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## Hearing Hope: Metatheatrical Utopias in the 'Staging' of Radio Drama

The radio play has long survived the competition from television in Britain, and also has a long tradition in the German-speaking world in the form of the Hörspiel – but its strength has lain precisely in demanding a visual contribution from the listener's imagination. What happens when a radio play is 'staged' before a live audience? In 2005, under commission from the Royal Festival Hall, the composer Carter Burwell proposed writing a sound score for new plays; and under the banner of Theatre of the New Ear, he recruited his long-time collaborators on film, Charlie Kaufman and Joel and Ethan Coen, to write specifically for sound-only. In this article Jenn Stephenson describes the experience of 'watching' a radio play, and offers a theorization of its qualities and the effects on its audience. Jenn Stephenson received her PhD from the University of Toronto in 2003 and is now Associate Professor of Drama at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada. Her recent publications include articles in *Theatre Journal*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, and *Theatre Research in Canada*. She is co-editor of the 'Views and Reviews' section of *Canadian Theatre Review*.

IN 2005, the composer Carter Burwell was approached by the Royal Festival Hall to mount a concert of his film scores. Eschewing this offer for a more interesting project, Burwell proposed instead scoring new plays. Under the banner of Theatre of the New Ear, he recruited long-time collaborators Charlie Kaufman and Joel and Ethan Coen, inviting them to devise scripts specifically for sound.<sup>1</sup> The two resulting radio plays – the Coen brothers' *Sawbones*, and *Hope Leaves the Theatre* by Kaufman – were presented live with a luminous celebrity cast that included Meryl Streep, John Goodman, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Marcia Gay Harden, Peter Dinklage, Hope Davis and others.<sup>2</sup>

In production, the plays featured the actors dressed in street clothes, sitting on stools, reading scripts from music stands. Foley artist Marko Constanzo generated myriad live sound effects – shoes clomping in puddles of water, banging on glass, typing on keyboards, crumpling paper, squirting water into bowls.<sup>3</sup> Burwell's musical underscoring was performed by the musical ensemble Parabola.<sup>4</sup>

Burwell's intended emphasis on storytelling through sound is highlighted in the

supporting materials around the plays. In the programme notes he writes:

You're watching a movie, in a theatre or at home, and starting to doze. You can't keep your eyes open, but the sound of the film still seeps in through your ears, which sadly are never closed. Your mind paints the picture itself in that meaningful but not quite visual way that dreams play out. This is the experience I'd like you to have now.<sup>5</sup>

Along the same lines, the poster for Theatre of the New Ear exhorts potential audience members to 'Leave Your Eyes at Home'. This may be good advice for audiences to *Sawbones*, but it is not for *Hope Leaves the Theatre*. *Sawbones*, which presents several episodes of a frontier television Western overlaid on the domestic trials of a husband and wife who watch the programme, is a radio drama staged live in this mode.<sup>6</sup> It fits Burwell's imagining of a sleepy audience member, letting the sound seep into his ears, creating a virtual dream picture. This is radio drama's theatre of the mind. Here, the visual staged elements are an interesting but subdued curiosity of behind-the-scenes production, but the play's fictional world is created

entirely in sound. *Sawbones*, then, is an aurally challenging but ontologically straightforward radio play; *Hope Leaves the Theatre*, on the other hand, operates on a different plane entirely.

### The Visual and Aural Senses

Existing only as sound, the radio play has frequently been denigrated as a blind medium.<sup>7</sup> Lacking the sensorily rich visual inputs of theatre or film, the worlds of radio seem woefully incomplete by comparison. But it is precisely this property of the incompleteness of radio drama that opens up perceptual gaps for self-reflexive play on the core theatricalizing processes by which apprehending audiences bring fictional worlds into being. Building on the foundational gaps generated by a purely auditory medium, *Hope Leaves the Theatre* exploits these aural indeterminacies in its fictional worlds by filling those gaps with inconsistent visual information and creating competing, irreconcilable multiple worlds.

Our usual phenomenological experience of sound is that it is synonymous with the object that creates the sound. It emanates from a physical object in the world and so becomes co-extant with that object. Merleau-Ponty suggests, however, that this phenomenon goes beyond source and effect and that different sensory experiences of the same object do not run in parallel but are actually entwined, being deeply enmeshed with each other in our experience of the object.

Synaesthetic perception is the rule. . . . The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when with a tinkling sound it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of the plane table, the softness of shavings.<sup>8</sup>

In active opposition to this typical fused relationship, the basic performance situation of Theatre of the New Ear disconnects the fictional result of sound from the actual-world source.

This division is most apparent in the production of the foley sound effects. In aural

terms, the sound of crushing celery might be a convincing facsimile for the sound of an operation to remove a bullet. Yet, in sight, these two actions – crushing celery and a gruesome surgical operation – are miles apart. The single sound is divided, participating in the creation of two worlds; one is a world we see with our eyes, the other is a virtual world in the mind's eye. This same divided bridging applies to the actors' voices as well.

Louise, the main character in *Hope Leaves the Theatre*, is voiced by the actress Hope Davis. But while Louise's voice comes from Hope Davis's body, the sound of her feet walking on a wet street is produced by Constanzo wearing high heels and walking in a tray of water. Hiving visual information off from aural information underscores the artificiality of the fictional world, emphasizing the purely virtual existence of the fictional character.

