music and text.

Most of our transcriptions fit on one page. They are identified by *rāg*, *tāl*, and the name of the performer. The Hindi text is accompanied by an English translation. The note placed just above the song itself includes the range of *mātrās* (“beats”) per minute of the entire performance of the song, the length of the performance in minutes and seconds, the number of *tāl* cycles, and the pitch of the tonic. The two sections of the song follow, presented in the conventional Indian way: one cycle of the *tāl* filling a line, the melody above the song text, and each section divided vertically into *vibhāgs*, divisions of the *tāl*. The first beat of the cycle, *sam*, is marked by an X, and appears at the beginning of the musical line on the page, although the actual musical lines of the song rarely start on the first beat of the cycle. Our first example starts on the fifteenth beat of the cycle.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> A summary of my notation system appears at the end of this article.

*Rāg Hamīr Tīntāl*

D. V. Paluskar

surajhā rahī hū, surajhata nāhī  
 urajhe nainā ko kaise surajhāvū re.  
 gunijana parī prema kī jinako  
 nita uṭha lāge rahe, nita urajhe.

However I try to disentangle myself, it's not  
 Working, how can I unstick eyes that are stuck?  
 Wise folk say: those who fall in love, their eyes  
 keep getting stuck,  
 They keep getting mixed up.

*Sthāyī* ♪ 202-82mpm, 3:26, 46 cycles, E

X	2	o	3
			‡ ‡ 3 4 su ra
(7) 6 — 7 jhā ra	ī — 7 ī hī	(7) 6 (7) 4 hū	56 5 <sup>#</sup> 5: 3 4 su ra
(7) 6 — 7 jhā ra	ī — 7 ī hī	(7) 6 5 - <sup>7</sup> hū	‡ 3 4 5 <sup>u</sup> 5 su ra jha ta
5 6 — — nā	5 <sup>4</sup> 5 5 <sup>6</sup> 5 <sup>4</sup> 5 ā	— (5) 3 4 hī	(-) <sup>2</sup> 2 <sup>7</sup> 4 <sup>3</sup> (3)5 u ra jhe
5 <sup>#</sup> 5 6 5 <sup>4</sup> 5 nai	5 <sup>4</sup> 5 <sup>4</sup> 6 5 <sup>4</sup> 5 nai	(5) 3 — 4 nā	— 2 ‡ 1 ko kai
— 23 45 — se	(5)3 4 2 — su ra	1 — — 2 jhā vū	1 —    3 4 re su ra

*Antarā*

X	2	o	3
‡ ‡ ‡ 4 gu	4 5 — 5 nī ja na	56 54 5 — pa	(5) 3 4 (—) rī
2 1 <sup>7</sup> 34 (7) pre	6 ī — — ma	ī — — — kī	7 ī 7 2 ji na
ī — ‡ 6 ko ni	7 ī — 2 ta u ṭha	ī <sup>7-2</sup> ī 7 ī lā	(7) 6 — 6 <sup>7</sup> ge ra
ī (7) 6 4 he	5 ‡ 5 4 ni ta	5 5 <sup>7</sup> 5 — u ra jhe	( <sup>4</sup> 34) 2    3 4 su ra

Figure 11. “Rāg Hamīr” sung by D. V. Paluskar (GCI: N88100, 1947)

This example is from the academic wing of the *Gwalior gharānā* (stylistic school) of vocal music. The singer D. V. Paluskar was the extraordinarily gifted son of the reformist pedagogue Vishnu Digambar Paluskar. Although replete with an airy buoyant feeling, this rendition is devoid of rhythmic or melodic ambiguities, typical of performances by the pedagogical class of singers. This is to say that the notes are very clear, not obscured by *gamak* (a vigorous broad shaking of notes), and they tend to fall squarely on the beats. The enunciation is also very clear. This sort of song is conducive to pain-free transcription.

The frequent occurrences of (7) followed by 6 are exemplary of a distinguishing feature of the “Rāg Hamīr”: 6 is often approached via a sliding step from the region of 7. Perhaps the least cut-and-dried feature of this rendition is the use of triplet timing at the end of the third line of the *sthāyī*: the syllables *su*, *ra*, and *jha* occupy two beats.

