

Performing Deaf Culture: The (Changing) Role of the Audience

Resisting a – typically Western – ‘phonocentric’ cultural tradition, several scholars and artists, both hearing and deaf, have successfully vindicated the representational autonomy of sign languages from vocal ones. This has been achieved through both a partial re-writing of that tradition and an appropriation of the right to express oneself with one’s own ‘voice’.

‘Performativity’ and ‘performance’ are key concepts in sign language literature and Deaf theatre, both unveil the ideological and epistemological limits of such terms as ‘language’ and ‘literature’ and invite to consider the body itself as text. Since the traditional concept of literature stems from a phonocentric ideology, based on the implicit identification between written and oral languages, such a model automatically wipes out the literary canon of everything that contradicts this link.

The aim of this paper is to show how, besides questioning the very idea of text, sign language literature actually shifts the attention from a textual model, based on language and speaking, to a performative model, exemplified by the recent studies in the field of performance art as well as theatre, cinema and television semiotics. Because of its oral nature and face-to-face transmission, this type of literature has always strongly relied on an intimate and mutual relation between author and audience. The advent of film and digital technologies heavily affected the way sign language literature was transmitted and received by the audience and although they allowed to capture and fix signs, the audience ended up being completely separated from the artist.

The actor-audience relation is still fundamental in Deaf theatre; it can pursue different aims and make different language choices depending on the type of audience it wishes to address: whether a deaf audience or a hearing one or a combination of the two, as in the duo of performers called Flying Words Project.

Advocating the inclusion of sign language literature within the wider literary establishment, Bauman, Nelson and Rose claim a necessary rethinking of literary practices: “The addition of sign to the body of literature warrants a rethinking of such fundamental notions as textuality, genre, performance, and body as they have been constructed within a decidedly hearing model”.¹

Sign poetry, in particular – one of the main means of artistic expression within Deaf communities – combines the movement and performance typical of oral poetry with the visuality of writing. As Rachel Sutton-Spence observes in *Analysing Sign Language Poetry*, “The idea of sign language poetry may seem unlikely to many people unfamiliar with sign language”.² As a matter of fact, the traditional notion of poetry is closely associated with the idea of sound and vocalicity; however, what characterizes a poem is a number of features that sign poetry possesses too, first and foremost a creative and evocative use of language.

¹ H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, Heidi M. Rose, eds., *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

² Rachel Sutton-Spence, *Analysing Sign Language Poetry* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13.

Roland Barthes³ reminded us that the very etymology of the word “text” recalls the action of weaving: text as ‘texture’, meant not as a definite act, but rather as an *in fieri* process, in which the narrative voice dissolves. In sign language poetry the central process of weaving is unveiled by the signer and the fluid movement of his/her hands, as they draw in the space the poetic ‘text’ through the use of the basic parameters of sign formation (handshape, location of the sign, movement pattern, and palm orientation).

The body itself becomes writing in sign language literature. Writing with their own body, for Deaf poets, implies a double meaning: writing ‘from’ their body and ‘through’ it. The feminist critical theory had already established a close link between writing and corporeity, stressing the peculiarity of the *écriture féminine* and of a literature produced from the margins. In Hélène Cixous and Trinh T. Minh-ha writing becomes figurative, an iconic signifier. Several scholars of sign languages have outlined the iconicity of some signs; Russo focuses on this feature to work out a model of poetic analysis more suited to the visual and performative nature of sign language poems. In particular, he assumes the existence of an interrelation between iconic phenomena and the strategies of understanding and interpreting a text and points out different types of iconic relations that can be identified within the structure of a signed poem.