Naturalistic mimesis encourages the audience to elide the normal ontological distinctions between fictional and actual aspects, allowing the actual ground to perform its fictional counterpart almost seamlessly. When we see and hear the actor, we see and hear the character as well: Hamlet's voice issues from Kenneth Branagh's body. However, in this case, Hope Davis does not embody Louise physically, as a theatre actor does. Her impersonation is limited to vocal production only. Davis talks as Louise. Constanzo walks her. Louise comes to fictional life out of a composite of sound effects. Like Branagh's Hamlet, Louise is fictional, but as significantly distinguished from Hamlet, she is invisible.

In ordinary apprehension, the visual sense is strongly tied to epistemological awareness. It is predominantly through sight that we verify our knowledge of the world. When we see Hamlet we understand that Hamlet's voice comes from 'Hamlet's body'; the actual noema of the actor Branagh is voluntarily rendered absent. The basic disjunction we always know is there between the actual and the fictional is submerged or softened by the synchronicity of seeing and hearing, naturalized to the way we apprehend the actual world. The noematic fragmentation of Louise

brings that usually suppressed disjunction to the surface, separating the actual actor who is seen from the fictional character who is sound only.

Michel Chion theorizes the effects of the association between possibly unrelated sights and sounds, coining a new word 'synchresis'. Synchresis blends 'synchronism' and 'synthesis' to describe

the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time . . . independent of any rational logic.<sup>9</sup>

Chion is mostly interested in unconventional pairings of sight with incongruous or unexpected sounds in film. Synchresis in Theatre of the New Ear functions slightly differently. In the apprehension of radio drama, sound gives birth to a kind of internal sight. We create virtual worlds by matching, responding to aural prompts and visualizing the corresponding world. In *Hope Leave the Theatre*, a mismatch arises on the other side of the triangular bridge that joins one sound to two worlds. We see Hope. But we hear Louise. In this way the play's performance situation aligns two parallel pairings to draw meta-theatrical attention to their syncretic differences. Aural inputs operate in the creation of a virtual fictional world, while visual inputs provide cues for the affirmation of the concrete actual world. This chiasmic matrix which pairs sound and the fictional world in opposition to sight and the actual world constitutes the basic phenomenological situation grounding performed radio drama in general and *Hope Leaves the Theatre* as a particular performance event.

With this unique performance situation in hand, *Hope Leaves the Theatre* creates additional worlds-within-worlds, fictionalizing the real-world personae of its actors – Streep, Dinklage, and Davis – making it impossible for the audience to relegate visual elements to mere tools of the production. The performance event itself becomes fictionalized.

It is the aim of this paper to demonstrate how the play's metatheatrical awareness out of the usual divided relationship of aural/fictional and visual/actual worlds displaces

objects and characters across multiple worlds, casting them into a kind of ontological placelessness. These elements, caught amongst and between worlds, occupy a kind of utopia – in the pure sense of *u-topos*, being no place. The audience, grappling to reconcile these meta-leptically dislocated elements, also enters into utopia. These moments of heightened awareness of the disrupted processes of theatricality bring the audience to experience what Jill Dolan calls 'utopian performatives':

small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.<sup>10</sup>

### Impossible Worlds in the Audience

*Hope Leaves the Theatre* begins without the usual theatrical cues to indicate a beginning. Audience members returning from intermission saw the actors already seated onstage. With the lights still on, the actors started talking softly into the microphones.<sup>11</sup> This ad lib chatter by the three actors mimicked typical audience noise with muttering, coughing, laughing, peppered with some more audible fragments of conversation: 'Save my seat.' 'We're over here.' 'Streep looks so young.' After several minutes, this murmuring was interrupted by an announcement over the PA (voiced by Dinklage live from the stage) asking patrons to please turn off their cell-phones. Then we hear Louise take her seat, squeezing past already seated audience members:

LOUISE: Oh, sorry. Excuse me. Oh, sorry. Excuse me. Oh, I'm sorry did (*piano ping, ping, tuning*) I step on your foot?

MAN: It's alright. (*Orchestra tuning.*)

LOUISE: Oh, God, I'm really sorry, I'm a klutz.<sup>12</sup>

The music morphs from atonal orchestra tuning to a light underscore which still retains a feel of tuning as we now overhear Louise's internal stream of consciousness, her thoughts heard as a rambling and self-absorbed monologue.<sup>13</sup> From the outset, the audience is chal-

lenged by an ontologically framed spatial puzzle. Presented with conflicting information, we are asked to realign our perceptions of fictional and actual space to accommodate two mutually exclusive views. In world<sup>A</sup> – the actual world occupied by the audience at St Ann’s Warehouse or Royal Festival Hall – we are in a theatre. It is intermission. We talk amongst ourselves. Some audience members are still taking their seats.

In world<sup>B</sup> – Louise’s world – she is also in this exact same theatre. It is intermission. She hears the ambient audience noises. She slides awkwardly into her seat. Using the theatre itself as the setting for world<sup>B</sup> and replicating actual-world audience behaviour, the two worlds are juxtaposed as synonymous. The audience noise we hear performs us, but it is not us. It emanates from the stage, fictionalized in the performance of the actors. Likewise, Louise is cast as a member of our immediate audience. She has the same experiences that we do. Aurally, she occupies the same space that we do. But visually Hope Davis, who voices Louise, is sitting on the stage in front of us.