Our next example, Figure 12, gives a taste of the greater complexity encountered in *vilambit*, or slow tempo, compositions. It is now standard practice to begin a *rāg*'s performance with this sort of composition, and to do most of the improvisation around the *vilambit* composition before ending with a fast composition. The fitting of slow compositions to the beats of the *tāl* is far more flexible: generally one must complete all the phrases in time to reach the *sam*, but there are few, if any, road signs along the way—words that should fall on certain beats. Indeed, many musicians consider it *beśarm* (“shameless”) to sing too precisely on the beats.

Here, Kishori Amonkar, considered by many to be the greatest living *khyāl* singer, sings a rare *rāg* that is a speciality of the *Jaipur-Atrauli gharānā*, a seven-note version of the popular pentatonic “Rāg Mālkauns.”



*Antarā*

<sup>0</sup> १ (14) ३ (-)4 gyā	<sup>10</sup> — 7 (-)6 — na	<sup>11</sup> 6 — १ ५(5) sa	<sup>12</sup> i)Z-- -i-- — — ra
<sup>13</sup> — — — 1 sa	<sup>14</sup> — (i3) 7 1 e	<sup>15</sup> — — 1 — so	<sup>16</sup> १ ५ 1 2 na ṭa
<sup>X</sup> (s4)3̣ — -i3̣ i2̣ kha	<sup>2</sup> — -3̣ (4)3̣ -44 rī	<sup>3</sup> 3̣iZ 1 1 -५ ṭa	<sup>4</sup> १ (6i)Z 3̣i-Z 1 ā
<sup>5</sup> (7) 6 — — lī	<sup>6</sup> (— -)5 —(-) 4 rī	<sup>7</sup> — — — —	<sup>8</sup> -५५ ५34 — — vo
<sup>0</sup> -5 ५(53) 4(-) 3̣ to	<sup>10</sup> — -५ ५५1 3̣ nan	<sup>11</sup> — 4 5--4 5 da du lā	<sup>12</sup> — (-)4 — (-)3̣
<sup>13</sup> 3̣ 3̣2 — -५५ ā	<sup>14</sup> 7̣2̣3̣ (4)3̣ -43̣ 3̣17̣ ā	<sup>15</sup> 13̣ 2̣34 54 4 re ba	<sup>16</sup> 4-54 434 3-45-- 54 ra ja ra
<sup>X</sup> 5 (—) 4५ १ hī	<sup>2</sup> (followed by <i>barhat</i> )		

Figure 12. “Rāg Sampurn Mālkauns” sung by Kishori Amonkar (Music Today A91006)

In this transcription I have done my best to capture a sense of the many ponderous, emotionally loaded *mīṇḍs*, slides between notes, that are a hallmark of this artist’s style; hence there is a liberal sprinkling of parentheses. The auxiliary employment of notes normally excluded by the *rāg* is noteworthy. The flattened 3̣ is on occasion approached from the region of 3, and the flattened 6̣ is, in the *antarā*, ornamented by 6. Most unusually, the very first note in our transcription, an unmistakable natural 7, is totally foreign to the *rāg*, but it is employed so skillfully at the inception of an introductory ascending run that no damage is done to the *rāg* image.

Our final example, Figure 13, is of the type of composition with which transcribers wrestle and sweat and then wrestle and sweat again at periodic intervals. Faiyaz Khan, one of the towering figures of Indian music in the twentieth century, appears to have transcended concrete relationships with songs: he pushed them and pulled them, molding them around his musical inspiration. It is not easy, sometimes not possible, to deduce what is actually “song” and what is improvisation; the two blend extremely fluidly.

Although Faiyaz Khan's rendition of "Rāg Toḍī" is in a medium tempo, the song connects with the *tāl* in a very abstract manner.

*Rāg Toḍī Madhya-lay Tīntāl*

Faiyaz Khan

garavā mē saṅga lāgī mīta piharavā	I embraced him, my sweet lover,
ānanda bha-ilavā more mandaravā.	Happiness occurred in my home.
sagarī raina mohe jāgata bītī	I spend every night awake,
bhora bhae phala pāila	When morning came I succeeded.
phulavana seja bichāũ more aṅganā	I will spread flowers on my bed and body.
rahasa rahasa gara ḍarũgī haravā.	Merrily I will place a garland round your neck.

