Vocal Distress on Stage: Voice and diegetic Space in contemporary Music Theatre

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This presentation is part of my PhD project, in which I attempt to conceptualize the interrelations between sound, performance text and performative/theatrical space from a perceptual and narrative perspective. In this paper, I would like to introduce the notion of 'vocal distress' to highlight some aspects of narrativity and performativity of the musicalized voice on stage. I want to avoid the term 'singing,' since extended vocal techniques and expressive forms of wordless communication are most specifically implied. The performance of De Helling van de Oude Wijven *by the Walpurgis ensemble (Antwerp, Belgium) offers the material for a case study on both the narrative qualities of the physical voice on stage, and the more abstract notion of 'narrative voice' (the voice of a narrator, composer, dramaturge, editor, ghost writer of the performance). I conclude with a discussion on diegetic space by extending further notions such as 'world' and plot from the Possible Worlds Theory by Marie-Laure Ryan from a semantic to a performative level.*

<div align="center">♋</div>

De Helling van de Oude Wijven (transl. 'The Slope of the Old Wives') is a music theatre performance[1], based on a multiplicity of texts and voices: most of the vocal pieces are poems set to music. The novel of *Pedro Páramo* (1955), written by Juan Rulfo, serves as a catalyst for the main frame of the acoustic events. Various excerpts from this novel inspired the theatre makers and form the context of the represented events. In the program brochure, one can read the following two excerpts:

> *Sounds. Voices. Rumour. Songs in the distance: my girl gave me a handkerchief with hems of tears… Falsetto voices. As if the women were singing. Laughter.*

> *In the middle of a village square. The chiming began with the big bell. Afterwards the others followed. The sounding of the bells lasted longer than usual. A neighbouring church sets in; the others follow. It became a big mourning chime. A cacophony of bells. The people had to shout to make them heard. Some bells are bursting and sounding hoarse. Nobody knew where they came from, but at a specific moment circus artists appeared.* (Taken from *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo, brochure p.2)

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[1] *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* (2002-2003) was produced by the music theatre ensemble Walpurgis (Borgerhout, Belgium). See the bibliography for further details.

These extra-dramatic, textual materials allow both the theatre makers and the reader of the brochure to offer a context to the musical or acoustic events, which in combination and through their associations *could* trigger a narrative reading. I want to stress the modal verb here, since it is only an *incitement* for a narrative mode of reading/listening. The rumour, the bell sounds, the singing voices from the novel reverberate into the on-stage events, and make the listener's imagination and cognition to 'work.' The bell sounds and the singing women provide a multiplicity of possible stories.

My focus is on the musicalized voice on stage and the diegetic space it creates. *De Helling van de Oude Wijven* serves as a theoretical object that allows me to follow the traces of the voice from text to actual staging. Issues of narration and narrativity, next to performativity, are at hand. None of the used text materials in *De Helling* are genuinely dramatic. The use of poems and the parataxis of disconnected elements make the performance lyrical rather than epical or diegetic. That is why the theatre makers call *De Helling* literally a 'theatrical and musical poem' for a capella soprano, mezzo-soprano and electronics. Moreover, theatrical and musical performance are no genuine narrative media either. The musicalization of the stage draws the attention to the sound qualities of the texts rather than to their content.

ℬ Musicalization of stage and text ℛ

'New' Music Theatre or contemporary music theatre is in its development very close to the experiments of the 'post-dramatic' theatre scene of the seventies, as described by Hans Thies Lehmann. In his article "From Logos to Landscape," Lehmann draws attention to a new type of theatrical communication that arises when there is no clear narrative or 'masterplot' anymore: "Theatre was and is searching for and constructing spaces and discourses liberated as far as possible from the restraints of goals (*telos*), hierarchy and causal logic. This search may terminate in *scenic poems*, meandering *narration*, *fragmentation* and other procedures – the longing for such space, a space beyond *telos* is there" (Lehmann 56). Musicalization[2] of the stage seems to be a fruitful strategy to break with the confinements of *telos* by purposefully disconnecting the elements.

Lehmann further elaborates on the implications of musicalization of text and performance: "New approaches to the text, so it seems, are often detected by a radical musicalization of the language material. An auditive space is opened, which calls upon the spectator/ audience to synthesize the elements presented" (Lehmann 57). *De*

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[2] Hans Thies Lehmann draws a parallel in this context with Aristotle's notion of *Melopoeia*, the part of dramatic art concerned with music: "Text in the theatre has always been considered in its dimension as sound, music and voice" (55).

