Sound and the South: The Spectre of 'Pan' in South African Theatre

> The Greeks had a god who dwelt in the acoustic realm. With no warning whatsoever, when shepherds dreamt and the midday silence was overwhelming, Pan buzzed in every ear.[1]
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> — **Friedrich A. Kittler, 'The God of Ears'**

In South Africa, Sophocles is confined on Robben Island, Aeschylus' spectre haunts the Ngqoko Cultural Group, and Euripides too frequents the postcolonial stage. Though enjoying much popularity in the global marketplace, adaptations of Greek tragedy in postcolonial zones are enmeshed in a complex ideological web—part child of hegemonic educational practices, part outgrowth of a deconstructivist decolonisation. This is most evident when looking at the much-neglected function of sound in these adaptations. As the, somewhat unorthodox, media theorist Friedrich Kittler argues, the death of Pan did not kill the 'god of ears'. And indeed, Pan seems to have returned to haunt the dramaturgy of postcolonial tragedies, particularly in South Africa. Here it would seem that the attribution of visuality as modern and Western has placed sound as the Other of vision, thus calcifying the border between the West and the non-Western Other. With the domination of the visual sense in the Global North, however, the important socio-poetic function of sound within dramaturgical practices of the Global South has largely been neglected.

Indeed 'sound', in the broadest sense of the term, can act as a vector for re-inscribing colonialism and consolidate the South's position at the peripheries of a globalised world. This practice of Othering results in sound (particularly in its manifestation as voice) being relegated to the discourse of the Other. Sound may, however, manage to escape the fetters of an alphabetical monopoly by appearing

as the real. Kittler reminds us that to store phonetic sequences of speech, literature had to arrest these in the system of 26 letters: Thus, in advance precluding sound sequences. In the West, texts and scores, therefore, evolved as the medium of choice for the storage of time.[2] In this act, binding them to the symbolic. Sound, on the other hand, can figure as the real: blind and unpredictable, able to elude the symbolic order; and in turn, perhaps even the hegemony of the West.

The peculiarly non-Western dramaturgical form that emerged in South Africa —workshop theatre— typifies the power of the real in sound. Workshop theatre by moving away from scripted texts sought to counter the hegemony of the text. Prominent contemporary South African dramaturg Mark Fleishman epitomises the spirit of this form by not publishing the majority of his work. In doing so, he has sought to counter what may be called the alphabet's monopoly, thereby prioritising the corporeal, oral nature of drama in South Africa: 'A workshop play cannot, therefore, be easily published, as the text is not easily divorced from the performance', Fleishman says.[3] Notwithstanding Fleishman's apparent circumvention of written literature, he has indeed published his *In the City of Paradise* (1998) under the RETAGS project.[4] And the initial stage directions of the play—an amalgam of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides— already points to the inability of grasping the drama through the written word alone: 'Suddenly a strange dis-embodied voice cries out from the dark in seSotho', the prologue reads.[5] These lines point toward two things in particular: On the one hand, the literal disembodied voice one would be hearing on stage; on the other, the voice that through the scripted text has quite literally been disembodied. It has been arrested, held captive by the symbolic order, grammatology's fetters. What we, quite literally *see* here, then, is the impossibility of fully delivering through the written word that which necessitates bodily representation: And it is here that 'the disembodied voice cries out from the dark [...].'

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[1] Friedrich A. Kittler, "The God of Ears," *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, ed. Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury, trans. Paul Feigelfeld and Anthony Moore (Cambridge: Polity, 2015) 3.

[2] Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986) 12.

[3] Mark Fleishman, "Workshop Theatre as Oppositional Form*," South African Theatre Journal 4.1* (1990): 89.

[4] The UCT Centre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies initiated a 5-year research project at the beginning of 2019 on *Reimagining Tragedy from Africa and the Global South* (*RETAGS*). See <https://zivahub.uct.ac.za/RETAGS>.

[5] Mark Fleishman, *In the City of Paradise Text* (University of Cape Town, 2019): <https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.8051735.v1>.