

Experiencing Drama. The Hybridisation of Drama, Telecommunication Tools and Digital Technologies in Pauline Peyrade's *Ctrl-X*

New digital technologies and telecommunication tools are now commonplace in our daily lives. We are constantly exposed to digital images, to multiple mediums coexisting and intersecting, and to synchronous information disseminated in a continuous stream, and from various sources. According to Silvestra Mariniello, this omnipresence of audio-visual and digital contents undeniably altered ‘the way we see things’ and affected ‘our perception of space and time, the way we remember and learn’¹. In other words, it changed the way we think and perceive the world around us. A new *éspitème*, following Michel Foucault’s terminology, has been generated, that is no longer based on reason and order, but on synchronicity, stream, and hybridity.

As a living art that reflects and dissects the world, theatre is particularly likely to be informed by this technological and epistemic innovation. Many studies² considered the impact of the latter on contemporary stages. They all pointed out a concrete and massive use of digital technologies on stage. A great number of them identified repercussions on performance aesthetics as well. But very few investigated that question regarding contemporary drama, as if drama was not affected by those mutations. And when drama was considered, it is mostly the thematic presence of digital technologies that was taken into account (which was often problematised with reference to a potential staging). Sometimes, as in Isabelle Barbéris’ study, the use of digital technologies during the writing process was also investigated. But what about drama aesthetics? Could there not also be some structural impact of telecommunication tools and digital technologies on drama?

¹ Mariniello, Silvestra. 2007. ‘La littéracie de la différence’. Deotte, Jean-Louis, *et al.*, dir., *Appareil et intermédialité*. Paris: L’Harmattan. 164.

² Amongst other: Picon-Vallin. 1998. *Les écrans sur la scène : tentations et résistances de la scène face aux images*. Lausanne: L’âge d’homme; Boenisch, Peter M. 2006. ‘Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance’. Chapple, Freda & Kattenbelt, Chiel, dir., *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi. 3rd ed. 103-116; Dixon, Steve, Smith, Barry, dir., 2007. *Digital performance : a history of new media in theater, dance, performance art, and installation*. Cambridge: MIT Press; Nelson, Robin. 2008. ‘After Brecht: the Impact (Effects, Affects) of Intermedial Theatre’. *Intermédialité/Intermediality*. n.12. 31-48; Sermon, Julie. 2012. ‘Le vivant et la technique’. Ryngaert, Jean-Pierre, Sermon, Julie., dir. *Théâtre du XXI^e siècle: commencements*. Paris: Armand Colin. 77-223; Valero, Julie. 2015. ‘Internet : modèle en devenir ou devenir modèle ?’ *Registres*. Special issue n.4. 198-206; Barbéris, Isabelle. 2019. *Du masque au profil. Théâtre, performance et usages 2.0*. Lormont: Le Bord de l’eau.

At least, this has been Jonathan Châtel and Sandrine Le Pors' hypothesis. In an essay³ focused on Simon Stephens' play *Pornography*, Châtel and Le Pors examined how the Internet could influence the structures of drama. However, they only detected an intensification of already known aesthetics features that appeared during the twentieth century (i.e. before the advent of digital technologies), such as indetermination of character, fragmentation of action, juxtaposition of stories, or multilingualism. Therefore, the aim of this present essay is to identify new dramatic forms due to an influence of telecommunication tools and digital technologies that renew the structures of drama. The focus will be on French playwright Pauline Peyrade's play *Ctrl-X* (2016), whose story implies telecommunication tools such as the computer, the mobile phone, and the Internet, but whose originality lies in its specific structure shaped by these tools, and in the new conception of drama it proposes.

Writing down telecommunication tools and digital contents

The title of Peyrade's play, *Ctrl-X*, refers to the keyboard shortcut that enables content cuttings. This directly associates the play to connected devices and, by extension, to the Internet and digital technologies. The latter are placed at the center of the story of the play. Ida, the main character, is alone in her flat after a meeting with her lover Laurent. She is listening to music and surfing on the Internet. She is also texting her sister Adèle, who wants to bring her back some forgotten medicine, and Laurent, who wants to continue their meeting.