*Sthāyī* ♩ 131-258 mpm, 3:06, c36 cycles, C#

X	2	o	3
	ḷ ḷ ḷ 1 gar	<sup>2</sup> 2 (-)ḷ — 2 vā mē	— — 1 <sup>1</sup> 7 saṅ ga
1 — ḷ ḷ lā	ḷ ḷ <sup>2</sup> 1 <sup>1</sup> 7 gī	1 1 2 (-)ḷ ga ra vā	-2 — 1 <sup>1</sup> 7 mē saṅ ga
1 — — 2 lā	ḷ ḷ <sup>5</sup> — gī lā	(6 3 2) 3 gī	<sup>6</sup> 5 4 (—) 6 pi yā
<sup>6</sup> (- 4) 33 4 mī ta pi	3 2 1 — ha ra vā	4 4 6 6 a nan da bha	1 7 1 ḷ i la vā
<sup>1</sup> 1 <sup>2</sup> 3- -2 -3 mo re man	-2 1 <sup>1</sup> 1 7 da ra vā	ḷ ḷ 1(2) 3 garvā	2 — <sup>1</sup> 1 7 mē saṅ ga
ḷ ḷ ḷ 5 gī	4 6 ḷ ḷ (followed by <i>antarā</i> )		

*Antarā*

X	2	o	3
		$\frac{1}{4}$ 6 6(-) 1̇	— — — —
		sā ga rī	
— 1̇ 1̇ 3̇	3̇ 3̇ 3̇ 57	-i 2̇ — —	— i <sup>1/4</sup> 3̇(3̇) 2̇
bī tī	saga	rī rai	rai
— -i (2̇)3̇ -2̇	1̇ -2̇ (i)7 3̇	1̇ 2̇-i 7i -2̇	-i -2̇ 3̇ 2̇
na		rai na	mo
1̇ 2̇ i <sup>1/4</sup> i 7	1̇ 2̇ i <sup>1/4</sup> i i <sup>1/4</sup>	i <sup>1/4</sup> 44 4 4	3̇ 4 <sup>66</sup> -7 7
he jā	ga ta bī	tī saga rī rai	aina mo he
1̇ — — —	— 3̇ 3̇ 3̇	3̇ 67i 2̇ —	— — — 3̇
jā		jā	
3̇ 1̇ — —	— -2̇ 3̇ <sup>2</sup> 3̇ 2̇	— 1̇ 7 1̇	-2̇ -(-) 3̇ -2̇
jā			ga
- <sup>1/4</sup> 1̇ (7) 4(7)	6(-) 1̇ — —	— 3̇ 3̇ 3̇	$\frac{1}{4}$ 66 -7 7
ta bī			rai na mo he
3̇ 1̇ ii 1̇	— — 1̇ 3̇	3̇ 1̇ 1̇ 1̇	1̇ 3̇ 1̇ 2̇ <sup>1/4</sup>
jā gata bī	tī	bho ra bha	e phu la
i7 — 1̇ 2̇	i <sup>1/4</sup> i7- (-) 6 (r6)4	3̇ 3̇ 67 6	5 5 (5)3̇ 2̇
pā i	lā	phul va	na se ja bi
3̇ — $\frac{1}{4}$ 4 <sup>1/4</sup>	6 7 1̇ 3̇	i2̇ 3̇ 3̇ 2̇	-i 6 <sup>1/4</sup> 4 6
chā mo re	añ ga nā	raha sa ra	ha sa ga ra
7i2̇ 3̇ -2̇ -7	6 4 3̇2̇ 1̇	— 1(2̇) 3̇ —	2̇ — 1̇ 7 <sup>1/4</sup>
ḍā rū gī	ha ra vā	garvā	mē sañ ga
3̇ 3̇ 3̇ 3̇			
	(followed by <i>barhat</i> )		

Figure 13. “Rāg Toḍī” sung by Faiyaz Khan (GCI: H249, 1934)

