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Soundscapes

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The Soundscape of *Ophelias Zimmer* / *Ophelia's Room*

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ABSTRACT – *Ophelias Zimmer* / *Ophelia's Room* is a feminist spin-off of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It retells the famous story of the Prince of Denmark from Ophelia's perspective and questions issues about the plot that are taken for granted – first and foremost, the reasons that led to the girl's death. As it will be shown in this paper, the play tells the story of Hamlet not only from Ophelia's viewpoint, but also from her 'earpoint' and thus defies ocularcentric theatre semiosis and builds a soundscape capable of denouncing the patriarchy even more effectively than both visual and linguistic elements. In this paper, *Ophelias Zimmer* / *Ophelia's Room* will be analysed using emerging theories on 'theatre noise' to demonstrate the dramatic and semiotic value of the play's silences, sounds, noises, embodied sounds, and musicality.

KEYWORDS – Ophelia; Shakespeare; Feminist criticism; *Hamlet's* afterlife; Reception; Soundscape; Noise; Silence; Sound; Theatre.

1. REWRITING *HAMLET* FROM OPHELIA'S 'EARPOINT'

Ophelias Zimmer / *Ophelia's Room* is a feminist spin-off of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It retells the well-known story of the Prince of Denmark from Ophelia's perspective. The nearly two-hour performance is exclusively set, as the title goes, in Ophelia's room, where a contemporary Ophelia lives as a convict, constantly listening to the noises, voices, and sounds belonging to both her mind and to an outside sphere from which she is excluded but which regulates her life. Sharing Ophelia's acoustic world, spectators can fully tune into the character and better understand her subjugation, as well as the violence perpetrated against her by patriarchal society. Hearing and identity construction are deeply linked in psychoanalysis. As Mladen Dolar points out, listening corresponds to obeying: "the commanding authority of the voice is already inscribed in the very posture of listening. As soon as one listens,

one has started to obey. The verb *to obey* stems from [...] Latin *oboedire*, to listen” (Dolar 1996, 28).

There are different elements which imply the prioritisation of aural-ity in *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* – as it probably was the case in Shakespeare’s times¹. First of all, the playtext is called ‘score’ and starts with a ‘prelude’ rather than a prologue, suggesting that musicality, in its wider meaning, has a major role in it. Furthermore, the play recognises the materiality and the dramatic presence of voices and sounds in comprising, among its characters, acoustic-only *dramatis personae*, i.e. ‘bruiters’ and ‘actorial voices’, which are, in most cases, visible on stage: Foley maid, Foley Ophelia, Foley Laertes and Polonius, Hamlet’s voice through tape recorder (played and stopped by Ophelia) and the recorded voice of Ophelia’s mother (reproduced as a sort of voiceover)². Finally, and most interestingly, playwright Alice Birch’s description of her act of rewriting Shakespeare contains revealing categories belonging to hearing, which highlight the importance of aural semiosis:

This piece is sparse. Shakespeare’s Hamlet is very *loud* and bombastic, and he takes up a lot of space and makes a lot of *noise* about his mental decline. And then you have this girl, relegated to offstage, and she is very *quiet*. And so, we tried to be quite faithful to that, while still making Ophelia the *loudest* part in the whole play. (Schaubühne Berlin, 1 Dec. 2015)

Leslie C. Dunn has pointed out the significance of music in constructing Ophelia as a madwoman in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and has also demonstrated how Ophelia uses music to resist against patriarchal impositions and against the male tendency to emblematised her, as when Laertes labels her “document in madness” (4.5.176). Dunn suggests Ophelia should be seen, instead, as a combative *figure of song*; she writes, “As female is opposed to male and madness to reason, so song in *Hamlet* is opposed to speech – particularly those modes of speech that serve defend the patriarchal order from the threat represented by Ophelia’s ‘importunate’ (4.5.2) self-expression” (Dunn 1994, 52). In *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* the protagonist is not noisy, does not sing and does not use music as a means of resistance, yet the play seems to respond to Dunn’s invitation in that it makes scarce use of dialogues, the main mode of discourse in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, while employing rhythmic

¹ On the centrality of sounds in the theatre of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and on early modern ‘sonic dramaturgy’, see Smith 1999, Folkerth 2002, and Lindley 2006.

² The sound design is by Max Pappenheim. See interview in the Appendix to this paper.

silences, noises and voices, whose utterances at times disintegrate syntax. The play can therefore be considered a rebellious 'feminist composition', in dissonance with Shakespeare's dialogue-centred play, representing the cacophonous, imposing and invasive 'sounds' of patriarchy as perceived by Ophelia.

As it will be shown in this paper, *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* defies both ocularcentric and speech-centred theatre semiosis while providing a feminist reading of *Hamlet* through a soundscape capable of denouncing the patriarchy even more effectively than both visual and linguistic elements.