The tight link between body and artistic creation inevitably affects the way the text itself is experienced. Whereas written poetry can also be transmitted through a solitary reading, without requiring the presence of its author, sign language poetry, on the contrary, needs the double presence of the poet/performer and of an audience, similarly to what happens in the theatre. Examining ASL literature, Rose stresses its performative nature. Those who see a poem in sign language experience it through the poet-performer’s body, as the poet’s inner voice emerges through the signs produced by his/her body. Deaf people have an intrinsically physical relation to the text, because sign language is expressed through the face, the hands, the head and the chest. Sign language clearly provides a new space of existence for literature:

ASL literature is more than a literature of the body; it is a literature of performance, a literature that moves through time and space, embodied in the author’s physical presence. To “read” an ASL text means to view a live or videotaped performance. The literary power of ASL literature is defined by, and coexistent with, its theatrical or performative power; thus the Deaf poet’s gift with language is always already a gift of bodily expression and dynamic stage presence.⁴

Because of its peculiar nature, the link between poetry and corporeal identity is made extremely concrete in sign language literature. This very feature, which also marks the difference between sign language and traditional hearing literatures, invites to expand established notions concerning poetic creation, the relation between poet and poetic text and the links among language, culture and performance:

³ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973); *Il piacere del testo*, trans. by Lidia Lonzi (Torino: Einaudi, 1975).

⁴ Heidi M. Rose, “The Poet in the Poem in the Performance: The Relation of Body, Self, and Text in ASL Literature”, in *Signing the Body Poetic*, 131.

... sign literature can demonstrate that signing/performing bodies are more than resistant to a perceived 'norm'. Rather, the performing bodies of sign literature can be seen as a standard from which the hearing world may learn something new about the relation of poetry to time, space, and image; the relation of body, text, and performance; the relation of language, culture and performance; and the relation of poet to the poem.⁵

⁵ Ibid., 144.

The evolution of sign language literature has involved not only the search of new forms of expression, but also new ways of addressing and relating to audiences. Moving from an early stage, when sign poems were merely a translation of well-known poems of the hearing culture, Deaf poets have gradually reached and shown a fuller artistic maturity, supported by a greater awareness of the aesthetic and expressive potentialities of their own language.

The need to find new interpretative models for sign language poetry are made clear, among others, by the artistic activity of Jolanta A. Lapiak, a Polish deaf media artist. Speaking about her artistic productions, ranging from video art to video performance, including multimedia painting, poetry and visual tales, Lapiak underlines the final aim of her art, that is challenging phonocentric notions of textuality and poetry: "Through sign language art my works explore grammatology (art/science of writing) and various ways of writing/speaking with a unique blend of cinematic vocabulary, lingual choreography, verbal calligraphy, poetry, and storytelling techniques, using ASL".⁶ Her performances – like *Writing and/or Speaking* – invite the audience to consider the limits of the logocentric hierarchy and dichotomy of writing/speaking, showing instead their complementary nature. Her primary means of writing, Lapiak declares, consists in her own body, which works as paper and ink at the same time; she writes in the air with it, with or without material supports as the video, considered by the artist as "a multi-dimensional, digital-temporal paper to scribe on".⁷

⁶ Cf. <<http://www.lapiak.com/lapiak/state.php>>, 16 March 2015.

⁷ Ibid., "Artist Statement: Performativity, Arche-writing, and 'Arche-speaking'".

Because of its oral nature and face-to-face transmission – at first within Deaf clubs – sign language literature was not preserved until the advent of film and digital technologies. The latter finally allowed to fix what was once transient and transitory, capturing signs and making it possible even to set up an archive. Among the first videotaped films in the United States, there is a series produced by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), whose relevance lies, as Brueggemann points out, in the possibility to preserve ASL literature while allowing the American Deaf community "to access its culture, identity and language".⁸

⁸ Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54.

This single event, however, has brought about contrasting effects on sign language literature, heavily affecting the way it is composed, transmitted and received by the audience, now separated from the artist. Paradoxically, as Krentz observes, while increasing sign language literature audience, film technology has also alienated the latter. The live audience of the earliest sign language performances interacted with the author/performer, and was affected by the emotional charge released by him/her, affecting in turn the performance itself.