The play, whose progression of action is continuous (no flashback, no ellipsis), is divided into numerous numbered micro-sequences (two hundred and twenty in total). Each of them constitutes a minimal and meaningful unit. It can report on Ida's physical actions. In that case, it takes the form of a stage direction:

1

*Ida allume une cigarette.*⁴

It can also present Ida's occasional oral conversations with Adèle or Laurent. In that case, it takes the form of a traditional dialogue. But these conversations are always conducted via a device (mobile phone, landline phone, intercom), or carried out from afar (on one occasion, Ida speaks to her sister through the window). At no point does Ida interact directly

³ Châtel, Jonathan, Le Pors, Sandrine. 'Le drame à l'épreuve du Net. *Pornographie* de Simon Stephens et autres textes'. *Registres*. Special issue n.4. 207-215.

⁴ Peyrade, Pauline. 2016. *Ctrl-X*, followed by *Bois impériaux*. Besançon: Les Solitaires intempestifs. 13.

with Adele and Laurent. Consequently, everything surrounding her fades away. Her entourage, the outside world, and even words are perceived as disappearing.

The micro-sequences transcribe the text messages received and sent by Ida as well. In such cases, they mention, under the typographical aspect of stage directions, the vibration of Ida's mobile phone or Ida's texting action, and sometimes describe Ida's reaction. Then, they reproduce, in a different font, the message as it appears on Ida's phone:

3

Le portable vibre. Ida lit un texto.

Laurent : Tu mas vidé... sauvage

4

Ida sourit, envoie un texto.

Ida : Oh... petite nature ☺
(p. 13)

They also reproduce, as mentioned in a footnote for the book edition, the various Web pages (tabs, pop-ups, Youtube videos...) appearing on Ida's computer screen. Some of these pages are authentic pages, others are invented by Peyrade. In terms of form, the title of the consulted page is indicated in small capitals, in the same font as that used for the text messages. Then, the page content is transcribed, still in the same font (which is apparently dedicated to the sections reproducing what Ida is watching on her screens). For video or recorded material, the title is followed by the timing reference of the transcript, and the spoken words are transcribed in the main font of the script, as are the stage directions and dialogues. Here are some examples:

L'ŒIL QUI LUIT

00:13:52

OTTIS TOOLE : J'adore le feu. Les incendies sur trois étages. [...]

(p. 13)

ZADIE SMITH – WIKIPÉDIA

ZADIE SMITH, née le 25 octobre 1975 à Brent, est une écrivain britannique née d'un père anglais et d'une mère jamaïcaine. [...]

(p. 22)

By turning these new technologies into words, by writing them down, Peyrade manipulated and distorted their properties. The visual and audiovisual nature of the text messages and the Web is twisted by writing strategies that verbalise it. Ida's synchronous web browsing is even rendered through a sequencing work. For example, the writer indicated that Ida is listening to music while smoking and surfing by isolating and transcribing passages of a song. And each time, she specified the timing of the written excerpt, in order to report the progression of the song despite the insertion of the mentions of Ida's actions:

16

DEAD AND LOVELY (STUDIO VERSION)

00:01:41

TOM WAITS : He never gave but he got
He kept her on a leash
He's not the kind of wheel you fall asleep at...

17

Ida boit une gorgée de vin.

18

DEAD AND LOVELY (STUDIO VERSION)

00:01:58

TOM WAITS : But now she's dead
Forever dead
Forever dead and lovely now...

(p. 16)

In doing so, Peyrade bypassed the impossibility of expressing the sound progression and its synchronicity with Ida's action through words. The sequencing strategy allows her to evoke these continuity and synchronicity through the linearity of writing. Both synchronicity and continuity are to be mentally recomposed during the reading, and to be performed on stage.

But the hybridisation between the structure of drama and the telecommunications tools or digital technologies is not limited to this 'wording' of digital and telecommunication content, nor to a simple formalist approach—and this is where Peyrade's innovation really lies. The writer also seized on the operating logic of the Internet in order to construct her play.