2. SHAKESPEAREAN AND WOOLFEAN ECHOES

Besides Shakespeare's words, this alternative reading of *Hamlet* seems to echo, amplify, and spread feminist voices, in particular the one of Virginia Woolf. This is, indeed, the work of feminist, avant-garde professionals, who could count on a unique, international cooperation between theatres. Originally written in English by Alice Birch, the play was directed by Katie Mitchell, designed by Chloe Lamford and performed in German translation, with English surtitles, first in Berlin and then in London³, it being the first co-production between the Schaubühne and the Royal Court Theatre that showed at both theatres⁴. The fact that, in the performance score, English and German coexist, since dialogues are translated into German but stage directions are in English, is suggestive of the international dimension of this project, authored by a particularly radical and promising all-women trio⁵.

³ The text was translated by Gerhild Steinbuch (born in 1983), an Austrian playwright with an academic background in Dramaturgy and in Creative Writing for the Stage. She won the Berlin Schaubühne Playwriting Competition in 2003 and has, since then, obtained several other prizes and grants. Besides writing for prose and music theatre, she teaches Drama and works as a freelance dramaturg and translator from English. Besides Alice Birch's *Ophelia's Room*, she has translated other plays for the Berlin Schaubühne, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2013), directed by Katie Mitchell, and Shakespeare's *Last Play* (2018) by the Dead Centre, written and directed by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd.

⁴ *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* premiered at the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in Berlin on 8 December 2015. The guest performance was first staged at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs on 17 May 2016.

⁵ This accounts for my including the German version of some particularly relevant quotations in note.

Alice Birch (born in 1986) is an unconventional, emerging English playwright and screenwriter. Her discomforting works investigate the female question, taking into account social, cultural and linguistic issues. As Laura Collins-Hughes puts it, “Alice Birch speaks softly and writes loud plays” (Collins-Hughes 2016). Providing a female outlook on topics such as suicide, pregnancy, pornography, working life, marriage and child abuse, her plays openly reflect her strong belief that “we still need the word feminism” (Dickson 2015), even in the twenty-first-century Western society. Designer Chloe Lamford (born in 1980), associate at the Royal Court theatre, shares with Alice Birch a cutting-edge idea of theatre and of her own role in it. Her interest is in “the dramaturgy of design within theatre, not just ‘what’s the set?’” (Featherstone in Kelting 2015). She considers stage designing as an integral part of the performance, capable of creating moods, inner conflicts and impressive experiences – thus, drama, through metaphorical correspondences between images, ideas, and emotions. “I design feeling”, she once revealed in an interview, “It’s why I’m so obsessed with things moving, and the kinetics of a show, because time and space is choreographic” (Lamford in Trueman 2018; see also Jays 2017). Director Katie Mitchell (born in 1964) is at the heart of the creative group and definitely in tune with its experimental vocation. In her long and prolific career, she has worked on many canonical classics to provide a feminist reading of them, using a very challenging theatre aesthetic.

This radical approach, together with outspoken feminism, made Katie Mitchell not only a controversial director in her homeland, but also an unanimously beloved one abroad, mainly in Germany, where she was twice invited to the acclaimed Berlin Theatertreffen showcase. Mitchell’s artistic home in Germany is the Berlin Schaubühne, not only for her longstanding friendship with resident director Thomas Ostermeier and executive director Tobias Veit, but also because of the freedom of expression and the creative inspiration she is granted there. In an interview, she stated: “They allow me to make the work that I really want to make and push me to make work that I’d never imagined I could make”; she also affirmed that working for German audiences is highly motivating, because of what may be described as a Brechtian cultural legacy, “in the UK [...] they go to the theatre to escape, whereas, in Germany, they come to be challenged” (Mitchell in Potter 2019).

Birch, Lamford and Mitchell genuinely worked collectively, as testified by Royal Court artistic director Vicky Featherstone’s words, when she states, “[that of] the five stages of drowning [...] was Chloe’s idea. So it’s incredibly

collaborative. It's also like that with the writer, Alice Birch" (Kelting 2015), and by the rehearsal diary, which reads:

Alice Birch (Writer) is integral to the creative development process occurring in rehearsals. *Ophelias Zimmer* is a new work in its own right, rather than merely an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Therefore, it is a privilege to have Alice in the room to edit, cut and extend the text. Sometimes the text is updated in response to staging ideas that arise in rehearsals. Sometimes the direction is adapted in response to new ideas that arise in the text. [...] This innovative and successful process is only possible due to the truly collaborative relationship between Katie and Alice. In rehearsals, we work from a 'performance score' consisting of Alice's dialogue and stage directions as well as Katie's stage directions and dramaturgical structure of delineated events. It's a constantly evolving document. (Royal Court Theatre n.d.)

This close-knit trio has been defined by Elaine Aston as made of "creative women who descend not from the bard but from his sister Judith as Woolf imagined her, the woman for whom writing was impossible given her gender and material circumstances". Their cooperative work, she writes, "evinces a creative response to Woolf's line of early twentieth-century questioning [...] 'how a woman nowadays would write a poetic tragedy in five acts'" (Aston 2016). The Woolfean heritage can be further demonstrated by considering the title of the play, *Ophelia's Room*, where the word 'room' does not correspond exactly to Ophelia's 'closet' in Shakespeare (2.1.77)⁶, but rather to what is in the title of Woolf's milestone essay *A Room of One's Own*. Moreover, the all-women group works on a tragedy in five acts to bring centre stage a character, Ophelia, whose story, as Shakespeare wrote it, suggestively shares many points with Woolf's Judith's: she has a brother who is allowed to do things she is not being a woman, she is denied the right of choosing her partner, she is taught the importance of chastity for women, she is led to madness by patriarchal demands, and she finally takes her own life as a consequence of societal pressures.

