

‘Chained into that machine’: John Jesurun’s Mediaturgical Adaptations

Christophe Collard

Communication unites, but communication also divides. This well-worn media studies tenet was never more applicable than in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, a 1990 experimental echo of Flannery O’Connor’s short story staged by John Jesurun, the Pope of Greenwich Village’s “post-surrealist” (Feingold 85) theater scene. It is an avant-garde adaptation of a work within a larger collection itself inspired by French philosopher’s Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s conceptualization of the “Omega Point,” wherein the latter urges his readers to

Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward
toward greater consciousness and greater love!
At the summit you will find yourselves united
with all those who, from the same direction,
have made the same ascent. For everything that
rises must converge (11).

For this production, dramaturg-director John Jesurun sat cast members in two parallel rows, on opposite sides of a wall, facing two separate blocks of audience benches, and whereby the other half of the cast was made visible on video monitors mounted above the wall to assist the spectators in assembling an already deeply fragmented narrative on the challenges of reconciling diverging languages, objectives, and values. As a semi-observed adaptation using multi-media means to mediate spectators’ perceptions towards acknowledging the impossibility of convergent communication, it firmly established its author as a divergent media artist on the rise. This article proposes a process-based perspective to Jesurun’s work and the adaptation-principle alike along this artist’s so-called “mediaturgical” interpretation of the culturally canonical Faust and Philoctetes-myths in order to present an alternative methodology capable of challenging many of the pejorative preconceptions still attached

to both adaptation and multi-media performance. “Intermedial” on the two *analogous* conceptual levels of inter-semiotic translation and pluri-medial (i.e. ‘more than the sum of its constituent parts’) presentation at once, Jesurun’s *Faust/How I Rose* (1996) and *Philoktetes* (1993-2007) should support the underlying hypothesis that distinctions emerge where media(ted) perception takes us, and that a process-based *awareness* of such mechanisms could facilitate interpretation.

A Hispanic-American hybrid himself, who grew up tri-lingually on a military base in Germany, John Jesurun started his meandering march across contemporary media experimentation rather inauspiciously as a content analyst and assistant producer at the mainstream television network CBS, only to turn towards independent filmmaking in the early 1980s and subsequently to the stage. This led in 1983 to the creation of *Chang in a Void Moon*, in his words a “living film serial” (qtd. in Fried 73) that theatricalized film scripts in different installments running all the way to the present day, and which combined cinematic “jump cuts” with televisual speed-editing and shifting viewing angles. Marking an aesthetic sensitivity inspired by the linguistic expressionism of “Mama Dada” (i.e. Gertrude Stein), and very much akin to the styles of his practitioner-contemporaries on the experimental Off-Off Broadway scene (Mac Wellman, Richard Foreman, Sam Shepard, Maria Irene Fornes), Jesurun gradually moved from moving sculptures to what he came to call “pieces in spaces” (Jesurun “Introduction,” 76), otherwise defined as stage plays where the live, the fictional, and the mediated become blurred across media and genres.

These “pieces in spaces,” elaborated in a reciprocal relationship by the kindred collective The Builders Association, prompted the editor of the *Performing Arts Journal* Bonnie Marranca to coin the concept of “mediaturgy,” a term both recognizable and problematic. It does not seek to divorce drama from its textual overtones, but rather signals a shift of critical perspective to “media-language” more attuned to cross-medial communication in networked societies (Marranca 16; see also Lehmann 46). Jesurun’s mediaturgy consists of a refusal to tell unambiguous stories with clear beginnings, middles, and endings, but rather directs his spectators’ gaze towards the untold stories of the “in-between.” By such means he generates a “troubled tension” (qtd. Gholson 91) between the “sophisticated and sometimes brutal techniques with which we present and filter information in our ordinary, contemporary reality” (Jesurun

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1993: 64; see Svich). His principal focus lies in exposing the *processes* that constitute perception and interpretation.

Such a mediaturgical approach can hardly be considered innovative in its own right. But Jesurun has also developed a minimalist style of staging, a rigorously “fast and flat” (Hagan 124) acting style, as well as generating the already mentioned “troubled tension” between media, genres, and referential frameworks. Staging inter-medial tensions while relying on *recognition* to attain a sense of *estrangement* generates *emotionality* by “cutting right through the acting façade of putting on an emotion” (Jesurun qtd. in Gholson 90). He establishes a mimetic bridge before laying bare the machineries of perception and consciousness. As Jesurun feeds on recognition to realize his multi- and inter-medial palimpsests, he effectively *stages* multiple communicative “texts” simultaneously. The stage performer, after all, functions as a communicative vessel *mediating* between the conventions of a text or script, between the context of the performative space, and between the reciprocal interpretations of creators and spectators alike – *in real time*. A live performance effectively *stages* a double vision of artistic product and cognitive process that stimulates associative thinking.