This attempt to merge two audiences at different ontological levels – the real audience in the stalls and a fictional audience who share our phenomenological experience seeing and hearing what we do – has two opposing effects. If we accept the successful parallel relation of the two worlds, one result is to increase Louise’s reality effect. We almost expect her to be sitting amongst us, which virtually she is. This blending effect is particularly potent because she is invisible. Our experiences of the theatrical event are consistent with hers. She becomes one of us.

Moving in the opposite direction, the attempt to merge fictional and actual worlds by imitation has the unusual effect of also fictionalizing both the actual audience and the actual space of the theatre. Just as Hope/Louise has a dual existence as actual Hope and fictional Louise, the audience too has been theatrically doubled. This is the normal situation for actor-characters, but not for audiences. One reviewer refers to this meta-theatrical structure aptly as ‘a play performed outside of a play’.<sup>14</sup>

## The Autonomy of Sound

The actors on the stage perform us in sound, and so the fiction envelops us. Seeing the actors up on the stage metatheatrically underscores the syncretic gap and so the virtual heard audience is designated as clearly fictional. Sight places that fictional audience ‘over there’ on the stage. Visually, stage and house face each other in opposition, one lit and one dark, fictional versus actual. But sound does not respect this division. Spatially unconstrained, it flows through stage and house, merging these two usually distinct spaces. By combining that performed audience with the context of the actual audience in a hybrid space, we become impossibly fictional.

This same paradoxical dichotomy is extended to Hope/Louise herself when Louise looks up at the stage and takes in the cast:

LOUISE: Oh, wow. The actors are already up there. Who’s in this one again? Uhhh, Hope Davis. I like her. (*Real audience laughs.*) I liked her in that movie about the cartoons. She’s cute. Kinda non-actressy. I like that about her. I mean I don’t get threatened by her which I like. I feel like I could be friends with her or something.

Laughing, the audience, of course, responds knowingly to this moment of self-reflection on the identical embodiment of having Davis talk about herself in the third person. Thus, Louise’s comments about Davis fictionalize the actress, dropping her from world<sup>A</sup> into world<sup>B</sup>, blending these two usually ontologically separate personae.

The correlative effect of this fictionally distanced self-observation is to divide Hope/Louise back into her component parts. In this relationship, they are ontologically distinct but are co-extensive in the same physical body. In the fictional world, Louise identifies Hope as a ‘real person’ – an actor in the play she is attending – and so her ontological equal. In this world, invisible as it is, Louise sees Hope up on the stage, and so the two identities occupy different bodies. What makes this Escher-like spatial arrangement of worlds possible is that sight and sound relate differently to our perceptions of reality.



The cast of *Hope Leaves the Theatre* on stage. Seated, from left to right: Hope Davis, Peter Dinklage, and Meryl Streep. Marko Costanzo is bending over an effects tray at lower left.

Whereas the vision of an object is intimately associated with its existence, being almost synonymous, so that to be is to be seen, sound is more autonomous.<sup>15</sup> This detachment from the solidity of things facilitates the permeation of Louise's world into our own, allowing an impossible situation to hang unresolved in ghostly suspension. Invisible as sound, it defers visual authentication.

In each of these cases dealing with the impossibly doubled audience and seen-Hope/invisible-Louise, attempts to blend ontologically distinct worlds and the resulting correlative metatheatrical divisions between irreconcilable worlds function to build strong affective bridges between ourselves and the play. Inside our experience of world<sup>B</sup>, we feel deep affection for lonely and disappointed Louise. In general, her existence as sound only renders us particularly accepting. As Dermot Rattigan (*Theatre of Sound*) suggests, this is an innate quality of radio drama,

As soon as we hear a word, we are close to the experience it signifies; in fact the sound is literally inside us. To submit to this kind of invasion, to allow another's picture of the universe to enter and

undermine our own, is to become vulnerable in a way we do not when we watch a film or a play, where the alien world is demonstrably outside.<sup>16</sup>

### Metatheatrical Manipulations

In addition to this, Louise's aurally constructed spatial situation as a virtual member of our own audience cements that sense of possession. She is our querulous but uninhibited guide to the experience of being an audience. Syncretically detached from the visual aspect of the performer's body, she resides spatially beside us and inside us. In this reflective space, we become aware of and take pleasure in the perceptual work undertaken in creating fictional worlds. When those efforts are challenged by spatial displacement and ontological disorientation, the audience is better positioned to see and to appreciate them. Subject to opposing perceptual vectors, blending and dividing actual and fictional theatrical worlds, our affective connections to both worlds feed each other. Our empathetic affection for Louise is intertwined with our affection for the institution of theatre itself and our role in it.

Considering the audience effects of inserting narrative accounts of offstage action into the usual flow of dramatized onstage events, Jonathan Walker writes:

When narrative is introduced . . . the performance subjects playgoers to incommensurate epistemological forces. Those conflicting forces cannot be said either to disable or to diminish their knowledge, but rather they disunify and overload it, impeding its effortless progress, and creating optimal conditions for productive interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

He concludes: 'The obscæne asks playgoers to be responsible for what and how they believe in the theatre by prompting them to arbitrate its indeterminacy and to produce dramatic meaning out of its overplenitude.'<sup>18</sup>

Metatheatrical manipulations of actual and fictional worlds in *Hope Leaves the Theatre* operate in a similar manner. Like the aural worlds of radio drama, offstage narrated worlds are also invisible worlds of sound that come into collision with fully dramatized, visually realized worlds. Between them, the gaps of indeterminacy created by the ontologically distinct worlds in competition challenge the audience and, as Walker says, 'disunify and overload' knowledge.