Conceptually, *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* is definitely in line with Woolf's call for emancipation. Indeed, the project was conceived as "a feminist antidote to *Hamlet*" (Featherstone in Kelting 2015)⁷, and breaking the

⁶ My reference edition of *Hamlet* is The Arden Shakespeare, Bloomsbury (2011).

⁷ *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* was the result of the trio's will "to push the boundaries of roles for women" (Featherstone in Kelting 2015), something experienced on stage by the actress Jenny König, starring in Mitchell's performance, who also played

boundaries of patriarchy is exactly what *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* does: it dares to challenge Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and its more than 400-year-long reception⁸, openly asking its audience "whether there isn't something toxic and deeply misogynist being dragged through history on the coat tails of heroes, like Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth, something that may still be influencing our own modern-day gender relationships" (Mitchell 2016). The point they make is that patriarchal values reverberate from generations to generations through Shakespeare's masterpieces as well, mainly through plays like *Hamlet*, in which the female protagonist appears in 5 scenes only (1.3, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 4.5) and has merely 58 speeches which is minimal compared to the 358 speeches by Hamlet⁹. In Shakespeare, Ophelia is trapped by the constraints of a patriarchal society in the crucial passage from girlhood to womanhood. The play clears that this graduation does not imply an act of empowerment, but rather a transfer of 'ownership' of the girl's identity. Polonius, who is extremely concerned about his daughter's company and 'private time' (1.3.92), states, "I have a daughter – have while she is mine" (2.2.106), thus defining Ophelia as a piece of property destined to become someone else's possession, i.e. her future husband's. He also alludes to the marketability of the girl's virginity and explicitly points to the fact that Hamlet, as a man, is allowed to be what she, as a woman, is not: free and self-indulgent (1.3.120-26). Likewise, Laertes tells Ophelia:

Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain
If with *too credent ear you list his songs*,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmaster'd importunity. (1.3.29-32; italics mine)

Despite all this, Ophelia is not portrayed as a completely passive character, but as a witty woman with her own thoughts and even knowledge of the world, who is ultimately driven to erase herself in the name of obedience. As highlighted by Coppélia Kahn, "before she bows to the authority of her

Gertrude and Ophelia in Ostermeier's staging of *Hamlet* (in the Schaubühne repertoire since 2008).

⁸ For a feminist reading of Ophelia's afterlife, see Showalter 1985, Thompson 1988 and Rhodes 2016.

⁹ These data derive from The Open Source Shakespeare, site at <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/characters/charlines.php?CharID=ophelia&WorkID=hamlet&cues=1> and <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/characters/charlines.php?CharID=hamlet&WorkID=hamlet> respectively (14/12/2019).

father and her brother, she voices her own views" (Kahn 2012, 233), and in the mousetrap scene, when Hamlet uses sexual innuendos (3.2.113-20), she is ready to join in and make a play on words herself. The reception history of Ophelia appears mostly unaware of these elements and has reiterated the image of a gorgeous, passive young woman, emblematised by the Pre-Raphaelite painted representations of the character – such as John Millais's *Ophelia* (1851-1852) – as a beautiful and 'exquisite'¹⁰ drowning young woman in an atmospheric river, full of colourful flowers and romantic foliage. Paradoxically enough, the internationally known icon of Shakespeare's Ophelia has been shaped not by what the character speaks and performs on stage, but by Gertrude's report of her death, whose reliability is obviously questionable. This phenomenon is also a demonstration, to a certain extent, of the power exercised on reality by hearing. The reception of Ophelia has been influenced more by Shakespeare's play's 'telling' about the character than by its 'showing', although Gertrude's speech may be well described as an ekphrasis. *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room*, as the programme reads, challenges these "received cultural images of Ophelia both in art and on stage"¹¹. The play is therefore an answer to what Elaine Showalter would call the feminist responsibilities towards Ophelia: revenging her from Jacques Lacan's critical disregard and "exposing the ideology of representation" (Showalter 1985, 92) that lies at the basis of the reception of the character through time.

In the following section, *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* will be analysed through emerging theories on 'theatre noise'¹² to demonstrate the

¹⁰ On the adjective 'exquisite' in the reception of the character of Ophelia, see Lerer 2012.

¹¹ Accordingly, the traditional iconographic attributes of Ophelia are deconstructed, to offer a re-picturing of the character, as it is well exemplified by the repressed natural, Pre-Raphaelite beauty of the actress Jenny König whose long slightly curly strawberry blond hair is not loose and interspersed with tiny flowers, but rolled into a bun, and whose graceful body is not exalted by fluttering elegant clothing, but hidden and demeaned by humble and chaste black dresses. On the iconography of Ophelia, see Lyons 1977 and Kiefer 2001; on the representations of Ophelia in different times and places, see Peterson and Williams (eds.) 2012.