Just as Jesurun's mediaturgies go beyond a formal adaptation of techniques and technologies from different media and genres, so he reveals an interest in precisely the “troubled tensions” - the uneasy truces and frictions between texts, media, and interpretative frameworks that bring them about. (Jesurun, *Breaking* 65) This puts him in good company, for even Shakespeare did not write a single original play in the purest sense of the term, just as nowadays roughly 90 percent of all Oscar-winning Best Pictures and award-winning television series are adaptations (Hutcheon 4). This should stand as sufficient proof that – to respond with another truism – successful adaptations are *adaptive*.

Since communication can only succeed by virtue of audience uptake, our understanding of the adaptation *as* adaptation implies an alluring blend of convention and invention - the fusion of the familiar with a display of new creative possibilities that *connects* before it *confuses*. My objective here is to avoid those spurious questions of “fidelity” and “closeness to the source-text” that have plagued adaptation and translation studies for so many decades, and focus instead on processes of signification in an attempt to understand the *motifs* and, above all, the *mechanisms* that effectively shape adaptations

through a reciprocal interplay with the forces of cultural signification. In short, a perspective that focuses not on difference between source and target texts, but rather on the ways in which certain *similarities* have come about. Just as adaptation itself, in the sense of an inter-semiotic translation from one or more signifying systems to a target medium, is more of a negotiable commodity than a rigidly circumscribed concept, its *heuristic potential* is infinitely more constructive than its reductive pseudo-alternative found in fidelity-discourses. Once a source text's discursive field is distinguished from that of a target text, the status of the translators change; they are not seen as "traitors" but rather "mediators" or "negotiators" (Bassnett 88). This would consequently define acts of translating and adapting alike as what David Johnston called "journeys towards otherness" (27); compositions straddling convention and invention and constituting yet another example of an ongoing process of complex negotiations. When addressing adaptation as a *syncretic structuring process*, the selective perception at the root of mere comparisons can be repurposed – or, *remediated* into a reciprocal exchange that feeds on complex networks of relations, operators, and operative strategies (Helbo Signes, 21).

Let us consider John Jesurun's "filmic theater," "theater/ movie installations," or even his "telematic theater" as examples of these kinds of adaptations that reject 'traditional,' one-dimensional distinctions between more conventional artistic platforms in their joint pursuit of a heightened *media awareness*. The theatrical performance functions as a *Gestalt*, which cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter paradoxically defined as "some kind of stable but one-of-a-kind, never-seen-before whorl" (187). Disciplined by a directorial "script" as well as framed in space and time, the stage production is simultaneously present and absent, recognizable and elusive, "construct[ing] meaning without denying the [live] presence of the representing object." (Helbo, Performance Studies, 4) Fundamentally oxymoronic, the theater thus appears as a most appropriate stepping stone for reflection on the processes of cultural hybridization represented by adaptations.

In the mediaturgical environment of John Jesurun's 1986 production *Deep Sleep*, the character Smith warns that we all "have to realize that [we are] chained *into* that machine" (268 – emphasis added). The performing arts' capacity of incorporating a virtually limitless number of perspectives, signifiers, and signifying systems in a temporally and spatially ritualized

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event turns the theater, even in its most traditional format, into a *hypermedium* that draws visual attention to an elusive content. Jesurun's mediaturgies offer a case in point, as they integrate video projections, montage and narrative strategies from different genres in a stage performance, and thereby upset any sense of linear logic. Simultaneously accessible and confusing, Jesurun's pieces in spaces remediate old and new communicative media while highlighting the mechanism's generative potential (Moninger 176). Instead of posing a threat to the integrity of older media like the theater, these pieces concentrate on illusion-making in what German theorist Irina Rajewsky called "Moment[e] des Intermedialen" (22) – a series of fluctuating, pluri-medial situations suggesting irreducible in-betweenness. By metaphorically capturing medial hybridity in a format both recognizable and accessible, estranging and confusing, Jesurun stimulates theoretical reflection *about* and *across* genres, media, cultural distinctions, and critical disciplines.

In John Jesurun's "pieces in spaces," time, place, and identity appear in a constant flow, with each scene dramatizing the cognitive absurdity of linear narratives through a perfidious play with attraction and alienation. "Truth" quickly dissipates in layers of fluctuating impulses that constantly "skirt the edge of chaos" (Jesurun "Breaking," 66) without giving up the communicative bridge between stage and audience altogether. To Jesurun, it is rather a matter of "shift[ing our] focus to accommodate imagination" (68). He is an emblematic proponent of what media and performance theorist Philip Auslander famously called our "mediatized culture," in which media have become so ingrained in everyday life that it is no longer possible plausibly to separate the live, the authentic, and the "original" from the mediatized (2-4).

