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Fear and Technology in the Theatre: Staging McLuhan

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Although Marshall McLuhan had comparatively little to say about the theatre as a medium in his books, Robin C. Whittaker's observation that "performance was integral to the delivery of McLuhan's messages" serves as a reminder to address the question considering an added dimension.¹ For example, at the "Theatre and the Visual Arts" panel at the Fourth Annual Seminar in Irish Studies held in 1971 at the University of Toronto, McLuhan was very much the performer in expressing various thoughts about the "electric theatre," to the delight of both his co-panelists and audience present.² Conversing with W. H. Auden and renowned Beckett actor Jack MacGowran, McLuhan asks "what the Greeks might have done with PA systems if they'd had them... would they have shunned the gramophone and radio?"³ Auden and MacGowran are categorical in their responses, MacGowran's retort that "they (the Greeks) would have been deadly against" being blunt and to the point.⁴ McLuhan answers by musing "whether this (incurSION of electronic media) will change acting and the problems of the visual organization of theatre is another question."⁵

In recent years the stage itself has entered the dialog, revisiting McLuhan and his theories. Examples include Michael Charrois' *The Illumination of Marshall McLuhan: An Interactive Multi-Media Performance Event* (2000), Jason Sherman's play *The Message* (2003–2018), Anne Bogart's Theater Artaud's production of *The Medium* (1995), and Mark Lawes' 2013 staging of *Sometimes Between Now and When the Sun Goes Supernova* at Theatre Junction Grand. Although diverse in approach and scope, all of the above theatrical treatments of McLuhan echo an increasing interest of the theatre in addressing the relationship of the live with technology in a "mediatized culture."⁶ In Auslander's view the two are not necessarily in opposition to each other, nor does the live necessarily precede the mediatized, instead being mutually interdependent.

1 Robin C. Whittaker, "Postmodern Display: Staging the Mind of Marshall McLuhan (1)," *Theatre Research in Canada* 27.1 (2006): 103.

2 "Theatre and the Visual Arts," Fourth Annual Seminar in Irish Studies held in 1971 at the University of Toronto. The discussion panel: Marshall McLuhan, W. H. Auden, Buckminster Fuller, Jack MacGowran. Moderator: Norman Jeffares. See: Mywebcowtube, "Marshall McLuhan 1971—Full debate with W. H. Auden and Buckminster Fuller," YouTube, June 14, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10owLAP6URc&t=39s>.

3 Mywebcowtube, "Marshall McLuhan 1971."

4 Mywebcowtube, "Marshall McLuhan 1971."

5 Mywebcowtube, "Marshall McLuhan 1971."

6 Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 10.

It is precisely this interdependence of the two that became my main focus in an attempt to research an academic interest in correlation to its reflection in live performance. I had often referenced McLuhan and his theories in teaching literature classes at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) beginning in the mid 1990s. This was intensified by a cross-appointment to NaUKMA's school of journalism in the 2000s, in both instances driven by not only an academic interest but also a personal act of memory arising out of attending McLuhan's classes at St. Michael's College in the 1970s.

The 2000s coincided with a growing personal involvement with theatre at Kyiv's Les Kurbas Centre for Theatre Arts, which resulted in 2003 in the production of an eponymously named play based on Oksana Zabuzhko's landmark novel *Polovi doslidzhennia z ukrainskoho seksu* (Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex).⁷ This experiment was theoretically fascinating in itself, as it provided the opportunity to in the capacity of a theater director stage a text that was central in my teaching of a course entitled "Feminist Readings of a Text" at NaUKMA. Regardless of the literary scandal created by the appearance of *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, work on the production in regard to collaboration with the author was entirely seamless, Zabuzhko's rider consisting of only one request—to be invited to the play's opening. It was partly this authorial no-conditions position regarding the use of her novel that provided the first impetus to consider another text by Zabuzhko for possible staging in the future, the idea for which was motivated by the search for a vehicle to bring McLuhan to the stage.