However, these obstacles to the creation of coherent fictional worlds do not overthrow the audience but rather bind them more closely to the theatrical process. Committed as we are to the theatre and the fictional worlds created there, we honour our utopic affiliation to Louise and, when Louise is exiled from the theatre, we go virtually with her. And yet, to our embodied perception fixed in the audience's physical emplacement in the theatre, Hope remains.

### A Condemnation of Hope

Not long after the play-within begins, Louise's cellphone rings. The disruptive ringing sound is the catalyst for another metatheatrical twist, radically reorienting our spatial perception. The ringing cellphone is one of a select company of noises that are explicitly taboo in the theatre. Louise contravenes each of these sound prohibitions. First she gets a tickle in her throat:

Oh shit, I have to cough. Better wait till there's some noise. Laughter or applause or something. Jesus, what if no one laughs during the whole performance? Fucking Charlie Kaufman. (Coughs.)

Then the man beside her, who Louise has identified as a note-taking critic, also starts to cough. She opens two cellophane-wrapped candies – another of the cliché theatrical nonos – and offers one to the critic. More coughing and sniffing before Louise is shushed by another audience member. And then her cellphone rings.

This metatheatrical showcase of theatrical bad manners illustrates to what extent we value actual-world silence during the performance and how that silence facilitates the stability of fictional worlds. We don't want to hear the sounds of the everyday world within its competing fictional sphere. Spatially pervasive, sound extends over the whole audience, unifying us as an audience even as it simultaneously detaches us from the fictional world we have collectively created.

When we first hear the cellphone ring, there is a mortifying moment as audience members think that the cellphone is ringing in the actual audience. We are relieved when Louise exclaims, 'Crap, oh crap. Where is it? . . . Hello?' This upset due to actual-world interruption turns to pleasure when we become aware that the phone is not a world<sup>A</sup> break into world<sup>B</sup> but rather occurs one level down; world<sup>B</sup> breaking into world<sup>C</sup>. Streep, then, when she speaks directly to Louise in the audience, steps out of her world<sup>C</sup> character – a woman in an elevator with two thousand plus floors – and becomes a world<sup>B</sup> version of herself. Although she mentions actual-world landmarks like films *Adaptation* and *Human Nature*, Streep's rant is clearly marked as a fiction. She rails generally against the boorishness of contemporary theatre audiences. But her focus veers quickly to the motivation for this performance: 'You know we are all up here working for free because this was the last thing that Charlie Kaufman wrote before the . . . before he killed himself? Think about that.'<sup>19</sup>

This single piece of unquestionably fictional information, received by the actual

audience with laughter, is sufficient to shift Streep's ontological status to become a character of herself. In support of this indicator, the music which had cut off when Streep first accuses Louise resumes to underscore her speech. With the dichotomous fictional worlds and their relative status clearly delineated in this way, this interruption is a straightforward play-within, generating what Silvio Gaggi terms 'neat' metatheatre, with each world remaining separate.<sup>20</sup> A level is inserted between ourselves in the actual world and the play that Louise attends, dividing Louise's audience experience from our own. Streep interrupts Louise's *Hope Leaves the Theatre* but not our own.

Although Streep turns to fellow actor Peter Dinklage for support in her tirade against this rude breach of audience etiquette, it is notable that she does not likewise recruit Davis. Davis as a fellow actor remains invisible and retains her persona of Louise. The world<sup>C</sup> play-world, which is interrupted by the phone breaking in and Streep breaking out, is what I am calling the 'elevator play' (also titled *Hope Leaves the Theatre*) but which at this point seems only to include Streep and Dinklage.<sup>21</sup>

Immediately after Streep and Dinklage resume the elevator play, we hear Louise get out of her seat, clamber across several people and flee the theatre. Louise leaves the theatre and for the remainder of the play we travel with her into the theatre lobby, out into the street (it's raining), onto a bus, up in an elevator, and finally into her apartment. The elevator play is left behind. However, in her hurry to escape the theatre, Louise also leaves her phone behind. The phone rings again, provoking a second and more lengthy rant from Streep. But, this time Streep interrupts a different play. The worlds blur messily as Louise's ringing phone impossibly breaks into Louise/Hope's own monologue as she rides the bus:

LOUISE: 'Fuck you, asshole! Invading my privacy! Objectifying me!' The 'male gaze' or whatever nonsense I was raving at the time. Oh, what a waste of enjoying someone looking at my ass. (Phone ringing.)

MAN (in the theatre): Shoot. Is that yours?

WOMAN (in the theatre): No . . . it's over there under her seat.

LOUISE: Oh God, if I caught him looking at my ass –

STREEP: OK, let me just take a minute here.

DAVIS: Alright, Meryl, Meryl.

STREEP: No. I think I'm just gonna take a minute. I think it's really important.

When the fictional world is disrupted this time, Hope Davis joins Streep and Dinklage as a performer in this play. Suddenly, we are restored to our eyes, and to our bodies. Sound led us out of the theatre when we left with Louise; our eyes stayed here. The audience for *Hope Leaves the Theatre* can't leave our eyes at home as the Theatre of the New Ear poster urges us to, but we do leave them in the theatre. Although the actors are playing fictional imitations of themselves, even with limited gestures and interaction, the performance and our visual reception of it almost come together at this point. We both see and hear the three actors themselves addressing an audience directly.

