

Ecologies of Media, Ecologies of Mind: Embodying Authorship Through Mediaturgy

by Christophe Collard

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Weary of endlessly scavenging for funding, would-be independent filmmaker John Jesurun decided one day in the early 1980s to make films without using a camera and “Let the audience be the camera” instead.^[1] Pragmatic *par excellence*, this new approach effectively launched the career of one of multimedia theatre’s most inventive innovators while generating a body of work characteristically concerned with reconciling the apparently irreconcilable. With his main theme of exploring the rampant technologization of contemporary culture and its effects on consciousness and communication alike, Jesurun’s artistic practice challenges one-dimensional interpretations while simultaneously underscoring the processes that constitute our perception. The artist’s incessant interplay with media of all kinds thereby strikes as the most obvious strategy, with his texts’ pervasive multilingualism a close second. And yet, as Hans-Thies Lehmann once observed, scenography and dramaturgy can only meaningfully meet via the performer’s *body*.^[2]

If we borrow Duke Ellington’s favourite phrase describing his music as “beyond categories,”^[3] John Jesurun’s theatre aesthetic could accordingly be situated as conceived along a paradigm encompassing transgression, fluidity, and blending to move, indeed, ‘beyond’ conceptions of ‘categories’ and towards what anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Bradd Shore have called an intrinsically *ecological* inclination.^[4] When, moreover, taking into account the insight yielded by intermedia studies that borders between communicative modes are the product of a similar kind of irreducible flux, plurimedial dramaturgies staging such organic inter-relatedness can help us recalibrate the *quality* of our thinking. For if we focus on the ‘live’ body in a heavily mediatized theatrical space, it becomes clear that the former functions at once as an enabling device and a site of refusal. Operating along a logic of connecting dispersed content, Jesurun’s emphasis on the performer’s *presence* in the here-and-now as a semiological nexus generates a sense of mediatised imbrication of all of the performative event’s constituents. Or as his long-time *compagnon de route* Bonnie Marranca has argued in her *Ecologies of Theater* (1996), an organicist conception of contemporary theatre that “inquire[s] into the relationship of mind and spirit” under the aegis of the performers’ biological ‘liveness.’^[5]

Bonnie Marranca is similarly to be credited for coining the concept of ‘mediaturgy’ along a reasoning not so dissimilar from her ecological argument.^[6] Indeed, to her, the term allows us to shift our focus on methods of composition in “a new form of dramaturgy,”^[7] and so suggests new critical modes of comprehending and writing about it. Thus re-routing connotations from a text-based linear progression of sorts to a media-induced sense of organic simultaneity as organizing principle, one could accordingly argue that “mediaturgy” permits one to highlight tensions between received conceptions of “meaning” and an increasing awareness of the processes that bring them about by foregrounding the media that mediate

the 'content' we process cognitively. An early illustration of this reasoning is of course found in the work of Jesurun's illustrious predecessor Richard Foreman (b. 1937), whose Ontological-Hysteric Theater, beginning in 1968, presented audiences with productions lacking a "regular" storyline, but which instead communicated via an idiosyncratic "idiom" best compared to the image of the "mind bath" – a completely *multivalent* experience. Situated in the grey area between live performance and "live" media, the concept of mediaturgy in effect seeks not a dissolution from drama and its textual overtones, but simply signals a shift from "linguistic language" to "media language" more attuned to our contemporary context of cross-medial communication in networked societies.

This article will pick up the ecological lead to present John Jesurun's mediaturgical and thoroughly inter-relational theatre aesthetic as an impetus to what Bateson calls "an ecology of mind"^[8] – i.e. an alternative way of thinking and creating that eschews distinctions in favour of convergence and all the emancipatory potential this implies, both for an updated understanding of the authorship principle as well as for individual signification in today's cultural context. Then again, already in 1986, Smith, one of the characters in Jesurun's so-called "Media Trilogy" warned us, spectators, that we all "have to realize that [we are] chained *into* that machine,"^[9] imbricated as it were into what Jesurun himself calls "an ongoing process of detours, pitfalls, and discoveries in interpretation and perception [of] a mediated world."^[10] Five years later, in *Blue Heat* (1991) he physically separates players from spectators by leaving the stage empty and relocating the action to the venue's back rooms as displayed by various screens in "real time," thereby forcing his audience to confront theatre's fundamental role as signifying *interface*.