¹² The dimension of sound is crucially important in contemporary English drama (see Rebellato, ed., 2013). 'Theatre noise' is a term coined by Lynn Kendrick and David Roesner to define a theatrical acoustic aesthetic (not merely the presence and production of sounds for the stage). "It expresses the innate theatricality of sound design and performance, articulates the reach of auditory spaces, the art of vocality, the complexity of acts of audience, the political in produced noises" (Kendrick and Roesner 2011, xv). It provides

dramatic and semiotic value of the play's silences, sounds, noises, embodied sounds, vocality and musicality, which are used to challenge Ophelia's traditional reception.

3. DROWNED IN SOUNDS

The five parts of the play are named after the five stages of drowning, whose clinical description is provided at the beginning of each part: surprise (prologue), involuntary breath-holding (act one), unconsciousness (act two), hypoxic convulsions (act three), and clinical death (epilogue)¹³. As the stages of drowning are introduced, the protagonist is shown undergoing them figuratively, asphyxiated not by water, but by the paralysing requests and impositions of a patriarchal society unto a young woman.

Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room makes Ophelia's character 'louder' by showing what in Shakespeare is unshown, namely her offstage life, and questioning issues about the plot that are revealed to be far more complex than commonly surmised, specifically the reasons that led to the girl's death, which this rewriting highlights. Some critics have noticed how in Shakespeare Ophelia's death takes a marginal place to the rest of the story. For example, Dunn points out that Ophelia's end is typical of an opera heroine, but her exit from the play does not correspond to the play's climax, as it happens in operas, and is not even represented on stage (Dunn 1994, 62). On the contrary, *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* ends with Ophelia's depart and shows the girl's death as an act of resistance, in a most impressive scene: exhausted by her failed attempts at speaking her voice and contrasting those who want to control her life, Ophelia kills herself by slitting her throat and then slides into the water that has slowly invaded her room – thanks to an ingenious pool created by Lamford.

Patriarchal constraints are visualised on stage through minimal but highly significant scenery. Ophelia's bedroom is spartan, colourless and aus-

a theoretical framework to soundscape studies (see Schafer 1994) applied to theatre (dramatic literature and performance). On this topic, see also Bocciero 2015. On the connections between literature and music, see the collection edited by Ciompi *et al.* 2018.

¹³ The play has not been published. Quotations are taken from the "Performance Score OZ" kindly provided by Jennifer Thomas, Alice Birch's agent, in both the original English written by Alice Birch (Birch 2015a) and the German translation which was performed (Birch 2015b).

tere: there is an iron bedstead with white sheets and a chair with a night table for an attendant, as one would find in a hospital or in a prison where surveillance is constant and usually 'paternalistic'; a dustbin near the door; a banister full of dark dresses, which are put on Ophelia during the performance by her maid making her look "bloated, like a real drowned person" (Lamford in Jays 2017); and a cheval mirror, used as a bedside table, devoid of its mirror. This detail suggests that Ophelia is not allowed to look at herself and thus have a clear idea of her own identity.

However, it is at the aural level that the metaphor of drowning finds its most expressive power and performativity. Silence plays a major role. As reviewers report, in Ophelia's bedroom, nearly nothing happens through the whole show – not without some kind of frustration on the part of the audience. Ophelia is mostly silent in her daily routine made up of reading, sewing, taking on and off her boots and shoes, getting in and out of bed, receiving flowers and throwing them into a dustbin after repeating the four syllable nominal clause "The flowers again" (Birch 2015a, 1, 6, 11, 18, 23)¹⁴, humming, listening to Hamlet's hammering tapes, briefly going out of the room and then coming back until her father forbids her from doing so, sleeping, having nightmares and finally waking up to repeat it all over again. Her long silences convey not only a sense of desperation, but also the awareness of the slow passing of time in her aimless life. The coexistence of these silences with repeated gestures and actions suggests a cyclical rhythm, as shown by this cadenced, 'silent performance':

OPHELIA is standing in her nightdress and coat. Her hair is a little wet. She takes off her coat, her boots. Sits on the floor and leans against the bed. She stands up. She lies down upon the bed. She cannot close her eyes. She gets up. Sits down. She goes to the door. She sits down. She lies down. She sits on the edge of the bed. She stands up. She sits down. She lies down. She looks at the ceiling. She puts her hands over her eyes. Her legs hang off the end of the bed. She swings her feet. Curls up. Stands up. Sits down. (10)

Ophelia's silences have also the effect of highlighting the flood of sounds and voices coming from the outside world.

In this play, sounds are used with different functions and give the audience specific information on the dramatic action, mainly concerning time, as it is common in the theatre (Leonard 2001; Edgar 2009, 156-61): there is the

¹⁴ "Wieder Blumen" (Birch 2015b, 2, 6, 11, 17, 22).