Jesurun's staging of what Bonnie Marrance terms the "dilemma of 'liveness'" (18) comes into sharper focus when we factor adaptation into the equation. While his *Faust/How I Rose* mediaturgically developed from an adaptation commissioned by The Builders Association, the production comprises a collage of intertextual and intercultural references to the Faust-myth, just as his work-in-progress on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* – started in 1993 with the latest re-write dated 2007 – feeds on classical Greek drama and his own mediaturgies to create a barren and alien landscape where communication is at once problematic yet the only possible means of salvation.

The script version of *Faust Jesurun* originally furnished to the Builders Association, and which he himself subsequently adapted comprises overt and covert references to, among many others, Camelot, JFK, the Beatles, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1968), Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* (1588-1589), as well as Goethe's *Faust* (1773-1832) (Callens 251). Broadly speaking, the story – or better -its narrative 'progression' – starts on the apocalyptic warzone of Earth and ends in the Sartrean hell of a physician's waiting room. The work addresses the Faustian pact in a "galaxy [that] has spun out of control" (Jesurun *Faust/How I Rose*, 107) from the perspective of the devil, here depicted as a punk-rocking surfer-girl at one point doubling Goethe's Gretchen (121-123), while Faust himself remains aloof and diplomatically disconnected. The language leaps back and forth between the grandest archaisms and the coarsest contemporary slang, mediated by the sight of the actors reading out letters, or speaking into microphones, with the sound of disembodied voices on the soundtrack. This panoply of styles is characteristic of Jesurun's constant play with recognition and estrangement, mixing catch phrases from advertising slogans, snippets of poetry and pop song lyrics with aporetic debates on the nature of the universe presented on a set made up of oversized canvases continually projecting lush and dazzling image-scapes. Since the Faustian bargain of selling one's soul itself has been appropriated – or, indeed, *remediated* – by our consumer culture in disparate fields such as nuclear deterrence, football transfers, or electoral redistricting, Jesurun's mediaturgical mish-mash addresses the *void* that was originally taken up by the aura of the canonical text. To literary theorist Harold Bloom, such a theatrical "double vision," combining artistic product and creative process is essentially Faustian because it implies an "absolute consciousness of self compelled to have admitted its intimate alliance with opacity" (32). Pushkin in his day called the Faustian legend an "*Iliad* of modern life on account of its aporetic, contingency-driven rejection of totalizing discourses, whereas Goethe himself termed it an 'incommensurable production'" (qtd. in Lukács 128). It is therefore no coincidence in Jesurun's text that when Faust comes to kiss the surfer-fiend, his reaction metaphorically sums up the historical prejudices associated with derivative practices such as impersonation, remediation, and of course adaptation:

FAUST How odd, my dear. Your tongue is so sharp. Your saliva so toxic. Your breath so

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mannish and harsh. Not at all what I remember. The taste is all wrong. You've changed. Love don't forget so quick. Flesh remembers flesh. But this flesh don't flinch. I've kissed what I don't know how to kiss. Or never will learn. I feel a pity tingling on the tip of my tongue, dear one, for a tongue that will never learn. For your dull kiss, your charred wooden lips (*kisses MEPHISTOPHELES again. Softly.*) I've kissed a salt mine, a tragic freak, a sleeping frog. How far thou art fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning. But I had no idea you had fallen this far. This can't be your first kiss (Jesurun *Faust/ How I Rose*, 123).

Interestingly, this metonym of the human flesh played a similar role in Jesurun's other ostentatious adaptation of a canonical work, his mediaturgical rendering of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, as directed for its world premiere by Dutch director Jan Ritsema at the Kaaitheater in Brussels in 1994. The third play in a triptych of *Philoctetes*-adaptations by André Gide (in French) and Heiner Müller (in German), it featured the legendary avant-garde actor Ron Vawter in the lead role, whose purple Kaposi rash created a troubled tension between the fictional theme of physical suffering and the embodied "liveness" it mediated on stage. Jesurun's version is a funeral play about a stricken warrior narrating his own demise from beyond the grave, a *memento mori* that slightly unsettles its classic predecessor by recycling the mythological story of Philoctetes, while deliberately dramatizing the actual *crossing* of the border with Vawter's naked Philoktetes re-enacting and commenting the *process* of his passing – all the while literally decaying before our eyes. No different from Jesurun's *Faust*, *Philoctetes* expresses the "troubled tension" of a liminal character as part of the liminal process that is adaptation (Patsalidis).