The effects brought about by film technology on sign literature are indeed twofold: on the one hand, it has allowed to keep and circulate performances

making them available to a larger public than in the past, encouraging artists to create more elaborate works. On the other hand, however, by making the latter accessible to both hearing and deaf audiences, this technology represents a threat to sign language literature:

By making Deaf images more accessible to hearing people, film has built bridges between the Deaf and hearing, fostering more respect and understanding. Yet as hearing people increasingly make up the audiences for Deaf works, and as film enables more hearing people to learn to sign, Deaf Americans may be losing some control over their language and literature.⁹

Fixing sign literature in films thus created a certain anxiety about audience and access. In fact, performing a signed text raises the issue of textual authority more than in the case of written works, if one considers the fundamental role of the ‘body-text’ in the making of the text itself. As each signed text carries with it the Deaf artist’s peculiar signing style, the biggest challenges and difficulties in interpreting and performing it lie in the ability to recreate the author’s expressive nuances, that is those linguistic and performative features that make a text alive (such as facial expressions and movements of the head). These very nuances, closely related to the meaning of the poem or text, give it a peculiar identity, being closely connected to the body of the artist.

The emergence of new communication technologies and their impact on the production and circulation of sign language literature also raise, according to Brueggemann, a number of questions: once separated from its live audience – differently from what happened in its early days – who is sign literature addressed to in the digital era? “Should it be translated? And who should carry out that translation, and how?”¹⁰

The issue of translation, closely related to the audience/performance relationship, is examined, among others, by the Flying Words Project, a creative duo made up of Peter Cook and Kenny Lerner. The two American artists, while experimenting with original poetic venues for sign literature, also show the possibility to join different cultural elements: Cook is deaf, while Lerner is hearing, but able to sign. Their performances draw inspiration from various Deaf vernacular traditions – including mime and story-telling – and frequently show the problematic interaction between sign and voice, trying to critically involve the audience in the task of making sense of the visual type of literature performed on the stage.

Lerner sometimes gives voice to Cook’s signs and sometimes it is Cook himself to speak while signing. The former often remains silent, while the latter adds words or part of words to his signs. This happens in “I Am Ordered Now to Talk”, a performance which focuses on the pedagogic tensions between oralist¹¹ and manual learning. The duo, standing one on each side of the stage, perform a poem telling the oralist education received by Cook at the Clarke School. Cook voices the poem while Lerner signs, thus overturning the common role interpreter/interpreted. The poem is a strong condemnation of the oralist method: Cook’s unintelligible speech

⁹ Christopher B. Krentz, “The Camera as Printing Press. How Film Has Influenced ASL Literature”, in *Signing the Body Poetic*, 68.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 53.

¹¹ The term “oralism”, within the field of Deaf Studies, refers to the teaching of spoken language to the deaf through speech training and lipreading, with the complete exclusion of sign language. This method, which spread after the Conference of the educators of the deaf (Milan, Italy, 1880), established the end of sign language teaching in residential schools for the deaf.

¹² Michael Davidson, “Hearing Things: The Scandal of Speech in Deaf performance”, in *Signing the Body Poetic*, 221.

suggests its limits, while Lerner’s signs correct it.¹² They both use a language ‘foreign’ to their own culture and embody, in this way, the alienating effect created by the performance itself; the audience is therefore spurred to comment and reflect on issues of language and communication based on a phonocentric model.

The cooperation between Cook and Lerner, rather than simply showing the possibility of linking deaf and hearing cultures, makes this very relation problematic. Their meta-textual references to deaf and hearing audiences challenge the idea that ASL is an invented or iconic language, ancillary to English. Lerner is often on the stage behind Cook and wears a mask, to emphasize the invisible presence of hearing culture. This artistic choice, according to Davidson, can overthrow the hierarchical schemes within the hearing-deaf relation:

In this sense, *Flying Words* redirects the paternalist hierarchy of hearing to nonhearing persons by placing the deaf performer in front, reversing the spatial (and audiological) proximity. The spatial positioning of hearing and deaf, English and ASL, interpreter and interpreted within *Flying Words* performances maps an indeterminate space between and within audist culture.¹³

¹³ Ibid. “Audism” is a neologism coined by Tom Humphries (1975) and deriving from the Latin *audire*, “to hear”. The term refers to a discriminating system of practices, behaviours and ideas connected to assumptions of superiority of the hearing toward the deaf.

