

ABSTRACTS

ECHO. VOICE, ACOUSTICS AND THEATRICAL LISTENING IN FRANCE (SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY)

RETHINKING THEATRE AS A PLACE WHERE ONE HEARS, PUTTING THE SPOKEN VOICE AT THE CENTRE OF THE STUDY

ECHO was born out of the idea that the study of Western theatre, despite its vocal, sound, and acoustic aspects, was no exception to the overvaluation of the visual. The research prolonged an initial project titled “Theatre Sound (19th - 21st centuries)” with a refocusing on three aspects: on France, on the second half of the 20th century, and on the spoken voice. The ECHO project approached theatre as a space organised *by* and *for* the spoken voice, thus returning to the commonly accepted definition by modern acousticians of the theatrical space (end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th), which seemed to be less suitable: technologies (from microphones to tape recorders) had transformed the sound of the theatre; significantly, the relation to the text, to the verbal, to the language (here, the French language) had experienced major transformations. Based on the hypothesis that, in the vital domain of language, transformation does not denote disappearance, the team explored how artists and technicians, from post-World War II to the end of the 1990s, have renewed the conditions and forms of the stage spoken word and its listening. In doing so, ECHO has allowed the reintegration of the theatre, an art which has contributed to structure Western society, within today’s crucial reflections on our relationship to the art of practicing (listening, reading, memorising, vocalising – singing) a written or elaborated language.

A RESEARCH ACTIVATED BY INTERDISCIPLINARITY: SIX COMPLEMENTARY METHODS

Benefiting from the strong interdisciplinary culture of Performing Arts and Sound Studies, the ECHO team, comprised of scholars in theatre studies with a background in history, anthropology, architecture, literature, music and aesthetics, of researchers in sociology and philosophy, of librarians specialised in theatre and audio-visual media, of sound practitioners and technicians, and of acoustic researchers, has articulated in this research a collection of very different methods: listening and description of audio recordings of performances (between 1947 and 1997), in accordance with a gradually developed protocol; reconstitution of the architectural and acoustic history of the two theatres where these recordings were made (Palais de Chaillot and Théâtre de l’Athénée); 3D virtual reality auralisation of the Athénée theatre with actors’ voices moving on stage; the study of radio programs and records as theatre memory; an ethnographic survey with audience members who had often visited – among others – these two selected performance venues as well as a collection of stage managers and sound engineers testimonies; analysis of discourses and models according to which the theatrical sound space can be considered.

MAJOR RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

In order to share its results, ECHO has designed an educational multimedia website, “Hearing the Theatre”, which includes approximately one hundred sound archives accompanied by a methodology of listening, available through the BnF website. The 3D acoustic simulations, resulting from the historical studies, will also be included, thanks to new virtual reality platforms available to the general public (youtube360, facebook360). These works have contributed to the ANR2018-RASPUTIN project, which employs acoustic simulations in VR to assist the visually impaired.

ECHO has thus drawn wide attention to theatre sound archives and scientific techniques of auralisations of performance spaces. It has also contributed to a rethinking of the theatrical art and its place within the genesis and social circulation of poetic forms of orality. Collaborations with the National Archives and Ormete (Italy) are evidence of this dynamic.

OUTSTANDING FEATURES AND PERSPECTIVES

ECHO's productions include reusable methodological models: forms documenting performance recordings at several levels; comprehensive reports on the architectural and acoustic history of the theatres; 3D auralisations; specific analyses of records and radio documents; new oral archives resulting from the survey of audience members and the collection of testimonies from sound engineers. These productions have already led to a better consideration of sound by preservation institutions. The project has also shed light on its underpinning cultural issues: the 1950-1990 period did not experience a weakening of the verbal in favour of the visual or non-verbal, as today's History of Theatre tends to assert, but rather, reinventions of the stage spoken word and its listening, involving or accompanying new uses of the microphone, the foundation of several language conservatories/laboratories, and, from the 1980s, the demand for proper acoustics. The research also revealed the importance and durability of sound in the spectators' memory, particularly the spoken voices of some actors but, even more so, the sung voices and music, as well as the audience/stage aural situation. The place given by ECHO to the theatrical space and its technical characteristics (neglected in the analysis of performances) should lead to a rethinking of the theatre as a place of listening in the urban "cartophonies". This is one of the avenues opened for further research, as well as the articulation of the visual and auditory for the spectator, the evolution of sound professions, and the refinement of the oral/aural history of Western theatre.

SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTION

The list of publications is characterised by a high volume of specialised papers linked to the auralization task beginning in 2014; from 2015, by a significant number of collaborations with other institutions; by the choice of digital media for the two major collective publications of the project; and by an articulation of the academic papers with the educational multimedia website, designed for a range of audiences.

Quantitatively, ECHO has produced several multi-partner publications (each involving almost all partners) on an international level: three peer-reviewed journal issues – two *Revue Sciences Lettres (RSL)*, published by ENS Editions, and one *L'Annuaire théâtral* in Montreal – as well as a book (CNRS Editions). It has also produced a large number of single-partner publications, both international (twelve articles, including numerous contributions to *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, and six book chapters published in France as well as in Germany, Canada, and the USA) and national (with three journal issues, two books, five articles, and fifteen chapters). In addition to the two symposia and three international workshops organised by ECHO, there are twenty-two international single-partner papers (including many presentations by the acousticians at international conferences). In France, two one or two-day workshops (with the Théâtre de l'Athénée, with the National Archives and the Théâtre de Chaillot) involved several partners, in addition to nine single-partner papers, given in conferences or research seminars.

Complete list of publications: <https://echo-projet.limsi.fr/doku.php/comm>