Helling opens up a similar space between the two female voices foregrounded and the pre-recorded soundscape of voices and bell sounds in the background. In this way, the play could evoke dramatic narratives, elicited by sound, music and voice. The main question for this case study is how these sounds and voices placed in performative space can create a possibility for *narrating* at the thresholds of narration and narrativity.

ಹಿ A question of narrativity ಲ

The polyphony of disconnected elements and voices gives the stage and the fictional universe it elicits the opacity of music. Post-dramatic theatre and music theatre purposely create unstable narrative positions as to allow slippages of identity, metaphor and closure. This does not mean that the performance is 'about nothing,' but it is up to the listener/spectator to make associative connections and to draw a coherent narrative out of the presented events. For many theatre scholars and narratologists, however, the first and basic issue that comes to mind is whether one can speak of narration or narrativity at all. In a narrow sense of 'narrative' as narration by a narrator or even purely based on *diegesis* (narrating about past events), both music and theatrical play, apart from the epic forms of theatre, are generally regarded as non-narrative genres (see Nünning & Sommer 105). The distinction between a novel and a play was very clearly defined by Gérard Genette (I will come back to this later). But I would like to make a distinction here between being a narrative and having narrativity. Significantly in this context, *De Helling* is called a 'musical and theatrical poem,' a genre that is not narrative either:

> A lyric poem may not be called a narrative – that is, it may not have the impact or felt quality of a narrative – yet almost invariably it will <u>include all kinds of narrative bits and pieces</u>. These bits can even <u>have</u> a high degree of <u>narrativity</u>, yet still the effect of the whole is not that of narrative. (Abbott 28, my emphasis)

Similarly, music theatre performances such as *De Helling* "push at the outer limits of narrative experimentation and yet they are at the same time packed with narrative" (*ibid*.). The same could be said for music. The whole question of music and its 'narrative impulse' (as introduced by Jean-Jacques Nattiez), was criticized by John Neubauer (1997), who claimed:

> Though instrumental music is incapable of *narrating*, it can *enact stories*: it can *show* even if it cannot *tell*, it can suggest *plot*, for instance in terms of themes and thematic development. Its most common verbal and rhetorical metaphor, namely *voice*, suggests that it can also enact metaphoric dialogues between instruments. (qtd. in Wolf 80)

So a music theatre performance can create the *impression* of narrating through music, although non-vocal music never tells. One could recognise within the performance many narrative tendencies, openings to a multiplicity of stories, while at the same time it attempts to obfuscate any single and clear structured narrative. In the end, I hope to conceptualize how musicalization of the stage through the voice could enact stories in terms of modality or *possible* worlds. But caution is required, as the question of the musicalized, physical voice on stage cannot simply be paralleled to the narrative studies of instrumental music and its metaphoric use of the term 'voice'.

ଛ From sensory to vocal distress ଔ

In *De Helling*, the voices tend towards non-linguistic or 'wordless' communicative strategies. In this context, I would like to introduce the notion of 'distress' in terms of both sensory and vocal distress, which could be recognised on different levels of the vocal performance as a mark of affective overstimulation, overextension or overexertion of the voice. On the part of the listener, there is the notion: 'sensory distress,' which is the basis of every sense perception. According to Robin Maconie, all perception is distressing and we constantly try to keep unwanted intensities of information at bay. Maconie adds: "Most of us succeed in channelling that effort into productive activity" (Maconie 23-4). I am tempted to regard this mechanism in terms of our performance of listening and reading in a narrative mode. Instead of walking around or away from a source of unwanted stimuli, as Maconie would suggest, one could also channel the overload of information into narratives (depending on one's narrative competence).

Vocal distress should be regarded for its metaphoric purposes to highlight something in the discussion of narrativity and performativity. In its most literal sense, vocal distress would symptomatically signal a disorder of the vocal chords, caused by stress. In certain sense, stress and strain in the vocal chords are constitutive for every vocal utterance (see Steven Connor). Vocal stress would *show* too much strain. But overstimulation of the voice as ('failed') performance also pretends to *tell* something. As such, this concept can work as a metaphor for an instance when showing (*mimesis*) becomes telling (*diegesis*).