“sound of cockerel” (Birch 2015a, 17, 22, 29) to mark the beginning of a new day (the plot encompasses nine days from January 13 to 21), the “sound of the gong for dinner” (4, 8), and the ringing of “a dinner bell” (15, 20, 27, 34). Sounds are also used for the information flow – to provide the audience with information about the plot. In this specific case, sounds evoke the well-known events of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which are only heard here from offstage. Here follows an example, concerning Gertrude and Claudius’s wedding party:

She hears music from the wedding at the castle. She stops sewing. She goes over to the window continues to listen to the tape. [...]

She sits on bed.

Outside, the noise of fireworks [Noises of wedding celebrations from the castle]

She stands, goes to the window.

She watches the fireworks.

She goes to bed.

There is another firework. (13, 15)

In Birch and Mitchell’s style, there are definitely points of convergence with Samuel Beckett’s musical aesthetic (see McGrath 2017): both strive to recreate music’s immediacy of expression in drama, use repetitive speech patterns, provide rhythm through internal micro-repetitions of terms and actions, use silences with musical and dramatic purposes and concentrate on sounds more than on words.

A plethora of other sounds can be heard from Ophelia’s room, suggesting the idea of people moving and living their lives while Ophelia is entrapped in her room, obliged (as the audience is) to listen to those sounds: “sound of door closing” (Birch 2015a, 4), “footsteps in corridor” (2), “footsteps on gravel” (2), “footsteps in living room” (4), “footsteps up the stairs” (14), “the front door opens and footsteps are loud in the hall” (*ibid.*), “the front door bangs” (*ibid.*), “faint noises below her room of a man running on gravel [...] noises of running on gravel get fainter” (16), “noise of a gunshot (3 shots) from the castle” (39), “sound of sirens” (40), and “foley water” (49) seeping into Ophelia’s room, slowly inundating it. The effect of these sounds (resulting from friction, clashing and explosion) is much more than informative in that they are crucial in creating the main mood of the play: the feeling of captivity and of being entrapped and violated as well as the unpleasant idea of not being able to decode exactly what is happening around, which causes a sensation of being menaced and vulnerable. These sounds may thus be classified as ‘intrusive noises’, using an interesting definition coined by Katharina Rost to

describe the way in which “some types of contemporary theatre performance use noises in very specific and powerful ways” to involve spectators and obtain “the power to touch the listener in a direct physical way and to capture the audience’s attention, with or against their will” (Rost 2011, 44, 45).

Rost explains the quality of being intrusive by referring to the Latin etymology of the word, “intrudere, meaning ‘to thrust oneself into an estate or benefice’”, and describes it as “a movement of someone or something into a geographically or socially defined space without having been invited or legitimised to do so” (46). Noises, however, cannot be defined as ‘intrusive’ in absolute terms but acquire this characteristic depending on the context and mode of their production and of their perception. On further developing Rost’s theory, one may focus, first of all, on the type of sound direction. In *Ophelias Zimmer*, sounds are perceived as intrusive, primarily because they follow an outside-inside trajectory, coming from the surrounding world and bursting into the girl’s bedroom. Further, if it is true that “a given sound”, as William W. Gaver states, “provides information about an interaction of materials at a location in an environment” (Gaver 1993, 4) – what Albert Bregman defines as the “energetics of a situation” (Bregman [1990] 1994, 37) – it is also true that sounds function as signals of a situation that one can fully grasp only by perceiving them through the other senses too. The aforementioned sounds in *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia’s Room* thus create a sense of violation, since they penetrate the girl’s private room and also allude to a series of potential dangers that create an atmosphere of continuous alertness. This intrusiveness is demonstrated by Ophelia’s gesture of putting her hands over her ears, particularly when she hears Hamlet shouting at her “Ophelia” and repeatedly pronouncing the hammering line “FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU” (Birch 2015a, 27, 33, 41) ¹⁵.

The acoustic movement of the aforementioned sounds allows a sort of *mise en position* of the spectators who, together with Ophelia, feel immersed in sounds and drown in them with her. The soundscape thus makes it possible for the audience not to only have an emotional background stimulus (Leonard 2001, 142) but also to identify with Ophelia as they share the same ‘earpoint’ and experience her “auditory captivation” (Rost 2011, 45). In a play such as *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia’s Room*, this strategy becomes semantically important as sounds are used to signify the suffocating consequences of the patriarchal system.

¹⁵ “FICK DICH. FICK DICH. FICK DICH” (Birch 2015b, 26, 32, 38, 39).

The intrusive nature of sounds is also personified on stage, in that most of the noises and short speeches belonging to the world outside the room are produced by the foley characters mentioned above, who are in a glass-fronted sound-booth on one side of the stage. According to Aleks Sierz, “this adds nothing to the effect of the piece except as a distraction from the intensity of the acting” (Sierz 2016). However, by focusing on the aural semiosis of the play, this element may be given different meanings. On the one hand, the sounds highlight the loudness of male characters in the play and also, simultaneously, Ophelia’s silence. On the other hand, as stated by Elaine Aston, this sound intrusion can be read as a symbol for “patriarchal surveillance, but in tension with a metaphorical sensing of the desire to ‘lock’ the controlling power out of Ophelia’s story” (Aston in Sierz 2016).