After all, if performance no longer takes place in the here and now "live" before an audience, can it still be considered "theatre" in the strictest sense? It is a question that immediately prompts a second one related to the *mediation* of said "live" content – a query arguably still harder to answer. Which recalls Jesurun's presumed ecological aesthetic: his is not an approach aiming for answers, but rather for shifting perspectives and re-evaluating possibilities for both artistic creation as for critical thinking from *within* "the machine." After all, as the same character Smith from *Deep Sleep* explains, "Those are the machines and you are coming *out* of the machines."^[11] Thus there is no outside to our mediated world – a Jesurunian appropriation, if you like, of Derrida's famous quip that "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte."^[12] On this, mind you, he emits no value judgment, fully aware of the pointlessness in speaking about "purity" or "essential," unmediated meaning. Technology, as it can hardly be denied these days, forms part and parcel of our cultural landscape and, as confirmed by mediatheorists Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1993), "technological *change*" is nothing if not, indeed "ecological."^[13]

Addressing the "ecological" dimension of technological innovation from the prism prompted by Jesurun of perennial inter-medial interplay brings us neatly to this artist's privileged artistic platform: the theatre, once described by Peter M. Boenisch as a semiotic *practice*, which incorporates, spatializes and disseminates in sensorial terms (thus: *performs*) the contents and cognitive strategies of other media by creating multiple channels, and a multi-media semiotic and sensorial environment.^[14]

Key to the latter argument is the almost organic *multiplication* of signifiers and signifying systems that takes place precisely via their interplay in real time. If we additionally take into account its relatively stable – yet not, as we have already seen, entirely unproblematic – basic requirements of an audience and a set duration, we could argue that the theatrical medium represents a *heuristic* platform to study the associations and reciprocities produced by an *interface* that facilitates co-presence and reflexivity across

physical, technical, and referential boundaries.

Via the continuous interplay in a Jesurun-production of multiple media, "live" theatrical presence here effectively *incarnates* an "overdetermined" hybrid permanently in flux. Twenty five years ago, Patrice Pavis already argued that the live actor creates a sense of clarity, an ontological foothold of sorts, within the semiotic complexity of multi-media theatre productions.^[15] A decade later, Philip Auslander placed the performer's live body on a par with technological media in contemporary theatre's process of "mediatization," whereby old and new media come to operate in the mediatic system that is the production.^[16] For live "presence" on a multimedia theatre stage remains inextricably interwoven with the *relation* between "live" and "mediated," and thus also with what performance scholars Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye have called "processes that expose and utilize the gaps, caesura, and absences *inherent* to acts of representation."^[17] Their use of "inherent" thereby echoes Jesurun's ecologically-inspired artistic practice whereby the live actor's performance is embedded into layered and responsive soundscapes, architectonic designs, as well as mediated sets that draw underscore the actual *passages* between live, mediated, and recorded channels of address. No oversimplified answers to a complex reality, but a stimulated sense of *intimacy* with the environment in which we find ourselves immersed.



Figure 1. John Jesurun *Firefall - Phase 2* (2009). Photo: Paula Court.

As Baz Kershaw similarly reminds us in his *Theatre Ecology* (2007), the term "ecology" references the interrelationships of all the organic and non-organic factors of ecosystems, ranging from the smallest and/or simplest to the greatest and/or most complex. It is also defined as the interrelationships between organisms and their environments, especially when that is understood to imply interdependence between organisms and environments.[\[18\]](#)

In *White Water* (1986), the second installment of his "Media Trilogy" after *Deep Sleep* (1986), Jesurun sought to connect cutting-edge technology with the primal fear that the same technology today is destroying our sense of spirituality. Precisely by instilling an "ecological" sense of interdependence between film, video, and live actors, his personal brand of authorship foregrounds the reverse perspective that technology, in fact, reflects human attempts at spirituality, a certain *longing* for the intangible expressed through the tension between humans and machinery – a tension grounded in the ever-present potential of *manipulation*:

I include [physicality] as a natural element. Because film and video can be manipulated and manipulate at the same time I have to treat them with some respect. Film and video have their own physical presence beyond the visual images they may represent. There is a tension there between a live and mediated performer but this is also natural. I want that tension to also exist in a real way in the presentation. When live and mediated images communicate verbally a third reality comes into place as a result.[\[19\]](#)