In that moment, world<sup>B</sup> seems to make a bid for higher reality status, coming very near to collapsing that fictional world and joining with world<sup>A</sup>. We almost forget that the actors are addressing a world<sup>B</sup> audience and that we in world<sup>A</sup> are not the targets of their censure.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the structure of fictional worlds, this second intrusion again lowers Louise's ontological status, pushing her deeper into these nested worlds. Whereas in the first interruption, Louise held equal reality status to Streep, here it is Davis who is Streep's ontological equal in world<sup>B</sup>. Louise's world is now world<sup>C</sup>, and the abandoned elevator play is similarly reduced, becoming world<sup>D</sup>.

Curiously however, the cellphone and the man and woman who pick it up have a more fluid status, existing non-exclusively in both worlds<sup>B</sup> and <sup>C</sup>. For them, Louise is both 'real' as fellow audience member and fictional since they encounter Davis as 'real' when her performance as Louise is halted. The shuffling of fictional worlds instigated by the second phone call and rant introduces a heightened ontological fluidity. We not only are asked to reassign the relative fictional

status of various players as we acquire new information, but we are now also being asked to allow certain people and objects – the cellphone and the man and woman in the audience – to flow across inter-world borders. It is not just that these objects migrate from world to world but rather that they are ontologically diffused, allowed to co-exist in multiple worlds simultaneously.

### Acousmatic Worlds of Technology

As an actual-world noise interrupting the fictional world, the ringing cellphone functions in a manner similar to self-referential metatheatrical interruptions to open the gap between the two perceived worlds at play. But in addition to being a simple noisy annoyance, the cellphone also repeats the division of sight from sound inherent in the radio play. The person on the other end of the line is purely an aural creation, existing phenomenologically as sound alone. Any visual impressions associated with that voice arise virtually in the mind of the listener.

In this way, telephone conversations, like radio plays, are by nature acousmatic. An archaic word revived in the 1950s, in film criticism 'acousmatic' is used as a term to describe a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen.<sup>23</sup> Running parallel to the generic acousmatic characteristics of *Hope Leaves the Theatre* as a radio play, Louise has a series of inset fictive acousmatic encounters, nesting one blind medium inside another. As Louise is invisible to us, these other characters are likewise invisible to her.

In spatial terms, acousmatic sound not only creates a person, but also brings into being a distinct other space – a 'there' that enters sonically into 'here', attempting to blend the two worlds. While at the same time, as characters in a blind medium, these acousmètres highlight the irreconcilable distinction between the other world that is being transmitted aurally and the visually constructed world that is occupied by the embodied ear of the listener. Structurally, these acousmatic incursions repeat for Louise – and for the audience at one remove – the same syncretic division between sight and

sound innate to performed radio drama, allowing two ontologically distinct worlds to operate synchronously, but on different sensory channels. And like other syncretically mismatched moments in the play already discussed, the resulting spatial displacement creates liminal zones of placelessness, granting first the actual audience, then the cellphone and the fictional audience members who retrieve it, and now Louise, through the paradoxical magic of metalepsis, a more fluid ontological status, diffusing existence across and between worlds.

Kaufman's programme bio, as read by Louise, describes the play as 'A celebration of hope. A condemnation of hope.' Following the ambiguous referent in the title, which hears Hope with a capital 'H' (as Louise) leave the theatre, this epigraph can be read as encompassing the actor/character in a similar way. The play is a condemnation of Louise as a bad audience member. As already discussed, she commits in rapid succession each of the three cardinal sins of theatregoing: coughing, unwrapping noisy candies, and worst, her cellphone rings mid-performance.

### Louise outside the Theatre

Chastised publicly, Louise is singled out from the collective. In addition to the aural unity of being in an audience, audiences are characteristically an invisible group. So when dragged into visibility, Louise is isolated and chooses to exile herself. She breaks with the communal group and leaves the theatre. Outside the theatre, Louise is alone. But even as part of the audience, Louise is alone. She comes to the theatre to be in company. As Dolan writes of her own desire for theatrical communitas, 'The desire to feel, to be touched, to feel my longing addressed, to share the complexity of hope in the presence of absence and know that those around me, too, are moved, keeps me returning to the theatre.'<sup>24</sup> Louise's loneliness dominates her monologic musings.

LOUISE: Ah, everywhere I go there's pretty girls everywhere. It's like a cancer of prettiness. It's just – it's just how can the world support so much prettiness? I don't even get looked

at any more. It's over. I'm just completely invisible. I had my chance and I blew it. 'Cause I thought I was disgusting and I wasn't disgusting, and now I am disgusting, so I'm just alone, and I'm gonna be alone and nothing's going to change that.

She connects her appearance – fat, therefore not sexy – to a desire for love, for sex, but most significantly these emotional and carnal wants manifest to her imaginings simply as a desire to be looked at. Even as she watches the play, commenting reflexively on the actors and her experience as an audience member, she continually returns to this one *idée fixe* which contrasts being seen and being desired against being invisible and being lonely.