The aggressiveness of Hamlet’s voice takes the form of recorded tapes for Ophelia, who listens to the love messages contained in them as they become more and more erotic and obscene. The words are then so violent that Ophelia cannot stand them anymore and stops the cassette recorder to put the tapes away. The same lack of respect and male sense of omnipotence is conveyed in the scene where Hamlet breaks through the room and shouts at Ophelia while pulling her and dancing to Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart”. It is thus the auditory level again that Birch relies on for characterisation: the 1980 rock song is emblematic of Hamlet’s egotism and preoccupation only with his own pains and feelings while remaining unconcerned with Ophelia’s. As noticed by Catherine Love:

Wildly thrashing his limbs to “Love Will Tear Us Apart”, Renato Schuch’s Hamlet invites an immediate comparison with Ian Curtis, a man tragically obsessed with death and determined to inhabit his own myth, even to the extent of his own destruction. But every act of destruction has its accidental victims, its civilian casualties, of which Ophelia is one. This is Hamlet as careless egotist, focused on his own meandering path to revenge at the expense of all others around him. While he dances, lost in indulging his own emotions, Ophelia sits in a chair and sobs. (Love 2016)

Ophelia’s life is also haunted by a voice that does not come from the outside, but from her inner self. More precisely, one can hear the cryptic sentences of Ophelia’s late mother, embodied on stage through a recorded voice. The kind of materiality given to these words is telling: they are not airy words but are significantly impressed on Ophelia; they are indelibly making up the halts, inhibitions and reproaches of her super-ego exactly like a recording. They

tell the girl about proper manners for a woman and about the need for social compliance; they even state Ophelia's mother would have been happier if her daughter had been a boy. Moreover, Ophelia's mother hints at gloomy past events lived with her little daughter, marked by enclosure and repression, which she mildly accepted:

Put your mouth up to the gap. I want to see that little O, my little O, there on the tiles. Don't cry, Ophelia. Don't cry. You're making puddles, all over the floor. (Birch 2015, 22) ¹⁶

Ophelia's inner voice, despite being feminine, tragically follows the patriarchal logic.

4. FEMINIST RESONANCES

After Ophelia has seen the body of her dead father, dragged into her room by Hamlet, there is a turning point in the story. In the girl's room, there appears a gentleman who gives her some kind of drug to annihilate her and wipe out the evidence of Hamlet's stalking and murder. He searches for all the tapes in the room to take them away and obliges Ophelia to say that Hamlet did not kill her father.

As the gentleman operates on Ophelia's consciousness, "water begins to slowly trickle into the room" (Birch 2015, 49) and fills it up to knee depth, accompanied by the sound of foley water, but at a fictional level, only Ophelia can see and hear it. First, Ophelia listens to her mother's urge to smile, flatten and sink with her eyes down (whose prosody is mesmerising):

Sink in. Sink in sink in and flatten. Eyes down, Ophelia. Eyes down. Eyes down, eyes down and breathe in. Smile Ophelia. Smile Ophelia. I can't get out. Smile Ophelia. I can't get to you. Smile Ophelia. I can't get out. (*ibid.*) ¹⁷

¹⁶ "Leg deinen Mund an die Öffnung. Ich will das kleine O sehn, mein kleines O, da, auf den Fliesen. Wein doch nicht, Ophelia. Wein nicht. Du tropfst mit deinen Pfützen ja den ganzen Boden voll" (Birch 2015a, 21).

¹⁷ Versinken. Versinken versinken und flach. Blick nach unten, Ophelia. Blick nach unten. Blick nach unten, Blick nach unten und atme ein. Lächle Ophelia. Lächle Ophelia. Ich komm hier nicht raus. Lächle, Ophelia. Ich komm nicht bis zu dir. Lächle, Ophelia. Ich komm hier nicht raus (Birch 2015a, 46).

Then, Ophelia repeats herself these words and, humming a sad song her mother hummed before, she makes her last desperate attempts to react but becomes increasingly feeble before finally taking a pair of scissors and slitting her throat – suggestively the part of the body where the phonatory organs are. Immediately after that, she slips into the water. Ophelia's drowning happens in a flood of social sounds before the water fills the room. She thus becomes the emblem of a self-imposed feminine silence, overwhelmed by the loudness of the male world.

Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room is a feminist project resonating different feminist calls. It is an answer to the seminal essay by Elaine Showalter, urging feminist criticism to take up its responsibilities and change the reception history of this character, which has been interpreted over the centuries according to the patriarchal archetype of woman or, better, madwoman. It is a play that follows Leslie C. Dunn in reading Ophelia as “a *figure of song*” (Dunn 1994, 50) rather than a “document in madness” (Shakespeare 2011, 4.5.176) and in highlighting the disruptive and challenging value that music is given in the early modern text, since the play embraces Ophelia's expressive mode. Despite representing an ultimately victimised female character, the playwright uses sonic elements and musicality to highlight the brutality of patriarchal values.