Structured moreover as a cinematic twelve-scene re-telling of his former betrayal by Odysseus, Philoktetes now lives alone on his island in a dumpster hotel, where he is seen soaking his putrefying leg in large quantities of margarita. Once again, the textual layers of the piece are inextricably interwoven with Jesurun's trademark use of "live cameras in several different positions to reveal and conceal the live action from all

participants, audience included” (Jesurun “Breaking,” 68), as well as with fluidly flowing filmed backdrops displaying unobtrusive images like the shimmering surface of a pool. Analogous with the eponymous hero’s liminal condition, though, these projections are both backdrop *and* performance space as they flow from wall to floor and back again – a semiotic strategy best summarized in yet another set of long aporetic dialogues:

ODYSSEUS: What does it represent?

PHILOKTETES: It’s an interpretation of a hungry fly after a meal of blood.

ODYSSEUS: Oh, no, dear.

PHILOKTETES: Oh, yes, dear.

NEOPTOLEMUS: It isn’t that, really, is it?

PHILOKTETES: Yes, it is.

ODYSSEUS: Where do you get such perversions?

PHILOKTETES: When I see my reflection in your eyes. (Jesurun, *Philoctetes*, 79)

When Vawter’s *Philoctetes* hauntingly reminds us that “the body knows the answer,” whereas we “don’t know the question” (83), Jesurun with this “intermedial coup” (Moninger 181) opens up a panoply of questions far beyond mere descriptions of story, scene, or theme.

The equivalence-perspective proposed earlier in this article now requires reconsideration. Because inter-medial creations and adaptational processes are fundamentally intertextual systems, referential and interpretive frameworks paradoxically must be self-relativizing in order to be meaningful. As adaptation theorist Patrick Catrysse suggests: “The functioning of norms explains why communicative behavior shows system(at)ic characteristics. Norms and systems can therefore be seen as two sides of the same coin” (253). This of course leaves us with a *process*-based approach in which nothing is certain except the reality of uncertainty itself. In the theater and in adaptational practice alike, this lack of fact is not to be decried, but rather celebrated.

The cases of Jesurun’s *Faust/How I Rose* and *Philoctetes* indicate how much human beings and machines are connected in contemporary “post-

dramatic" theater, as in the cultural complex that spawned it. Drawing attention to the mediation behind artistic creation by highlighting the artificiality and – above all – the *negotiability* of the illusion helps us discard the notion that media and technology are a threat to our so-called "essential" humanity (Schmidt 435). The supplementary insights offered by the multi- inter- and/or hypermedial theater stage moreover remind us that even the "live" is perennially mediated, and is the sole possible way through which communication can occur. To John Jesurun the key question here is not about what is "original," but rather *how* various thematic threads and signifying systems have come to connect (Jesurun "Breaking," 69). Considered from such an angle, the two 'mediaturgies' by John Jesurun could then well deserve to be termed "provocative adaptations" (Farley 507). The term's implications of intensified perceptibility may ultimately direct attention to the *cognitive* association of poetic patterns, contextual frames, and personal connotations. As a result, adaptation becomes a matter of enhanced pattern recognition instead of "optimizing" a text along immeasurable criteria.

Ultimately, in a cultural context characterized by pluri-medial hybrids, where apparently stable notions of authorship, influence, and medial determinism are constantly undermined, any individual perspective must remain incomplete. The perception fostered by the adaptation-principle itself can never be preconceived as an end in itself, but should rather be identified as an emancipatory refuge for associative thought. Based on what adaptation theorist André Helbo called an "epistemology of plurality" (*Signes* 63), adaptation duly breaks down the barriers between the conscious and the unconscious mind while simultaneously functioning as an *engine* of associative thought across media, genres, and cultural distinctions. This potential should remind us that meaning is derived from nothing but the *interplay* of various signifying systems, and hence that the *process* of "meaning-making" can never be finite. Still, the *distinction* between acknowledged and unacknowledged remains of paramount importance when discussing intertextual relations. A certain text can adapt one or multiple others, yet referentiality is characteristic of the signification process itself since even the simplest form of communication relies on recognizability in order to succeed. When *every* text or discourse is intrinsically adaptive to some degree, the term "adaptation" may very well be stretched beyond the point of meaning. On the other hand, simply

adding an adjective would reconfigure the concept as a functional construct. And it is precisely by tapping into this heuristic potential that the concept can prove its intrinsic worth against a barrage of less generative concepts.

In keeping with John Jesurun's that "Wherever there's trouble, there's poetry" (qtd. in Gholson 91), the conclusions of this article point towards the intrinsic relativity of critical distinctions, while the practice-based insights it hopefully provides insist on their cultural necessity. The dynamic created in Jesurun's mediaturgies stages a brittle balance between formal complexity and processual logic; his is a kind of techno-functionalism that is exuberantly lucid about its own limitations. Bonnie Marranca called it "performance as design" (19), Jesurun's Faust calls it "nothing but God's whore puppet theater" (123). The difference is always but a matter of perspective.

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