The fit seemed perfect. One of the texts in the *Sestro, sestro* (Sister, Sister) collection (2003), *I, Milena*, tells the story of a TV news anchorwoman who for her stellar performance at the station is rewarded with her own TV talk show. The unnamed show has the host interview women whose husbands have left them. The novella's intrigue builds when one evening watching her own show Milena begins to sense that the onscreen Milena has become an out-of-control double. From that point on the plot develops as a *doppelgänger* tale with the evil twin leading to its tragic climax. Zabuzhko's novella reflects a new TV presence in Ukraine at the beginning of the 21st century. In a period of little over a decade Ukrainian television was transformed from a Soviet state-run medium offering a handful of channels to a burgeoning combination of channels both state-run and private. Like many things in Ukraine at the time, the medium was

7 Oksana Zabuzhko's *Polovi doslidzhennia z ukrainskoho seksu* (Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex) was published in 1996 and immediately gave rise to a much discussed literary scandal, partly on account of its own myth-making: the first edition's back cover provocatively described Zabuzhko as "Henry Miller in a skirt." The novel's first-for-Ukrainian-literature overt discussions of sexuality in combination with explicit language (against the background of a wide-ranging overview of Ukrainian history and identity) guaranteed the book notoriety and its author fame. The novel spawned a new generation of feminist-themed writers creating confessional texts along with a whole counter-wave of anti-feminist sentiment. As of this writing, the novel has had 10 editions and has been translated into 11 languages. In addition to its adapted Ukrainian staging (2003) it was adapted for the stage at Warsaw's Teatr Polonia (2006).

being abruptly redefined, ironized by Zabuzhko in *I, Milena* by the glamorous news anchorwoman now having the power to “in the evening dissolve governments and parliaments and in the morning effortlessly bring them back.”⁸ As a television host, Milena is an example of a new type of talk-show personality of the late 1990s, all the more often female, for example popular journalist and later politician Olha Herasymiuk with her top-rated *Proty nochi* (Before Nighttime) show on the private 1+1 channel.

The reason for using Zabuzhko’s novella as a vehicle for introducing McLuhan to the Ukrainian theatrical audience was twofold. First, it in itself was a story touching upon many issues regarding media important for McLuhan. Second, its utilization would provide an ideal medium for presenting a theatrical discussion of McLuhan, at that time little known by the Ukrainian audience (outside of the academic community). Take 2 in working with the author proved that the first instance was not an aberration. Zabuzhko once again placed no conditions on the use of her novella and showed interest in the conception of the play’s production revolving around McLuhan. The play was conceived as reflecting McLuhan’s theories in both form and content. As there would be six television screens on set (both CRT and projection), one (the smaller of the 2 projections) could largely be dedicated to McLuhan himself. The montage shown included interviews with McLuhan, documentaries about him, even his appearance in a Woody Allen movie. The screen would sometimes intercut McLuhan’s words and thoughts with musings on media and communication that had been conceptualized for the play by a number of Ukrainian writers, those asked to participate having been informed of the play’s concept and McLuhan’s part in it.⁹ A compilation of these musings on a DVD disk was provided to each audience member with a sleeve containing information about the play, in one of a number of (subtle in intent, never coerced) attempts to actualize McLuhan’s thought that a characteristic of the “electric theatre” is its requisite unification of performer and audience, reflecting an earlier notion of the audience disappearing altogether, best exemplified by the example of the Mass as performance (other examples of audience participation in the play included inviting late arrivals help carry equipment onstage).¹⁰

The set’s largest screen was devoted to a representation of the abandoned wives of *I, Milena*. Five Ukrainian actresses were invited to appear in a combination of episodes,

8 Oksana Zabuzhko, *Sestro, Sestro* [*Sister, Sister*] (Kyiv: Fakt, 2003), 125. This edition marked the first unabridged publication of the novella. *I, Milena* was first published in 1998 in an abridged English-language translation in *Two Lands: New Visions. Stories from Canada and Ukraine*, eds. Janice Kulyk Keefer and Solomea Pavlychko (on the latter’s request as a submission to this anthology). The story was first published in Ukrainian (abridged) in *Kurier Kryvbasu 2* (1998).

9 Participants included writers Halyna Hlodz (on the anonymity of user nicknames on the internet), Marianna Kiianovska (the dangers of virtual existence), Mariia Kryvenko (personal relationships with technology), Oksana Lutsyshyna (TV fame and notoriety), Oksana Rybaruk (human communication), Mariana Savka (interpersonal distance communication), Maksym Strikha (history of a personal relationship with TV), and Taras Vozniak (hot and cold media).

10 Mywebcowtube, “Marshall McLuhan 1971.”

both described in Zabuzhko's story, and imagined. The stories included accounts of infidelity, jealousy, violence, and other aspects of dysfunctional relationships hinted at in the novella.¹¹ These were intercut with the fictionalized "confessions" of couples who had chosen to stay together despite marital difficulties and the counterpoint of a music video based on Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Want to Have Fun."¹² Talk-show host Milena was played by Halyna Stefanova, who had previously appeared as Oksana in *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*. Milena's part consisted of fragments adapted from Zabuzhko's novella along with fragments from other texts, for example, Mykola Kulish's *Narodnyi Malakhi's* (The People's Malakhy's) monolog about the new man in a distant blue yonder. Also present onscreen were imagined episodes from Milena's life and scenes from the movie *Being There*, based on Jerzy Kosinski's novel.