One of the vocal events in *De Helling* that illustrates the notion of 'vocal distress', is the moment when one of the two unnamed women, more precisely the mezzo soprano imitates an old woman sitting on a bench, rattling *as if* she is telling something that really works her up. From her gestures one can tell that she is probably an embittered woman and that her story agitates her. In this almost pre-discursive babbling, the production of illegible vocal sounds and syllables appears to convey how 'vocal

distress' becomes musical. Moreover, the woman seems to be narrating while she is a character of her own narrative universe. Her burlesque exaggeration evolves in rhythm and increasing intensity of her vocal gestures (her entire 'voice-body:' facial expression, hands, arms, etc.), accompanied by an increasing *noise-scape* of sounding bells over the loudspeakers. In terms of focalization, one could say that this auditory scenery creates a shift from an external perspective into the internal space of the character, as the bell sounds echo through the whole performance, hunting the women as a kind of memory. The increasing noise also intensifies our sensory distress and leaves every interpretation open.

The illegible story creates no pleasant feeling of closure. Rather the voice shows itself in all its physicality, thus creating an uncanny feeling of 'not yet knowing'. The overexerted voice is not only a sign, a metaphor, or a symptom for the crisis of pinpointing the voice to a narrator, but also a signal. It signals the voice as event.

ᏸ Mimetic/diegetic dichotomy Ꭿ

Doris Kolesch, a theatre scholar in search for an 'aesthetics of presence,' similarly concluded from her study on voice that the physical voice on stage is an event: "The voice is no definable object, it is not a thing, but rather a tangible, expatiating acoustic event" (Kolesch 274, my transl. PV). The voice of the woman on the bench just happens, as it unfolds in space as acoustic event. It has no defined space in itself. It is 'atopical' (a term that Kolesch borrows from Roland Barthes), but it is thrown into space. The 'vocal distress' of the old woman character illustrates the 'throwness' of voices, which gives pleasure as opposed to, according to Richard Aczel, "any final fixing of their source" (Aczel 705). In the event of singing and reverberating, the voices are placed in space, but have no single source.

What is more, Kolesch emphasizes how the *atopicality* of the material voice touches upon the porous boundaries of the dichotomy: *showing* (mimesis) versus *telling* (diegesis):

> Discourse originally meant moving back and forth, drifting apart, coming and going, entangling. The vocal discourse – as we now can specify – transgresses its discursivity, to the extent that a non-discursive, non-arbitrary, analogous moment represents the condition of its potentiality. In vocal discourse, the discursive and the non-discursive, the possibility of what one can tell and show, run to and fro and between each other. (Kolesch 277, my transl.)

In this sense, vocal distress challenges a platonic dichotomy, which says that plays are mimetic (i.e. they imitate action by performance), whereas epic poems are diegetic (i.e. they represent action by telling) (Abbott 193). Rather, theatrical and

musical(ized) performance contains a complex mix of both modes of narrative representation, inherent to the physical voice. Sybille Krämer also acknowledges that the voice "not functions just as a sign, but rather as a signal. In its indexicality it is grounded, that the voice not only speaks [I would add 'tells'], but also shows" (Krämer 73, my transl.). The pleasurable confusion between showing and telling, and the focus on the *eventness* of the human voice ask for a more cautious examination of the boundaries between performativity and narrativity.

<p align="center">ℬ Narrative voice suspended ℭ</p>

So far, the notion of vocal distress has been discussed to conceptualize the narrative qualities of the physical voice. However, the multiplicity and dissemination of voices intend to deconstruct any fixed meaning or placing (Lehmann 57) also implies the deconstruction of a *single* narrative voice or 'narrator'. Obviously, one has to distinguish the physical voice that 'rehabilitates' its musical properties, from the notion of narrative voice ("voix," or "Erzählinstanz") in a more abstract sense. One should be careful not to fall into the epistemological trap of equating the voice of narration with the narrating aspects of the material human voice. But the concept of vocal distress allows also for a critique of the narratological demand, ever since Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1983/1988), to postulate a narrator as the principle of organization and selection in every play.

In his proposal for a 'narratology of drama', Manfred Jahn follows Seymour Chatman's claim that drama or the 'stage play' is actually mimetic, but *includes* also diegetic passages vocalized by a narrator (Chatman 318). In postulating that drama *is* a proper narrative genre, Jahn reintroduces Stanzel's distinction between *teller* and *reflector* figures (*A Theory of Narrative* 1979/1984):

> Ultimately the question of narrative agency in drama boils down to whether a play's narrative 'agent' (*CTT* 119) shows up as an overt teller figure . . ., or remains an impersonal, covert show-er or arranger function. (Jahn 2001: 670)

This bodiless shower/arranger function serves to resolve Genette's premise that there can be no narration without a narrator (see for instance Chatman's critique on Bordwell). But Jahn acknowledges that this covert narrator or narrative agent must "stand back, cover its traces, and refine itself out of existence" (Jahn 675) in order not to disturb the represented, fictional world in the theatre. His position could be understood in a context of sensory distress:

> As Erving Goffman points out, in order to attend to the what of a fictional world, we have both the capacity and the willingness (perhaps even the obligation) to 'disattend' the puppeteer, the ventriloquist, the director, the stage manager. (Jahn 2001: 676)

Gay McAuley, a theatre scholar who studies theatre space, confirms this position. To her the theatre stage (and space) could very well have a function of narrating. She stresses, however, that this disembodied 'authorial' voice is split into many voices.