A play driven by a hypertextual logic

In *Ctrl-X*, Peyrade in fact interweaved two plots into one another. The first plot is basic and obvious. Ida, wanting to be left alone, is surfing on the Internet and trying to fend off Laurent and Adèle who, for different reasons, want to join her. But her behaviour becomes strange. She keeps lighting and extinguishing cigarettes without smoking them, eating M&M's and immediately spitting them out. She finally loses her temper and brutally pushes Adèle and Laurent away. But then she comes back to them, as if forgetting what happened, and starts dancing alone.

But a second plot is gradually emerging as we go along with the reading. We discover it not through the dialogue nor the stage directions, but *via* the seemingly disjointed succession of the Web pages Ida is consulting, and the connections we can make between some of those pages. Among the various websites Ida is visiting is indeed the website of a photographer named 'Pierre K'. The character is also watching news reports about the war in Damascus and about a photoreporter's death in Syria, as well as interviews of 'Pierre K.' about war photography. She is looking to pictures as well, including a series of 'Pierre K.' entitled 'Ida'. She also checks her e-mails, and reads an e-mail received from a certain 'Pierre' with 'Mon amour' (My love) as a subject. By connecting the content of those various Web pages, we understand that Ida lost the one she really loves, Pierre, who is a gone, dead, or disappeared (Peyrade leaves it to the reader's judgment) war photographer, and we realise that she can not recover from this loss. This second plot underlies as much as it enlightens the surface plot. Ida's increasingly erratic and troubled behaviour can be explained by the pain that the Web surfing is reviving. Expecting to find on the Internet what she has lost (this is, declares Clotilde Leguil⁵, the whole trap of the Internet), Ida is once again confronted with the absence of the one she loves, and she can not bear it. This is where the real story of *Ctrl-X* is to be found.

The construction of this underground story and the reading mode it induces are reminiscent of the hypertextual principle of the Internet. According to the latter, each Web page is indeed an independent entity which is connected to many others. Within this network, every Internet user is free to surf from one page to another. This trajectory generates then a coherent, significative and unique whole. In the same way, readers of *Ctrl-X* are surfing between the seemingly disparate and random transcriptions of Internet pages, and are recomposing a coherent story by inferring meaningful connections. This story is not directly nor even linearly

⁵ Leguil, Clotilde. 2019. *'Je' : une traversée des identités*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

delivered, but is given to be constructed through the connections and references that can be established during the reading.

Inviting readers or spectators to (re)constitute the real drama that lies behind an evident story is no innovation. Sub-conversations of Sarraute and Duras's plays, or symbolic detours of Maeterlinck's plays, also lead the readers or spectators to detect what is going on beneath the surface, and to reinterpret what is said and shown to them. But *Ctrl-X* reveals a new writing method that borrows the 'hypertextual logic' from the Internet. Peyrade's play is in fact what the Belgian playwright Paul Pourveur calls a 'nomadic drama'. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri's thoughts⁶, Pourveur defines the 'nomadic dramaturgy' as a play construction that 'refers to the aimless journey we make on the Internet, travelling from one database to the next, gleaning bits of information which we assemble, constructing meanings as we go along'⁷.

The characters of *Ctrl-X* themselves really take shape only through the transcript of the connected devices content and the hypertextual reading experience. The character of Ida is mainly composed and guessed by the readers through the Web pages, the text messages and the lyrics of the songs. The presence of the character is more suggested than written, and her past and mindset are suggested rather than described or mentioned (in an unpublished interview she granted me, Peyrade herself stated that she had sought, by means of the form, to make *perceptible* the emotional 'spiral' Ida is going through). Similarly, Adèle and Laurent only exist by way of the text messages or the snatches of phone conversation, and Pierre, by way of traces on virtual networks we identify.

Readers of *Ctrl-X* are invited to experience a singular reading, in which the story and the characters of the play really unveils (if one refuses this experience, one misses the play). Here we find the 'hypertextual attention' to which Sermon alluded in *Théâtre du XXI^e siècle : commencements* (Theatre of the 21st Century: Beginnings). Just like the spectators evoked by Sermon, readers of Peyrade's play unfold their attention in a way that is 'not so much linear as reticular'⁸.

⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, Guatarri, Félix. 1980. *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

⁷ Pourveur, Paul. 2021. 'Mille répliques, mille possibles'. *Textyles*. n.60. Online: <<https://journals.openedition.org/textyles/3999>>, accessed on 12 August 2022. The translation is by Pourveur, which gave me an essay written in English that gathers and develops thoughts he expressed in a conference presentation (in the context of the 'Les coulisses du réel' project) and in the essay about Jean-Marie Piemme cited here.

⁸ Sermon, Julie. 2012. *Op. cit.* 177. 'moins linéaire que réticulaire', our translation.

Thrawing mimesis. An intermedial reference that breaks with a common conception of drama

As a matter of fact, with *Ctrl-X*, Peyrade executed an 'intermedial reference', to use Irina Rajewsky's typology. A single materially present medium—the play text—'uses its own media-specific means' to refer, in the mode of 'as if', 'to another medium *qua* system'⁹—the Internet and, more broadly, the digital technologies. Rajewsky's terminology should not be misleading. The 'intermedial reference' is not a simple allusion to one medium by another. It is an articulation, a hybridisation, of semiotic codes and logic of a medium with that of another. As they meet, these codes and logics affect each other. On one hand, Peyrade distorted the semiotic properties of telecommunication tools and digital technologies: she turned their non-verbal attributes into verbal ones. On the other hand, she renewed dramatic writing by combining its linear and discursive principle with the non-linear and the non-discursive principle of the Internet (elements are not previously ordered according to a unique and fixed chronology, but are to be connected through a 'huddled'¹⁰, synchronous, and multidirectional perception). *Logos*, i.e. language as a logical and ordered construction of statements, is challenged.

Therefore, *Ctrl-X* invites us to change our traditional perception of language. We are shown that language can become the scene of a non-logocentric experience. We are invited to change our traditional perception of dramatic text as well. The latter is opened up to the contingency of the reading experience, in which every reader can individually get involved, and from which the characters and the real story emerge. It is given a broad experiential value that thwarts mimesis. The readers, just as the spectators of the 'presentative' theatre conceptualised by Jean-Frédéric Chevallier¹¹, are discovering that, 'here and now', there is an 'interstice' where something can happen, where they can *experiencing* something more. Drama is shaped by performativity, since performativity emphasises the *hic et nunc* of an experience.

This does not mean that mimesis is excluded. Fiction as well as the dramatic categories coming from mimesis (story, action, conflict, characters...) remain. But they are distorted. They are mainly arising from an 'interstitial' area, being actualised through the reading experience. For all that, identification is not prevented. On the contrary, it may even be reinforced, because

⁹ Rajewsky, Irina. 2005. 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation; A Literary Perspective on Intermediality. *Intermdialités/Intermediality*. n.6. 52-3

¹⁰ Barbéris, Isabelle. 2009. *Op. cit.* 52. 'ramassée', our translation.

¹¹ Chevallier, Jean-Frédéric. 2021. *Le Théâtre du présenter*. Paris: Circé. 250 and subsequent.

readers perceive the characters through their own experience and sensibilities, and can thereby attribute their own emotions to them.

Peyrade's play thus breaks with the idea that in theatre experience is a stage matter and necessarily occurs in an artistic phase that comes after drama (a dramatic text is written and then one proposes to experience it on stage). The text *already* proposes an experience. By doing so, *Ctrl-X* also breaks with the idea inherited from Hans Thies Lehmann's 'postdramatic' theory, that assumes an incompatibility between dramatic features (as fiction and characters) and the distortion of mimesis that contemporary theatre undergoes. *Ctrl-X* weakens mimesis, offers the readers a lived and non-logocentric experience, but is not, to quote Lehmann, a "no longer dramatic" theatre text'¹².

¹² Lehman, Hans-Thies. (2000) 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trad. Jürs-Munby, Karen. London: Routledge. 17.