As argued by Elaine Aston, “with its woman-centred focus and textured ‘language’”, the play is also a response to “Cixous's seminal call for ‘writing women’”. Even if it has a dystopic ending, it shows that “a century after Woolf and despite numerous interventions on the part of feminist writers and practitioners, [female emancipation] is still ‘in the twilight of the future’” (Aston 2016). It is exactly to Virginia Woolf, ultimately, that this play responds, in that it is focused on Ophelia's room, and, as hinted above, Woolf advocated the need for a woman to have a room of one's own to strive for equality in fiction writing. In her celebrated essay on women and literature, Woolf explains how she came about with the idea of the need for a room of one's own to support women's emancipation, and she does it through a fictional tale, narrated in the first person. The story revolves around a woman who, like the Ophelia of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, was deep in thought on the banks of a river near an old college. Lost in her inner world, the woman began to walk on the turf, where only Fellows and Scholars were allowed, and was namely yelled at by a Beadle from a distance, to remind her that she was only allowed to walk on the gravel. It took the woman some time to understand what was happening, because, while strolling through the college, her “body seemed contained in

a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate, and the mind, freed from any contact with facts [...], was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment" (Woolf [1929] 2015, 5). Every woman's room, in Woolf's acceptance of it, should function as that miraculous, soundless cabinet, which may correspond to the feeling one has staying underwater (in a "glassy stream", Shakespeare 2011, 4.7.167), hearing nothing and watching the world outside as through a glass. At the end of *Ophelias Zimmer*, a glass box is lowered over the girl's room, "framing her like a museum exhibit" (Jays 2017). With Woolf's text in mind, this image can be read both as a quotation of a feminist staple message and a metaphor of its failure.

APPENDIX. AN INTERVIEW WITH MAX PAPPENHEIM, *OPHELIA'S ZIMMER'S* SOUND DESIGNER ¹⁸

Maria Elisa Montironi (MEM)

Thanks for accepting this e-mail interview.

Max Pappenheim (MP)

Thank you, Maria Elisa. I'm really glad that you found *Ophelias Zimmer* stimulating and I'd be very happy to help. It was a wonderful project to be a part of, and I still have plenty of questions about it myself. I anticipate that these are my own personal reflections. Not everything I say is an accurate representation of the intentions or opinions of the Director or of the team as a whole. I am sure that my view has evolved over the several years since the production was made. But these are my thoughts at this point.

MEM

Well, then... Let us start. What is the role of sounds in *Ophelias Zimmer* from your point of view?

¹⁸ This interview, which has been edited for publication, took place via email in May 2020. Questions and answers are faithfully reproduced here. I thank Max Pappenheim for his time and kind cooperation in answering my questions.

MP

The play aimed to present the experience of Ophelia and allow the audience to interrogate both the character's experience and how this affects their relationship with Hamlet (both the character and the play). The starting point was a document that laid out the events in *Hamlet*. Sound allowed us to present many of these events realistically as observed from a distance (for example, the wedding party was represented by the sounds of music, celebrating guests, and fireworks). It also allowed us to interpolate Ophelia's day-to-day existence. The sounds of Polonius in the house, leaving for work, and returning, for example, gave Ophelia's existence a structure/routine that helped us move inside her head. "Sound design" largely involves making very precise choices about the exact sounds to be heard. For example, we chose the music that Polonius listens to after dinner very carefully. Before Laertes departs, upbeat jazz; after he leaves and Polonius retires alone each evening, a more wistful waltz. The role of sound thus serves both a practical purpose, and an emotional one. The combination of these two is what I would term "storytelling", and is at the heart of Sound Design. Further to this, and moving away from "realistic" sound, but still within the realm of "storytelling", is the abstract expressive sound – the underscoring and motifs that represent (for example) the emotional atmosphere, Ophelia's inner reaction to the appearance of the flowers and letters each time – and the symbolic sound – the bell and "humming" that together indicate the passage of time.

MEM

To what extent did you "author" the play?

MP

Katie Mitchell has developed a highly collaborative process for building a play. If "author" is taken to mean "participate in the creation of the work", I would say I was heavily involved – with Alice Birch, Katie and Chloe Lamford as the principal creators (I joined at the stage where rehearsals began, after they had conceived and begun to plan the work), with myself, the actors (including our collaborators Michelle Terry and Paul Ready), Lily McLeish, Jude Christian and Kat Huoy as the next level of collaborators. Fabiana Piccioli (Lighting Designer) was less present in rehearsals but once we began to rehearse onstage her contribution was very important to both the clarity of storytelling (especially regarding time of day and therefore the sequence

of events) and the emotional life of Ophelia. “Author” sometimes has connotations of “bring forth ideas fully formed” and this was not a feature of *Ophelias Zimmer*. When rehearsals began we had a very short “script” draft of (I think) three pages representing perhaps ten minutes of the eventual production. Everything else grew out of rehearsals and the improvisations that we made. As I was in rehearsals throughout, I consider that a lot of my contributions from the earliest stages were critical to the eventual shape of the piece. One aspect was the live-foley sound which I facilitated (by providing microphones, etc.) and coached the actors in (although they brought a lot of their own experience to this also).