> It is more difficult to account for the process as it occurs in the theatre than in the novel because the fictional content is subject to multiple shaping processes that may be widely separated in space and time and be the responsibility of different artists. In the novel it is the writer who produces both narrative and the narrating, whereas in theatre the authorial voice is necessarily divided between those responsible for the dramaturgical shaping of the material (the construction of the theatrical narrative) and its physical presentation (the narrating). (McAuley 128, my transl. PV)

If we go back to the scene of the babbling woman, her performance of vocal distress highlights the issue of agency. The character of the babbling woman seems to try to escape a textual organization by a covert authority (a director, a composer, a dramaturge), as she is the narrator of her own illegible story. Character and narrator seem to coalesce, and by means of overextension the singer tries, paradoxically, to restore control. In an Artaudian sense, the extended vocal sounds symptomize how the singer is not in control of the narrative content of the lyrics. The characters created in *De Helling* are always in-between *homodiegetic* (as singing 'I' in their own storyworld), and *extradiegetic* by singing songs of authors, ghostwriters of their performance. In this respect, one also has to take into consideration how music as a medium (with a pre-composed score) to some extent takes away the agency from the singer as well (see Behr 32), and how the singing adds another layer, or even another narrative voice.

ஐ The cognitive take ಣ

Gay McAuley is one of the rare theatre scholars who adopt narrative theory. Generally, theatre and performance studies have not so much engaged with narrative theory in the past. Manfred Jahn is mainly interested in the narrative aspects of *drama*, which he would want to conceptualize in "a professedly cognitive model" (Jahn 676). The problem, however, seems that one needs to stretch concepts as 'narrative', 'narrativity', 'narrative voice' etc. in order to make them work for the theatre. This is nowadays mostly done in so-called 'post-classical' and cognitive theory of narrative, which lead to the whole territorial expansion of narrative. But one needs to keep cautious with such a semantic broadening of concepts that were developed in specific contexts.

A cognitive approach, however, can cast light on our urge of comprehension, which results in a semiotic and hence, a narrative mode of reading. One of such approaches

is Monika Fludernik's 'Natural Narratology.' In her article "New Wine in Old Bottles? Voice, Focalization, and New Writing" (2001) Fludernik opposes to Chatman's take to narrative agency through her concept of 'narrativization,' which she actually bases on Jonathan Culler's process of *naturalization*. Narrativization is, in her terms, a reading strategy, that allows for reading texts as narrative. In her *Natural Narratology* (1996), she explains:

> When readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives – motivated by the generic makers that go with the book. They therefore attempt to recognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters, or they try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level. (Fludernik 1996: 34)

When we read the performance of vocal distress as an old woman telling her life story on a bench, we *narrativize* this scene according to our experience of the world. Fludernik grounds, in that respect, narrativity in the representation of 'experientiality.' But this does not at all exclude the production of a hidden narrative voice or narrator.

ꙮ Diegetic space in the theatre ꙮ

Lastly, I want to make some points about a narrative approach to the spatializing of voices. Earlier, I have addressed the issue of voice as atopical but expatiating event. The spatial aspects have always been important (though partially neglected) to understand narrative processes that establish the story*world*. One of the spatial aspects is focalization. Manfred Jahn refers to focalization as the spatial perspective for the spectators by what they see *and* hear. This includes the role of the framed theatre space proper. Mieke Bal hints, in this respect, at a similar function of space to frame the events as a place where the action takes place, but also suggests that space can be understood as the 'acting place' (Bal 95). Applied to the organization of the theatre space, one needs to examine how space creates a stage for narrative events mediated by the actor's voice. In theatre theory, the theatre stage is generally regarded as an amalgam of different spaces, among which the physical space of the stage, and the fictional space (McAuley 29-30; 74). McAuley recognises in the end three levels in the perception of theatrical space, which I would like to subsume as:

- ꙮ The physical space that constitutes a frame and contextual clues;
- ꙮ The mimetic space, or the space of representation;
- ꙮ The diegetic or narrative space (which is more than the fictional space).