Of course, to a world<sup>A</sup> audience for whom Louise exists as a character in a sound play, Louise is invisible. In world<sup>A</sup>, her invisibility is an inescapable, essential quality of her existence. Yet even in her own world, despite her articulated need to be seen and to be desired, Louise has absorbed the separation between sound and vision characteristic of this unique genre of the performed sound play, voluntarily perpetuating this barrier in her interactions with her ontological peers. Sitting in the theatre and on her journey home, Louise does speak with other people, but these encounters are fleeting; they are the many superficial exchanges that make up everyday life. She apologizes to the man in the theatre as she squeezes past him to her seat. The theatre usher asks her if she needs the restroom. A homeless man asks her for change. Louise asks a woman if this is the bus to Brooklyn. And so on in a similar vein.

Apart from such passing comments, Louise has two extended acousmatic conversations. In each conversation, the man she talks to proposes exchanging blind contact for an actual face-to-face liaison. And in both cases Louise rejects these offers.

After Louise arrives home, she discovers that her cellphone has been left in the theatre. She calls it and it is answered by the man who sat beside her. The acousmatic world introduced by the man's voice is augmented by the interjections of his sister in the background. Together they tell Louise the story of

the elevator play that she missed and how moved by it they were. To extend this connection and shift from sound to vision, the man asks Louise out for a drink. She hesitates only for a moment and then tells a lie, inventing a husband 'who would probably get – (*cat purrs*) oh, you know husbands. But thanks, though.' Still he says, 'I feel a kinship with you, it's silly, I know, but I like you. You seem really . . .'

To avert the possible integration of this acousmatic other world into her own actual world, Louise creates a minor fictional inset world in the story of her husband.<sup>25</sup> The husband, generated in words and aurally personified in the soundscape by the meowing cat named Mr Darcy, is brought into being as a competing virtual presence to defer bringing the absent man from the theatre into actual presence. Rather than breaking down inter-world boundaries, Louise performs the theatrical audiencing work of making new ones.

She gets a second amorous offer to shift communicative frames, and meet her online lover in person. When Louise arrives home, she boots the computer and quickly receives an instant message:

IM LOVER (*beep-receive*): There you are.

LOUISE (*typing*): Jesus, that was fast. What? Are you hiding in the bushes outside my house? (*Beep-send.*)

IM LOVER (*beep-receive*): I'd like to hide in the bush inside your house, baby.

LOUISE (*typing*): I bet you would, darling. (*Beep-send.*)

To represent this wholly textual communication, we hear Louise talking as she types her own messages and we hear her lover's replies in a deep, velvety, but somewhat mechanically flattened male voice. In this medium, the separation between the senses is even more pronounced, since Louise does not hear his voice directly, but instead imaginatively creates a visualized sound from text, actualizing her lover in a virtual space, in a precise parallel to our creation of Louise from sound. The virtual world of radio drama finds a technological equivalent in the virtual worlds of the internet.

By contrast with the cellphone man whom Louise had seen earlier at the theatre and who had seen her – a ‘visualized acousmètre’ – this online relationship has no visual context at all. Another layer is added to this acousmatic connection, because instead of only creating a virtual impression of the person typing and messaging, ontologically equivalent but spatially distanced, the words create yet another narrative inset fictional world of virtual sex acts.

Again Louise is using language to create a fictional alternative to avoid actual-world visibility and connection. However, unlike her one-sided story about her husband-cat, this time she has an equally invisible theatrical collaborator to help create the stories. Louise settles into this acousmatic world, still lonely, but resigned to its limited satisfactions. In her last line of the play, she accepts her instant-messaging lover only as voice: ‘Oh baby, how you talk!’

In both encounters with acousmètres who want to become more richly materialized in sight (and touch), Louise obstinately, and perhaps fearfully, protects the border between worlds, maintaining the separation between other worlds introduced by acousmatic technologies and her own world. Louise lives in a dominantly aural environment, even preferring a virtual performance of sex to the real thing. She is in this respect an ideal audience member to radio drama. Nevertheless, this is not a hopeful outcome. By denying the two men an opportunity to become visible, she also maintains her own invisibility, rejecting her own opportunity to be seen.

### A Celebration of Hope

While condemning the isolation of Louise (and the audience) in their purely aural environment, *Hope Leaves the Theatre* also celebrates the parallel experience of the sensorily divided audience caught up in virtual worlds. Through the same spatial disruption that fictionalizes the audience, placing us in a dispossessed but utopian space, Louise is also gifted with a hopeful ending out of an impossible reorganization of the play’s structures, not in space but in time.

Tacked on to the end of Louise’s play is an epilogue of sorts.<sup>26</sup> During the applause, music swells to cross-fade from Louise in her apartment busy with her online lover to another scene where the critic we met earlier sitting beside Louise in the theatre composes his review. Unimpressed by the play’s meta-theatrical game-playing, he pans it, dismissing its ‘postmodern, channel-surfing, facile cleverness’. But in yet another shift of the ontological framework, the critic is reflexively aware of his own inclusion in the play:

CRITIC: And even going so far as to place a fictitious critic in the fictitious audience during the fictitious play and have the whole messy affair end with his fictitious review. It’s a play within a play within a play within a – yes, we get it, Mister Kaufman, bravo, aren’t you wonderful? And wait, there’s more. The critic’s daughter is named Louise, also the name of the play’s protagonist. (*Coughs.*) And the critic coughs a lot. Does he have lung cancer just like the father of the Louise in the play? Oooo, I’m getting chills, Mister Kaufman.