Milena's part linearly tells the Milena story following Zabuzhko's text, by itself making perfect sense, as do the stories being told onscreen, whether they be McLuhan's own words, scenes from *I, Milena*, or commentary on technology, the internet, and communications. Yet another screen featured the presentation of live television programming during the play's performance. A studio video camera operated by actress Marharyta Kulichova captured a video stream of Milena onstage that was being transmitted onscreen simultaneously with Milena's live performance, thus echoing the duality of the main heroine's existence. A similar experiment was being carried out by sound designer's Oleksander Chaika's live audio recording and re-transmission of Milena onstage along with the actress's live voice, although with added distortions such as reverberance amplified by a surround sound effect created by a multitude of speakers including above and under the audience seating area. This audience immersion effect was intensified by lighting designer's Yevhen Kopiov's lighting scheme that also included visual effects under the audience seating area. Both lighting and sound designers, including all of their equipment, were located onstage as part of the set concept. All this was meant to show the technology of play production onstage as an artistic fact rather than a technical facilitator or partner. Because of the sheer volume of audio and video equipment onstage technical glitches were foreseen and in regular occurrence. A stepped on cable, a dislocated connection or loose fastening among other mishaps were all foreseen and did eventually occur.

The production was an experiment, in Auslander's words, of the interdependence of dramaturgy and technology onstage rather than a fear of technology or irritation with it, as expressed by Auden and MacGowran in their UofT panel discussion with MacLuhan, in which McLuhan suggests that Auden's choice (in his own words) to reside in the 19th century is not an effective defense against the presence of new 20th

11 Actresses included Anna Aleksandrovych, Viktoriia Avdieienko, Valeriia Chaikovska, Liudmyla Diemientieva, and Lesia Humanetska, all actresses at major Kyiv and Lviv theatres.

12 Played by Oleh Drach, Tetiana Kaspruk, Oleksii Kravchuk, Olena Krylova, Oleh Stefan, and Oleh Tsiona. The music video featured NaUKMA MA literature students Maryna Bludsha, Tetiana Diachenko, Yelena Ivanuna, Yuliia Kropyvianska, Anastasiia Levkova, Sofiia Mamchych, Kateryna Mischchuk, Olha Poliukhovych, Daria Semenova, and Halyna Tkachuk.



Halyna Stefanova as Milena

century technologies.¹³ The Kurbas Centre's staging of *I, Milena* (entitled *Craziness for the Shiakuhachi, TV, and Voice*) attempted a crash course not only in introducing McLuhan to the Ukrainian theatre audience but also in immersing the audience in the live performance vs mediatized event debate. Toward this end upon entering the theatre the audience encountered an empty space shod entirely in black. First to emerge onstage was lighting director Kopiov, accompanied not by any equipment but by his shakuhachi, on which he began to play a meditative melody. In time he was followed by actress Stefanova in costume entering backstage and slowly progressing toward Kopiov in silence, then accompanying him by chanting and beginning a slow rendition of her text. The empty space was filled only by the human voice and the sound of the shakuhachi. It would be intruded upon by the gradual carrying onstage of various equipment: parts of a 5 meter high metal scaffold carried in by Chaika and myself (subsequently assembled), followed by speakers, cables, TV sets, sound and lighting equipment, tripods and cameras, accompanied by clanging and other cacophony, all the while the human voice and shakuhachi continuing to sound, now less audible to the audience. During the assembly of the scaffold and the setting up of various audio and video equipment the main large screen was electronically lowered, this being the only time during the play with the presence of a sole source of electronic sound in addition to the human voice.

The stage was gradually transformed from a theatrically unlit empty black space to a TV studio-like environment, or rather a comic-book version of one. With the addition of every piece of audio, video, and lighting equipment, each screen

13 Mywebcowtube, "Marshall McLuhan 1971."

introduced its version of discourse, supplemented by a score consisting of electronic sounds combined with the recording and re-transmission of Milena's part performed by the actress onstage. With the accumulation of sound sources it became less and less possible to discern individual voices, including the play's live text, all emerging from various parts of the stage, in result transforming the audio experience for the audience into a total antithesis of Cage's 4:33. The aural experience was augmented by a visual one, with a multitude of screens of all sizes, ranging from a small studio TV monitor to a 6 meter screen, including both front and back projection.