The length of this transcription is due to the artist's meandering delivery of the *antarā*: many of the words are repeated in various combinations and melodic contexts, and without including these variations it would not have been possible to give a faithful impression of the artist's style of song delivery. Notice the powerful syncopation and complex meter: the singer is by no means a slave to the regular beats of the *tablā*. The words are unclear in several instances: the first syllable of the song, *gar*, is a barely audible condensation of the first two syllables of the word *garavā*. Similarly, the first syllable of the flowers (*phulavana*) of the penultimate line becomes lost in performance, but we do not mind: this is a great singer pouring his heart out, one of the most iconic disc recordings of twentieth-century Indian music, and we are happy to wrestle with it.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at some of the issues arising from our ongoing attempt to represent the songs of an oral tradition in a useful and accurate manner. A song can be remembered, written down, taught, sung at an intimate musical gathering, sung in a public concert, or recorded to disc or tape. How does a song permutate as a result of its mode of existence or performance context? What is more “real”—the song as it exists in a musician's mind, the song as formulated in the course of teaching his disciples, the song as sung in concert (attending to all the extra-musical exigencies of public performance), the song as idea (abstracted and written down), or the “permanent” and reaccessible aural evidence of a song that we find on a recording?

By transcribing only recordings that are in the public domain, we hope to locate our work as a companion, an aid to understanding and imbibing the songs found on India's most iconic musical artifacts, the first tangible distillations of an oral tradition. In so doing we also reaffirm the power of Indian music's recent past, represented by the styles and renditions of the great masters of the twentieth century, the last pre-modern artists, many of whom are either already forgotten or are rapidly being forgotten. Shellac, bakelite, and vinyl provide a testament to the masterpieces of North Indian music in the twentieth century.

### Summary of the Notation System

The *sam* or first beat of the *tāl* (rhythmic cycle) is indicated by an X, and the ninth beat is indicated by an o. In Figures 11 and 13 (fast and medium tempo compositions) each vertical column contains four beats, whereas in Figure 12 (a slow composition) each numbered box represents one *mātrā* (beat) containing four subdivisions separated by spaces. The degrees of the scale are represented by the numbers one to seven, functionally equivalent to the Indian *sargam* syllables (*Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa, Dha, Ni*). Half-height numbers occupy less than an entire beat. As in the Indian system, a subscript dot indicates a lower octave while a superscript dot indicates an upper octave. Flattened notes are underlined. Hyphens indicate prolongations. Crochet rests ( ̣ ) last a full beat (full quarter-beat in Figure 12). Quaver rests ( ̤ ) are of variable duration, that is to say, a quarter of a beat if the beat has four subdivisions, a third of a beat if the beat has three subdivisions, half a beat if the beat has two subdivisions, and so on. Slurs join those notes that are sung to the same syllable. Notes or prolongations encircled by parentheses are unstable, sliding towards the subsequent note. Superscript notes are grace notes; when italicized they are voiced before the beat. Superscript tongues as in [˘4] or [˘3] indicate that notes are approached from above or below but not from an identifiably distinct tone.

At the upper left-hand corner of each transcription the following data is supplied: number of *mātrās* (beats) per minute and duration of the song's performance—including all improvisation—in minutes and seconds, number of rhythmic cycles, and tonic pitch.

**The following sound examples may be found in the eCompanions section at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).**

- “Rāg Yaman Kalyān,” *sthāyī* performed by Bhimsen Joshi. GCI: EALP9321, 1967.
- “Rāg Gauḍ Sāraṅg,” *sthāyī* performed by D. V. Paluskar. GCI: N35289, 1947.
- “Rāg Dhānaśrī,” *sthāyī* performed by Vilayat Hussain Khan. W7EPE1217, 1961.
- “Rāg Durgā,” *sthāyī* performed by Mallikarjun Mansur. GCI:HT33, date unknown.
- “Rāg Mārū Bihāg,” *sthāyī* performed by Bhimsen Joshi. GCI: ECLP2276, 1962.
- “Rāg Darbārī Kānaḍa,” *sthāyī* performed by Amir Khan. HMV: EALP1253, 1960.

- “Rāg Chayanaṭ,” *sthāyī* performed by Omkarnath Thakur. Cassette Rhythm House 240361, 2002, original recording 1940s.
- “Rāg Hamīr,” *sthāyī* and *antarā* performed by D. V. Paluskar. GCI: N88100, 1947.
- “Rāg Sampūrn Mālkauns,” *sthāyī* and *antarā* performed by Kishori Amonkar. Cassette Music Today A91006, 1991.
- “Rāg Toḍī,” performed by Faiyaz Khan. GCI: H249, 1934.