The writing of this review is interrupted by the critic’s daughter – a teenaged Louise. Dad shouts out to tell her to turn down her music, a pseudo-Alanis Morissette-styled rage song about suicide called ‘Brains and Blood’. Louise herself when she comes in seems pleasant and well-mannered. She tells her father she is heading out to Friendly’s with a friend, Janine, and consents good-naturedly to her eleven o’clock curfew. The warmth in the relationship between young Louise and her dad is evident:

LOUISE: Do I look fat in this?  
 CRITIC: No. You look very nice. You’re not fat.  
 You look beautiful.  
 LOUISE: Thanks, Dad. I’ll see you later.  
 CRITIC: Give us a kiss.  
 LOUISE: Oh, Dad. (*She kisses him.*)

Significantly, in a play rife with spatially distanced relationships, she shares the same space as her father. The interpersonal connections forged in the language of seeing and being seen in this short scene are especially rich in light of the adult Louise’s previous acousmatic relationships. When she asks how she looks, he actually sees her. This

contrasts with the instant-messaging lover who cannot see her but still says, 'You're looking awfully good to me right now.' Louise's casual promise to return is also couched in visual terms 'I'll see you later.' Last, they exchange a filial kiss. Louise leaves and the scene is submerged in a reprise of the hard-bitten suicide song. Both of Louise's exits, from the main play and again from this epilogue, follow on from this exact phrase, 'Give us a kiss.' In dialogue with her lover, Louise says, 'Give us a kiss,' to which he replies 'Where?' Her final line, 'Oh baby, how you talk,' ends the play, leaving Louise in her virtual world un-kissed.

Because the critic is also contemporary with the adult Louise and with the performance of *Hope Leaves the Theatre*, this scene cannot be attributed to a simple flashback. A reference to Louise's mother going to see *Sophie's Choice* at the movie theatre with her Aunt Jackie locates this scene in 1982.<sup>27</sup> The performance of *Hope Leaves the Theatre* attended by Louise and the critic is explicitly marked as present-day 2005, featuring a background TV report of same-day news items as well as more general references to the recent filmography of Streep, Davis, and Dinklage.

The fluid inter-world transposition of the critic and the impossibly folded timeline that allows him to co-exist as the coughing critic who sits beside Louise at the play and as Louise's father aware of his own death years before the play's performance again renders these intersections utopian, both in the sense of being no place and also in the sense that we see this scene as hopeful. The spatial nowhere-ness of utopia is translated into time.

The metaleptic folding that brings together the coughing critic and the teenaged Louise offers Louise a hopeful ending. She is able to return to the days she fantasized about earlier. She is going out with a friend to the aptly named Friendly's, presumably a teen hangout. Louise mentions it in her pre-show monologue: 'Ah when I was eighteen I could eat anything. Every day after school I'd go with my friends to Friendly's and we'd have these giant plates of French fries, remember?' She connects those carefree days with dis-

gust for her forty-something body through the fulcrum of how she perceives her own appearance.

I look at myself in those pictures and I looked sexy and I'm wondering what the hell was I thinking? I mean, why didn't I take advantage of the body I had?

By voicing this wish earlier in the play and then being transported back to her eighteen-year-old self, there is a sense that perhaps Louise gets a second chance. Whether she is actually privy to this older perspective or not, the reverse chronology of the scenes allows us to witness this younger Louise paradoxically as her future. By emphasizing the irreconcilable gaps between relative fictional and actual worlds and at the same time impossibly blending those worlds through metalepsis, *Hope Leaves the Theatre* uses spatial displacement to offer the kind of uplifting hopeful experience posited by Dolan. Even as hope/Hope leaves the theatre, we paradoxically still find hope/Hope at the theatre.

## Notes and References

My thanks to Natalie Papoutsis and Chris Eaket for directing my reading in the field of radio drama and sound theory. Thanks too to Kayla Ramlochand who produced for me a draft transcript of the play.

1. Burwell is the composer for the scores to Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002) and *Being John Malkovich* (1999). For the Coen Brothers, Burwell is a long-time collaborator. He has composed for all their films from *Blood Simple* (1984) to *No Country For Old Men* (2007), with the sole exception of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

2. *Sawbones* and *Hope Leaves the Theatre* premiered at St Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, New York, where it had three performances 28–30 April 2005. It was then performed in the original commissioning venue, the Royal Festival Hall, London, for just one night, 13 May 2005. A remount was staged at Royce Hall, UCLA, 14–16 September 2005. For the remount the *Sawbones* cast was unavailable and so the play was replaced by *Anomalisa* by Francis Fregoli. On Labour Day Weekend 2005 (2–5 September), Sirius Radio broadcast a recording of the St Ann's show on Channel 148.

3. Brian Stokes, 'Theatre of the New Ear' Personal Blog: "Brian Stokes: The Intermittent Supergenius", 16 September 2005. Stokes saw the Los Angeles performance on 15 September <[www.lifeformz.com/weblog/2005\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.lifeformz.com/weblog/2005_09_01_archive.html)>.

4. An image of the staging arrangement can be seen at <[www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html](http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html)>. Jeremy McCarter writes, 'Aside from the amassed star power, through, there's nothing much to see. The actors

wear no costumes; denim abounds. At the rear of the stage sits the live band, Parabola, a versatile ensemble ranging from electric guitars to strings.' See 'Ears Wide Shut', *The Guardian*, 4 May 2005 <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1475943,00>>.