The most frequent reaction to the performance from audience members was that nothing could be separately heard or discerned onstage, causing irritation. It was impossible to fully make out what McLuhan was saying onscreen as it was impossible to properly hear what was being said onscreen either by writers instantly recognizable to many audience members or by actresses depicting scenes from the novella. Reviews of the play tended to echo the question of the incursion of technology theme, and not just in the theatre. In her article "Postcolonial Discourse in Stagings of Contemporary Prose Works in Ukrainian Theatre" Hanna Veselovska noted that in the play "postcolonial discourse was covered over by a clear anti-urbanistic pathos, Milena's revolt against a world of simulacra, against the absorption of human nature by technology."¹⁴ This was a comment on the stage version's transformation of Zabuzhko's novella, in which Milena is ultimately defeated in her struggle with her double. In the play the very last scene allowed for a very graphic revolt by Milena as she became one with her television image by slashing a screen onstage from behind with her projected live image still on it. This scene represented Milena's second attempt to physically immerse herself in the technology of her medium. She had previously taken apart a CRT television set onstage, leaving its innards exposed, picking up the front bezel through which she could now speak live rather than virtually. Milena's act of confronting technology and immersing herself in it in the stage version of the novella left an open ending as it was immediately followed by a total power outage, achieved by shutting off the supply of electricity to the theatre space by a lever pulled on its main electrical junction box. Total silence followed the previous crescendo of sound, which by that time could be interpreted as either an unstructured chorus of sound, both live and mediatized, or simply noise in its totality. The resulting total silence in total darkness was disrupted by the opening of a window stage left to sounds of the courtyard beyond it. I particularly remember one performance at which after the power outage, preceded by the sounds and flashes of a short-circuit causing it, the silence was broken by someone in the audience uttering "Oh God" rather loudly.

What may have seemed as the defeat of the ruinous effect of technology on humanity was once again encroached on by a mutation of it—in the absence of a supply of electricity a battery-powered cassette recording transmitted Milena's last words of

14 Hanna Veselovska, "Postkolonialnyi dyskurs v instsenizatsiakh suchasnoi ukrainskoi prozy teatramy Ukrainy [Postcolonial Discourse in Stagings of Contemporary Prose Works in Ukrainian Theatre]," *Visnyk Kyivskoho natsionalnoho universytetu kultury i mystetstv* 2 (2019): 75.

the story, *deus ex machina*. Zabuzhko's thought that even though the real Milena may be gone, a future Ukrainian channel-surfing TV viewer unaware of Milena's existence encountering a technical transmission glitch will nevertheless feel her presence in the medium, which she has become one with: "(they) will not know it was I, Milena" corresponds to McLuhan's notion that "technologies are merely extensions of ourselves, suggesting that the age-old question of the live vs the mediatized, asked by McLuhan regarding the ancient Greek theatre may be somewhat other than the clearly antagonistic relationship suggested by Auden and MacGowran.¹⁵ And not only by the above, of course. One of the great theoreticians of 20th century theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, made a point to emphasize that a "rich theatre," with all manner of technological possibilities would remain "second best" in the utilization of these technologies in comparison to their effect in their primary loci, that is in cinema and other forms of electric media: "No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. Consequently I propose poverty in the theatre."¹⁶ Commenting on the debate, Oleksandr Rutkovskyyi observed:

In front of us, both in the story's text and onstage—is not the cannibalistic devouring of the prey (Milena) by a predator (TV) as much as a happy coincidence of kindred souls and their mutual gravitation towards each other.¹⁷

In his article "The Televised Continuity of Being," Viktor Sobianskyi notes that

the play's creators are honest to the utmost with their audience and perhaps overly tolerant: they simply present a picture of the contemporary world, leaving everyone with their own choice as to how to react to the dangerous challenges of reality. They do not call on anyone to stop watching television, communicate by cell-phone, or use the social networks.¹⁸

Almost all commentary on the play, including Anastasia Haishynets', notes shock as an audience response: "Immersion into a multi-channel and in essence uncontrolled stream of audio and visual information evokes in the audience a state close to shock and

15 Zabuzhko, *Sestro, sestro*, 154; Marshall McLuhan, "Interview," in *McLuhan: Hot & Cool*, ed. Gerald Stearn (New York: Dial Press, 1967), 261.