MEM

The sound of patriarchy is a cacophony made of shouts and noises in *Ophelias Zimmer*. Do you think that sound designing means creating metaphors?

MP

I have long been keen on the word “symbol” alongside or instead of “metaphor”; the two aren’t quite interchangeable, but I do believe that much if not most theatre is profoundly symbolic. I am often unsure quite which category sound in theatre fits into. As mentioned above, I am clear on the duality of sound in theatre. It is both literal and abstract; specific and vague; practical and emotional. So, yes “but also”! Sound is about both creating metaphors and presenting realities. Sometimes a writer has created/dictated the metaphor in advance (e.g. when the script calls for “a sound of thunder”, or “a sound like a breaking string in the sky”). Sometimes a writer has provided an opportunity for a metaphor, sometimes even without realising (“it is Sunday morning” – so the world outside may be very quiet indeed until the bells begin calling people to church – whereas the writer had only made it Sunday because a character would otherwise be at work, and the location may or may not be within earshot of a church that rings bells). Often we look for opportunities for metaphor: we decide to establish a certain weather state, or place a clock in the room, or have a radio on next door. In *Ophelias Zimmer* we discovered early on the interesting possibility of the audience being conscious that the sound of Ophelia’s world is created/operated by men. Even her personal space is shaped by their actions. This adds a new, performative dramaturgical layer to the story. Early experiments considered what would happen if the men one day refused to make the sounds for Ophelia’s room and she was, quite literally, muted. We also experimented with making all of

the foley props wet once the room began to flood, extending that metaphor into the making of the play itself. As you point out, a list of the sounds of the play is dominated by men's voices and sudden eruptions of male-initiated violence; but also simply sounds that the male characters make and women do not. It is men's footsteps that float up from the gravel. Men laugh after dinner. Men walk up and down the stairs (Ophelia's unshod footsteps are almost silent) and men invade after Polonius dies. The men choose what music is heard (it is even Hamlet's song that Ophelia sings as she loses her grip on reality). Probably most of the text heard is in the Hamlet actor's voice: Hamlet's letters, and the "Five stages of drowning" that punctuate the five acts. We never hear any sounds made by Gertrude, for example; she is represented only by a very strange combination of low and high frequencies akin to an electrical fault. The voice of Ophelia's mother may only be heard while Ophelia has her time dressing – her most intimate and personal time, one brief refuge when it would be culturally unacceptable for men to interfere (notably here mother is not heard while the maid dresses her in the presence of the Gentleman). An interesting exception to all this is the Maid – the only other female voice that is heard "live" – who also makes loud footsteps in the corridor as she approaches. The Maid feels like an extension of the men's grip on Ophelia's life. She is certainly a cold character and not the ally we might (perhaps) expect. Even her speaking style generally reflects this: "Ein Brief." "Heute nicht, Ophelia." And so forth. This clipped, staccato speech is perhaps a metaphor for all Ophelia's interactions in life: short, strained, and bursting with the unspeakable. One of my favourite metaphors (or in this case, I think symbols) in the piece is the large box that descends between the acts. It is unsubtle perhaps (it's hard to avoid feeling the weight of it hanging above the action throughout, with the sound giving so much of the weight to it) but it is also profoundly practical: and because it serves this practical purpose, it doesn't feel as forced as might (for example) thunder and lightning on the day Ophelia kills herself. At the end, where the box that descends is a new one, lighter, made of glass, that descends with a soft and attractive hum, we understand the "beautification" of Ophelia's death when Gertrude reports to Hamlet that there were flowers in the water (etc.). And of course then the heavy box descends again anyway.

MEM

I think that sounds are inescapable at the theatre for the audience, thus there can be an immersive theatre also without headphones. What's your opinion?

MP

It is common for textbooks on theatre to refer to the etymology of the word theatre and its relation to spectating. I think this is naive (as any student of linguistics will explain, etymology is not equivalent to meaning; as the prevailing Classical research holds, theatre grew out of performative worship songs of which the text was the most important feature). Plenty of plays have been easily translated into radio plays, but it is unthinkable that a play could be remounted with visuals and no text. So yes, sound is inescapable: an audience member who wants to hear the text will necessarily have to hear all the sound as well. One of the most interesting aspects of my work has been the discussions with those who provide captions for hearing-impaired and deaf people. We must decide each time which sounds require captioning or explaining, and what the wording should be. It is a very valuable exercise. I dislike the term “immersive” because I have often felt thoroughly “immersed” in productions from a seat in a darkened auditorium. (I say this as a regular collaborator with Silent Opera whose productions are promoted as “immersive” and do indeed give the audience headphones!) As you say, sound is inescapable: we cannot “close our ears”. One of my principal jobs, and sources of much frustration, is to minimise the aural distractions to the audience that theatres provide, most especially noisy equipment. (I once spent the entire budget for sound equipment on lighting equipment, because it allowed us to project three captions without the need for a noisy projector.) Except for very specific dramaturgical reasons, I would like all theatre to be “immersive” and work hard to make this the case.

MEM

Well Max, thanks for your time and thorough answers!

MP

Thank you. I hope this is helpful.

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