Said "Third Reality" was made more palpable still in Jesurun's 1990-production *Everything That Rises Must Converge* where both actors and audience were divided into two groups and separated by a wall nine-feet high and forty-feet wide, which occasionally rotated on its central vertical axis while characters communicated their ostensibly nonsensical multilingual dialogues across the divide through live videos and wireless microphones. For, when no direct physical connection can be established, we *trust* technology to make meaningful our attempts at meaning-making.[\[20\]](#) However, the reason why in certain circumstances we may decide (consciously or unconsciously) to "trust" technology in a performative setting is squarely attributable to its *embodied* presence on stage. After all, embodied modes of reception and perception are those that do not require strictly logical analysis for their verification. As the theatre presents tangible living bodies on stage to living bodies in the audience, performers' and audiences' embodied receptiveness is thereby stimulated to facilitate *affective* interpretation. When we moreover take into account the stage's hypermedial capacity to integrate a sheer endless number of technologies, the embodied dimension stretches towards "ecological" coalitions of mind, body, and technology. It is a perspective which prompted Philip Auslander to conclude that in the theatre there simply can be "no clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones."[\[21\]](#)

Today, due to the ever-broadening trend of technologizing the theatre stage, critical discourses tend to consider the "live" body in performance as a cultural and biological *biotope* – a construction site, as it were, for the assemblage of identity and consisting of multiple foundational layers of what Wolf-Dieter Ernst has called "anthropological ballast."[\[22\]](#) Via the continuous interplay of multiple media on stage, theatrical presence today has become a sort of semiological hybrid permanently in flux. From this angle, then, John Jesurun's playing with our perception via a multi-media bombardment of our senses strikes, paradoxically enough given the overabundance of technology, as primarily *actor-oriented* – especially so given this director's categorical rejection of improvisation and constant admonitions to "deliver words faster and flatter, faster and flatter."[\[23\]](#) Indeed, by turning his actors into "de-psychologised talking heads,"[\[24\]](#) he forces his spectators to fill in the blanks. For, with the actor's body as interface between the spectator and the cybernetic machine of that is the multimedia stage, the very notion of embodiment itself becomes unstable. Once again, to Jesurun, this is something intrinsically positive:

As a director, I find that the performers are willing to go as far as the language and technology

will take them. And as a writer, I am willing to go as far as the performers and technology will take the language. Regardless of the creative outcome, this is a true sharing of intentions and possibilities.[\[25\]](#)

Following Jesurun's "ecological" authorship, embodied presence on a multimedia stage represents a type of "meaning potential" that can only be accessed via the *energy* exuded from *affecting* sender and receiver simultaneously. By means of filmic jump-cuts in the narrative progression, the pulsating pace of a video-clip aesthetic, "super real"/un-theatrical conversation tones, soap-opera cliffhangers, or the generalized presence of pop-cultural references, a Jesurun-piece creates a feeling of familiarity in a thoroughly unsettling environment. The extensive reliance on cutting-edge technology, for one, markedly clashes with a recurrent thematic focus on biological decay and linguistic elusiveness. His, then, is a self-professed logic of "engag[ing] rather than seduc[ing]" audiences.[\[26\]](#)

Human perception is a process of constantly decentering and re-centering referential frameworks due to the unflagging stream of new impulses we encounter in everything we undertake. The theatre can thereby play a heuristic role as a *self-reflexive* platform of signification due to the *invitation* it extends from performer to spectator to connect via conscious participation in a "live" event. For, if accepted, the cognitive communion that ensues will remind all participants for the event's entire duration of its disruptive constructedness.[\[27\]](#) In Jesurun's relatively recent internet-inspired *Firefall* (2006/2010), old-school metatheatrical devices like self-reference and metalepsis abound, but coupled with reflexive statements on the potentiality evoked by *design* and the essentialism exuded by philosophy,[\[28\]](#) all aside from a scenography itself hell-bent on dramatizing the merging of media into one, uncannily concordant whole. Or, as the character F. – billed as "try[ing] to find a common ground between the introduction of chaos and the status quo"[\[29\]](#) – puts it, they, the characters in Jesurun's production, are all constantly being "Re-morphed, re-transmuted into positive, *useful* objects."[\[30\]](#) Much earlier in his career, Jesurun implemented the recognisability of television-dramaturgy in *Red House* (1984) and his "living film serial" *Chang in a Void Moon* (1982 – ongoing) to help engage his audiences into otherwise formalistically forbidding theatre experiments. In his adaptation *Faust/How I Rose* (1996) we find another token of this artist's constant play with recognition and estrangement, mixing catch phrases from well-known advertising slogans, snippets of poetry, and pop song lyrics with aporetic debates on the nature of the universe within a set made up of oversized canvases continually projecting lush and dazzling imagescapes – the sequential fluidity of which moreover contrasts with the abruptness of both the dialogue and the scene switches. All examples, indeed, of an *ecological* inclination to *engage* rather than *seduce*:

A lot of things bother some people with my work. "You can't have this conversation, it means so much and it only lasts two seconds." But slowly, as you get into the movement of the whole, *it's like watching a plant grow*. When you listen to the conversation and the actors are standing there, fine, but once you start switching and add all kinds of conflicting angles, lights – it even focuses *more* on the words. It sets up conflicting things and makes the audience think, also, about what is actually happening on stage.[\[31\]](#)

The very fact that Jesurun addresses the element of scenography as catalyst of meta-reflexive thinking squarely aligns him with Philip Auslander, when he argues that the experience of liveness is not limited to performer-audience interactions but refers to a sense of always being connected to other people, of

continuous technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown.[32]

"Meaning," it so transpires, is not the result of uncovered content, but of a technologically mediated relational engagement prompted, indeed, by the "co-presence of human bodies." After all, the tension between technology's power of affect and the physical presence of actors on stage co-opts the audience's "motor-equivalence" – i.e. performing a similar act under differing circumstances -- to generate a sense of reflexivity that is nothing if not "ecologically" *dialectical*.[33]



Figure 2. John Jesurun *Firefall - Phase 2* (2009). Photo: Paula Court.

Said "ecologically" dialectical reflexivity, according to Gregory Bateson, bridges fundamental philosophy, technology and bodily presence by the bias of the *energy* exuded from their interplay,[34] and viscerally experienced as the "temporary"[35] product of an *embodied* cognitive negotiation between competing/conflicting signals and impulses. John Jesurun himself made a telling statement in this regard, "shocked" as he was to learn that his work at one point was described as 'interdisciplinary:'

I don't really see the boundaries between one and the other. It seems natural to me that they should work together. They seem to be part of one another. Creatively they are all interconnected.[36]

Key tenets from embodied cognition postulate that consciousness itself is produced through the body-mind interface fuelled by our actions and perceptions, but also by nature, culture, and *environmental* interactions, rather than by a top-down strategy whereby the mind is directing the body.[37] Furthermore, as recently demonstrated by N. Katherine Hayles in her book *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012), the kind of embodied cognition activated by "live" performers in an inter-medial setting – including attentive focus, unconscious perceptions, and nonconscious cognitions – “provides the basis for dynamic interactions with the *tools* it helps bring into being.”[38] Since such reasoning effectively implies that all "Meaning" is necessarily embodied, it no longer makes any sense to separate man and machine, or to think along such rigid distinctions – which, all things considered, might not be such a bad thing.

Contemporary technogenesis, like evolution in general, is not about progress. That is, it offers no guarantees that the dynamic transformations taking place between humans and technics are moving in a positive direction. Rather, contemporary technogenesis is about *adaptation*, the fit between organisms and their environments, recognizing that both sides of the engagement (humans and technologies) are undergoing coordinated transformations.[39]

To Chris Salter, such a reasoning effectively confirms Jesurun’s claim that distinctions are but functional delusions, as the “supposedly modern tension between the *humanistic* body and the *dehumanized* machine that has so occupied us [is], in reality, a fiction.”[40] As this brief introduction to Jesurun’s "ecological" aesthetic hopefully has shown, man and machine alike are in a continuous state of becoming, and their interplay on an intermedial theatre stage establishes the latter, with its "ecology of media," as a *generative* platform for a new "ecology of mind." This begs the question whether adopting an ecological perspective to assess our plurimedial cultural context implies that a notion like "authorship" has become redundant. Personally I would argue the exact opposite – provided we follow Jesurun and Marranca’s lead by shifting our focus from clearly demarcated entities to processes of signification. As leading semiotician and media theorist Gunther Kress reminds us in his *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003), authorship traditionally depended on “a regulated relation between knowledge and canonical modes of representation” whereas today their power and authority have become relative to a tilt. The answer, to him, therefore “is to insist on the teaching of *principles* [whereby] the processes and *environments* of representation are crucial.”[41] In ecologies of media and ecologies of mind like Jesurun’s mediaturgies where man and machine organically interact, authorship is embodied as *design*.

Christophe Collard teaches contemporary performing arts, literature, and critical theory at the Free University of Brussels, Belgium. He is currently working on a book-length study of John Jesurun.