16 Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge), 20.

17 Aleksandr Rutkovskyyi, "Trepanatsiia televizora [Trepanning the TV Set]," *2000 Weekly*, 14:553, April 8–14, 2011, F3.

18 Viktor Sobianskyi, "Televiziina tiahlist buttia. 'Variatsii dlia siaku-khati, televizora i holosu' u Tsentri Kurbasa [The Televised Continuity of Being. 'Variations for Shaku-hachi, TV, and Voice' at the Kurbas Centre]," *Kurbasivski chytannia* 6.1 (2006): 139–40.

a happy sigh of relief after the play's end."¹⁹ She continues by offering that *Craziness...* represents "the search for a new language and forms of communication with the contemporary individual who in principle can be little surprised or frightened by anything (especially within the framework of a theatrical presentation)."²⁰ Discussing intermediality in performance, Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx observe that "it is clear that digital technology and its capacity for image and sound manipulation significantly extend the potential to disorient the spectator," with the resulting shock effect.²¹ The authors continue to elaborate on the complex ways of how "digital technology interferes in the here and now of the live performance."²² Rutkovskyyi adds that such intermediality is "standard practise of the avant-garde, both in theatre and the cinema," but comments that "in this case (*Craziness...*) the polyphony of the media of expression, as I see it, has figurative meaning."²³ For myself, from the point of view of the play's creation, this hits home. In the production of *Craziness...* the intermediality of the play is a reflection of the intent to stage (in this instance McLuhan's) theory, an endeavor regarded as problematic by Robin C. Whittaker: "To stage theory in mimetic space is a problematic proposition for the playwright... such flirtations risk obscuring the presence of the performance text by the theory itself."²⁴ Which brings me back to my original intent to bring McLuhan and his theories to the stage, the question of presenting together the seemingly at odds—live performance with medialization and theory as a way of introducing McLuhan, due to a personal interest, to the Ukrainian audience in an artistic setting in addition to the academic one I had been engaged in my teaching at NaUKMA.

To end I'd like to summarize a social media discussion of the play involving *I, Milena's* author in regard to a visiting delegation from a Western European university in October 2011. Zabuzhko accompanied the group to the play's performance, commenting on her Facebook account "they say they've read the English-language translation of *Milena* and are demanding to see the author to hash things out... we'll see))."²⁵ She later posted her impressions of the discussion following the performance: "One of them, a journalist who had been in front of the Pechersk court and saw a parallel—

19 Anastasiia Haishynets, "Virtualno vyrazhaias: Eksperymenty nad tekstom Oksany Zabuzhko v Tsentre im. Lesia Kurbasa [Virtually Speaking: Experiments With Oksana Zabuzhko's Text at the Les Kurbas Centre]," *Kommersant Ukraine* 17, February 8, 2011, 4.

20 Haishynets, "Virtualno vyrazhaias," 4.

21 Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx, "Presence and Perception: Analysing Intermediality in Performance," in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, eds. Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, and Robin Nelson (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP), 219.

22 Nibbelink and Merx, "Presence and Perception," 221.

23 Rutkovskyyi, "Trepanatsiia televizora," F3.

24 Whittaker, "Postmodern Display," 101.

25 Oksana Zabuzhko, "Siohodni, 4 zhovtnia v Tsentri Kurbasa... [Today, October 4, in the Kurbas Centre...]," Facebook, October 4, 2011, <https://www.facebook.com/oksana.zabuzhko/posts/254060804638746/>.

the metaphor of a cacophany of the time.”²⁶ One of the delegation asked me (I was present at the above-mentioned discussion) if I had been inspired in the production of the play by the theatrilacized events in the streets of Kyiv, with their blaring sound systems and multiple screens marking the latest political crisis (the person posing the question not being aware that the play’s premiere had predated them). No, I answered, I was inspired by Marshall McLuhan.



Roman Veretelnyk is a graduate of the Universities of Toronto and Ottawa. He teaches literature and theory at the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and has taught at the Universities of Manitoba and Ottawa. His 1989 study “A Feminist Reading of Lesia Ukrainka’s Dramas” constituted the first modern application of feminist theory in Ukrainian literary studies. He has co-operated with the Les Kurbas National Center for Theatre Arts, directing four theater productions and one film. Current research interests include receptive theory, the works of Vasyl Stus, and documentary-biographical theatre.

26 Zabuzhko, “Siohodni, 4 zhovtnia v Tsentri Kurbasa...” Pechersk is a district of Kyiv.