5. Carter Burwell, programme notes from the UCLA production <[www.beingcharliekaufman.com/images/uclaplaybill.jpg](http://www.beingcharliekaufman.com/images/uclaplaybill.jpg)>.

6. 'The Movies of Joel and Ethan Coen, You Know, For Kids!' <[www.youknow-forkids.com/newear.htm](http://www.youknow-forkids.com/newear.htm)>. This site features a first-person account of *Sawbones*, the text of the performance programme, and also MP3 files of the audio broadcast of the play.

7. Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 53–69.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 266–7.

9. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), p. 63.

10. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 5.

11. Jeff Goldsmith, 'Francis Fregoli Tries to Forget and Charlie Kaufman Loses Hope: Two Live Audio Plays at the Theatre of the New Ear', *Creative Screenwriting*, No. 23 (September 2005) <[www.creativescreenwriting.com/csdaily/picture/9\\_23\\_05.html](http://www.creativescreenwriting.com/csdaily/picture/9_23_05.html)>.

12. A published text of the play has not been made publicly available. Quotations are taken from my own transcript of the Sirius Satellite Radio broadcast. At times some of the dialogue is indistinguishable. I have tried to be as careful as possible in the transcription, but some errors undoubtedly have crept in.

13. Part of this section of Louise's pre-show monologue titled 'Dressing Room Lights' can be heard online from Carter Burwell's site: <[www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html](http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html)>.

14. James Andrew Mollison, 'Theatre of the New Ear', James's online diary <<http://agnte.livejournal.com/101654.html>>, 14 May 2005.

15. In the short story 'A King Listens', Italo Calvino muses on the separation of the source of sound from the sound itself: 'And when in the darkness a woman's voice is released in singing, invisible at the sill of an unlighted window, then all of a sudden thoughts of life come back to you: your desires find an object. What is it? Not that song, which you must have heard all too many times, not that woman, whom you have never seen: you are attracted by that voice as a voice, as it offers itself in song. That a voice comes certainly from a person . . . a voice, however, is not a person, it is something suspended in the air, detached from the solidity of things.'

16. Dermot Rattigan, *Theatre of Sound: Radio and the Dramatic Imagination* (Dublin: Carrysfort Press, 2002), p. 133.

17. Jonathan Walker, 'Rhetorics of the Obscène', *Theatre Survey*, XLVIII, No. 1 (May 2007), p. 81.

18. Walker, p. 94.

19. This section from the cellphone ring and including part of Streep's tirade titled 'The Cell Phone' can be heard online on Carter Burwell's site: <[www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html](http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html)>.

20. Silvio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern: a Study in Twentieth-Century Arts and Ideas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 15.

21. The 'elevator play' is the performance that seems to be indicated by the faux programme notes. The scene listing in that programme begins with 'Scene One, Elevator'. Subsequent scenes include 'Elevator, ten minutes later'; 'Joe's Living Room', 'Engine Room of an Argentinian Freighter, 1943'; and 'The Void, Thursday 6:53 EST'. We only get a little into the first scene before we leave the theatre with Louise.

22. Blogger Suw Charman reports that on the night she saw the play the two worlds did come uncomfortably close: 'Suddenly the night had taken a turn for the meta that even Kaufman could not have predicted. One could almost believe that the idiots behind us had been planted, if it weren't for the fact that Streep's diatribe patently made them squirm. I could feel them sinking into their chairs, as the audience around them bristled agreement and approval. . . . You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. You could have spooned it into bowls and fed it to people as a midnight snack. There's no way Streep or Kaufman could have known that there'd be tosswits in the audience, although I suspect that the betting was odds on favourite for that being so.' Suw Charman, 'Theatre of the New Ear, Chocolate and Vodka', 16 May 2005 <[http://chocnvodka.blogware.com/blog/\\_archives/2005/5/16/864180.html](http://chocnvodka.blogware.com/blog/_archives/2005/5/16/864180.html)>.

23. Michel Chion, 'The Acousmètre', *Voice in the Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (Columbia UP, 1998), p. 18.

24. Dolan, p.20.

25. In Louise's apartment, we hear in the background a television news report. This report recaps the story of runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, who disappeared from her Georgia home and resurfaced in New Mexico, telling her fiancé that she had been kidnapped. When picked up by police Wilbanks admitted to having made up the entire story. Kaufman lifts this directly story out of the daily headlines. Wilbanks resurfaced to a media frenzy on Saturday 30 April 2005; *Hope Leaves the Theatre* premiered on 28 April. This news item must have been inserted into the evening's performance for 30 April – probably the date the play was recorded for broadcast. This last-minute addition is particularly apt since as I argue Louise uses the same strategy of lying and creating a fictional obstacle to a real-life relationship. See <[www.cnn.com/2005/US/04/30/wilbanks.found/](http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/04/30/wilbanks.found/)>.

26. This whole section titled 'Brains and Blood' can be heard online on Carter Burwell's site: <[www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html](http://www.carterburwell.com/projects/TONE.html)>.

27. If we take Louise to be eighteen in the 1982 epilogue, she is the same age as Hope Davis, both born in 1964. Both women would be forty-one at the time of the 2005 performance of *Hope Leaves the Theatre*.