All three levels of space conflate in the imaginative space, the interior space in the mind of the listener/spectator. But the co-existence of spaces that are both real and not-real (fictional), as explained by McAuley through Freud's concept of *Verneinung*, is somehow the crux of her study, especially when one considers that 'fictional' spaces could very well refer to real places in our real-world experience. Therefore, I would like to adapt and adopt a theory from cognitive studies, as developed by Marie-Laure Ryan, which conceptualizes the fictionality in terms of a basic distinction between *actual world* and *possible reference world*. This theory is inspired by Leibniz's notion of possible worlds[3].

Basically, the theory proposes two concepts, as Ryan (1991) explains: "the metaphor of 'world' to describe the semantic domain projected by the text; and the concept of modality to describe and classify the various ways of existing of the objects, states, and events that make up the semantic domain" (3). By means of the principle of *minimal departure*, we construct fictional worlds by filling the gaps, which means "by assuming the similarity of the fictional world to their own experiential reality" (http://www4.ncsu.edu/~dherman/possworlds.html). Much in line with Fludernik's account of experientiality, Ryan claims further: "We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text" (Ryan 1991: 51). As to the applicability of this model, one point of critique would be that Ryan regards the storyworld as a *textual* universe, a semantic domain projected by a *text*, and she describes the process of reading as guided by explicit *textual* direction (Ryan 1991: 56). For theatre studies, this would mean either a focus on the drama text (the score), or a semiotic reading of the performance text (performance as text), whereas I am more interested in the constitution of diegetic spaces through the performance of reading and listening.

As to this performance, already before the opening scene of the *De Helling*, the actual reference world is first re-centred extrinsically through the description of place on a semantic level by means of the title. The space of the slope ("de helling") establishes a new actual world, which imposes its laws on the implied reader-listener and determines its horizon of possibilities and expectations (Ryan, "Possible Worlds Theory"). Once this horizon is established, the storyworld can be populated with individuated agents (characters) and objects. According to Ryan, however, these characters are ontologically complete human beings. In music theatre however, the existence and identity of these characters as holistic beings can be very problematic. Rather, *De Helling* shows us a continuous metamorphosis of voices and character-narrators, constantly oscillating, moving and challenging the current interpretations:

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[3] "It will be remembered that according to Leibniz, an infinity of possible worlds exist as thoughts in the mind of God. Of all these possible worlds, only one is actual: the best of them all, chosen by the divine mind to be instantiated" (Ryan 1991: 16).

Are these women living on a slope? Are they really women? Do they really exist? Or are they already dead? The metamorphosis of characters questions the ontological status of the possible reference worlds. It seems that in *De Helling* these reference worlds seem to be changing all the time according to how we perceive the characters through their songs and vocal gestures. The interaction between these 'worlds' could create a plot. Plot in theatrical performance should be understood in terms of the development between worlds, milieus, metaphorical spaces triggered by vocal and acoustic events. As a plot gradually comes about in *De Helling*, the voices and vocal gestures that trigger the possible reference worlds are constantly on the move in our interpretation because of changes between the narrative universe and the actual world of the stage.

ℰ Conclusions ℛ

Through the notion of 'vocal distress' I touched upon the porous boundaries between performativity and narrativity, as well as mimesis and diegesis, physical stage and possible world. In its musical occurrence, voice is an expatiating acoustic event. The musicalized voice and the voice in distress show us that the physical voice on stage is never narrative in itself, but can only metaphorically (pretends to) narrate. Like the ventriloquist, the voice triggers our imagination, our urge for comprehension and a coherent story. But the musicalized voice embodies and carries over other meanings that go beyond a classical semiotic-narratological analysis. Cognitive approaches explain for our comprehension of these puzzling voices: narrativity and fictionality are frames we project from our experiences to comprehend and find coherence in the sequences of disconnected elements and events. The vocal space creates gaps for us to fill in with ever changing possible worlds in a dynamic process of reading.

De Helling van de oude Wijven highlights the tensions in our urge to locate the voice by pushing the boundaries and creating ambiguity in the mediation of multiple narratives without a single narrator. Likewise, the metamorphosis of voices challenges the current interpretations as well as the classical models of narrative theory. The tensions in voice (the 'vocal distress') that thereby occur cause ambiguity about whom exactly narrates and populates the possible worlds emerging in diegetic space. This leaves us with a pleasant ambiguity of *not yet* knowing, of modality and inbetweenness, which should challenge us to give voice a voice, without placing it in the silent box.

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ର୍ଷ More info about the music theatre ensemble Walpurgis: www.walpurgis.be, and e-mail: info@walpurgis.be.