[1] John Jesurun qtd. in RoseLee Goldberg, “You Are A Camera,” *Artforum International* January 1989, 74.

[2] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2001 [1999]), 423.

[3] Duke Ellington qtd. in Michael Cerveris, "Intersection, Crossover and Convergence: Fluidity in Contemporary Arts (A Perspective From the US)," in *Trans-Global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*, ed. Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 15.

[4] See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1987); Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[5] Bonnie Marranca, *Ecologies of Theater* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), xiii.

[6] See Marranca, "Mediaturgy: A Conversation with Marianne Weems." *Performance Histories*, ed. Bonnie Marranca (New York: PAJ, 2008), 189-206 and "Performance as Design: The Mediaturgy of John Jesurun's *Firefall*," *PAJ* 96 (2010): 16-24.

[7] Marranca, "Performance as Design," 19.

[8] Bateson 1.

[9] John Jesurun, *Deep Sleep* (1986), in *A Media Trilogy: Deep Sleep, White Water, Black Maria* (New York: NoPassport Press, 2009), 64, my emphasis.

[10] John Jesurun qtd. in Juliette Mapp et. al., "Writing and Performance," *PAJ* 34, no.1 (2012): 122.

[11] Jesurun, *Deep Sleep*, 67, my emphasis.

[12] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 158.

[13] Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 18.

[14] Peter M. Boenisch, "Aesthetic Art to Aesthetic Act: Theatre, Media, Intermedial Performance," *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, eds. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 113.

[15] Patrice Pavis, "Theatre and the Media: Specificity and Interference," *Approaching Theatre*, eds. André Helbo, J. Dines Johansen, Patrice Pavis, and Anne Ubersfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 22.

[16] Phillip Auslander, "Liveness, Mediatization, and Intermedial Performance," *Degrés* 101 (2000): e8.

[17] Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 26, my emphasis.

[18] Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 15.

- [19] John Jesurun qtd. in Caridad Svich, "A Natural Force: John Jesurun in Conversation with Caridad Svich," *Trans-Global Readings: Crossing Theatrical Boundaries*, ed. Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 45-6.
- [20] See also Birgit Walkenhorst, *Intermedialität und Wahrnehmung: Untersuchungen zur Regiearbeit von John Jesurun und Robert Lepage* (Marburg: Tectum, 2005), 84.
- [21] Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.
- [22] Wolf-Dieter Ernst, *Der affective Schauspieler: Die Energetik des postdramatischen Theaters* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2012), 15.
- [23] John Jesurun qtd. in Donn Russell, *Avant-Guardian, 1965-1990: A Theatre Foundation Director's 25 Years Off-Broadway* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 1996), 410.
- [24] Lehmann, *Postdramatische Theater*, 208.
- [25] Jesurun qtd. in Mapp et. al. 122, my emphasis.
- [26] John Jesurun qtd. in Catherine Bush, "Views From the Top: John Jesurun's Cinematic Theater," *Theatre Crafts* 7, no.19 (1985): 48.
- [27] See also Alice Rayner, "Rude Mechanicals and the Spectres of Marx," *Theatre Journal* 54, no.4 (2002): 548.
- [28] John Jesurun, *Firefall*, in *Shatterhand Massacree and Other Media Texts* (New York: PAJ Publications, 2009), 178.
- [29] Jesurun, *Firefall*, 167.
- [30] Jesurun, *Firefall*, 194.
- [31] John Jesurun, qtd. in Martin Rentdorff, "I'll Make Film Without Filming It," *Theater: Ex* 1, no.2 (1985): 8, my emphasis.
- [32] Phillip Auslander, "Digital Liveness: A Historico-Philosophical Perspective," *PAJ* 34, no. 3 (2012): 6.
- [33] See also Mona Sarkis, *Blick, Stimme und (k)ein Körper: Der Einsatz elektronischer Medien im Theater und in interaktiven Installationen* (Stuttgart: M & P, 1997), 29.
- [34] Bateson, 11.
- [35] Giannachi and Kaye, *Performing Presence*, 236.
- [36] Jesurun qtd. in Svich, "A Natural Force," 46.

[37] See Nagoya Hirose, "An Ecological Approach to Embodiment and Cognition." *Cognitive Systems Research* 3.3 (2002): 289-299.

[38] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012), 87, my emphasis.

[39] Hayles, *How We Think*, 87, my emphasis.

[40] Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 276.

[41] Gunther Kress, *Literacy in the New Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 173, my emphasis.

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