*School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London*

### References

- Bhatkhande 1970                      Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande. *Hindustānī Saṅgīt Paddhati: Kramik Pustal Mālikā*. 6 vols. Hathras: Sangeet Karyalay. Orig. publ. 1925.
- Bor 1986/1987                      Joep Bor. “The Voice of the Sāraṅgī.” *Bombay: National Centre for the Performing Arts, Quarterly Journal*, 15 (iii, iv) and 16 (i).
- du Perron 2000                      Lalita du Perron. *The Lyrics of Ṭhumrī: Hindi Poetry in a Musical Genre*. Ph. D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Forthcoming from Curzon-Routledge.
- Kippen 1988                         James Kippen. *The Tabla of Lucknow: A Cultural Analysis of a Musical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meer 2003                             Wim van der Meer. “Visions of Music.” Unpublished paper presented at ESEM (European Seminar in Ethnomusicology) conference, Vienna.
- Nayar 1989                             Sobhana Nayar. *Bhatkhande’s Contribution to Music*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
- Patwardhan 1990–2001             Vinayakrao Patwardhan. *Rāg Vigyān*. 9th ed. 7 vols. Pune: Dr. Madhusudan Patwardhan. Orig. publ. 1936-64.

**Glossary**

<i>antarā</i>	the second section of a song composition
<i>bandīś</i>	a song composition
<i>gharānā</i>	a tradition of hereditary musical specialists, usually defined by place of origin; a tradition of musicians with a common musical style or teaching lineage associated with one of the hereditary lineages
<i>khyāl</i>	the prevalent genre of Hindūstānī (North Indian) classical vocal music; also a song composition in the <i>khyāl</i> style
<i>mātrā</i>	one beat in any <i>tāl</i> (rhythmic cycle)
<i>sāraṅgī</i>	the main bowed stringed instrument of North Indian music, traditionally used to accompany vocal music
<i>sthāyī</i>	the first section of a song composition
<i>ṭhumrī</i>	a genre of semi-classical vocal music, romantic and sensuous in nature, originally sung by courtesans

## About the Authors

**Richard Bauman** is Distinguished Professor of Folklore and Ethnomusicology and Director of the Folklore Institute at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research centers on oral poetics, genre, and performance. Among his recent publications are *Voices of Modernity* (2003, with Charles L. Briggs) and *A World of Others' Words* (2004).

**Lalita du Perron** is a Researcher focusing on “The Songs of North Indian Art Music” in the Department of Music, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her interests encompass performance and patronage in North India and Hindi song texts. Her book on *Êhumrī: Hindi Poetry in a Musical Genre* is forthcoming.

**Patrick Feaster** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University, Bloomington, active in the documentation, restoration, and reissue of early sound recordings. His dissertation, in progress, explores the emergence of communicative practices and conventions for representing performance in American phonography through the year 1908.

**Felicia Hughes-Freeland** is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Wales, Swansea. She has been researching dance in Java for over 20 years, and has investigated television in Bali and most recently tourism and performance in Laos. She is currently writing a book about Javanese dance. A trained filmmaker, she is also editing a video on the hobby horse dance in Java.

A student, performer, and teacher of the North Indian *sārājgī* since 1970, **Nicolas Magriel** completed his Ph.D. on this musical style in 2001 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where, together with Lalita du Perron, he is now working on a three-and-one-half year AHRB-funded research project on the songs of *khyāl*, the prevalent genre of Hindustani vocal music.

**Peter Middleton** is Professor of English at the University of Southampton, UK, and the author of *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (2005) and *Literatures of Memory* (2000, with Tim Woods). His research interests include poetics, the history of poetry performance, the impact of science on modern poetry, and a web project on contemporary poetics ([www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc](http://www.soton.ac.uk/~bepc)).

**Isolde Standish** lectures in Film and Media and is Director of Studies for the Cinemas of Asia and Africa M.A. Degree in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her publications include work on Korean cinema, *A New History of Japanese Cinema* (2005) and *Myth and Masculinity in the*

*Japanese Cinema* (2000). She is currently examining the relationship between cinema and nation.

**Naoko Yamagata** is a Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University, UK. Her research centers on Homer, including studies with comparative and reception-based perspectives. Her publications include *Homeric Morality* (1994) and “Locating Power: Spatial Signs of Social Ranking in Homer and in the *Tale of the Heike*” (2003).