The challenge of translating sign language into a spoken language is very much present in contemporary reflections about Deaf culture. One of the venues that allows to examine this issue is Deaf theatre. Theatre, being based on spatiality, expressivity and gestuality, is a naturally suitable genre to sign languages at large. William Stokoe, whose pioneering studies greatly contributed to establishing sign languages as real languages, endowed with grammar and syntactical features of their own, believed that the structure of sign language is not merely narrative, prosaic, rather mainly, “cinematic”. Stokoe compared the signer to a camera, because of his/her ability to reproduce images from different angles and to vary the point of view.

The history and origins of Deaf theatre are difficult to trace back because of the lack of written documents about it. The first Deaf performances probably took place inside the residential schools for the deaf and enacted scenes related to experience of deafness, school life and the history of the deaf at large. Their initial aim was entertaining an audience of deaf people who shared sign language and life at the residential schools, but later became instrumental to fostering the awareness of possessing a specific culture, identity and language.

Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan highlight a moral and financial dilemma faced by the Deaf theatre: on the one hand, following its original mission, it tends to focus on themes of Deaf culture addressed to an audience of deaf people; on the other hand, financial needs and the desire to inform the hearing society about the Deaf cultural experience inevitably imply the need to make performances understandable and enjoyable to a hearing audience too.

The diversity of such needs helps understand the different choices made by companies of deaf actors: presenting plays entirely in sign language, without the mediation of interpreters or narrators, or choosing solutions which allow a mixed audience, including both deaf and hearing spectators, to see a new type of

performance, by introducing the acts performed in sign language through a short spoken presentation. In this case, the use of spoken language can be paralleled to the strategic use of English in postcolonial cultures. Ashcroft, Tiffin e Griffiths, while defining the concept of linguistic ‘appropriation’ within the field of postcolonial literatures and considering the use of English by non native writers, claim that such a choice does not derive from a sense of inferiority of one’s own language, but rather by the desire to reach a wider public through the colonial language, defined as “a useful means of expression”.¹⁴

Dorothy Miles and Lue Fant identify two different types of theatrical language related to the theatre of the Deaf: the Sign Language Theatre (SLT) and the Deaf Theatre.¹⁵ While the former uses spoken and signed languages simultaneously, and includes deaf and hearing people (not necessarily familiar with sign language) among its spectators, the Deaf Theatre adopts signs only to communicate. These choices are due not only to their heterogeneous audience, but also to their different aims. SLT pursues artistic and cultural objectives, as well as social aims: offering hearing people among its audience the possibility to experience first-hand the beauty and versatility of sign language and to appreciate Deaf culture. In the case of Deaf Theatre, instead, the actors are mainly deaf and the language used is exclusively sign language; moreover, most performances focus on deaf people’s lives and experiences. The ultimate aim is to reinforce the awareness of the peculiarity of Deaf culture and of the autonomy of sign language in relation to vocal language.

Nowadays there are various companies of professional Deaf actors all over the world. Two relevant companies which have strongly contributed to spreading the knowledge and appreciation of Deaf culture and sign language among the hearing society are the National Theater of the Deaf (NTD) and the International Visual Theatre (IVT). The NTD was born in the US, where the first studies on sign language were carried out in the Sixties. In 1864 the present Gallaudet University was established by an Act of Congress; twenty years later, in 1884, the first performance by deaf actors was organized in this university, while other performances were being held inside Deaf clubs and at companies of Deaf actors.¹⁶

Before the establishment of the NTD, the theatre of the Deaf was unknown and invisible to the hearing majority; the few hearing spectators who saw Deaf performances either knew sign language or were linked to the deaf by kinship or friendship. The performances organized by the NTD immediately attracted the attention of critics to the way Deaf actors signed and a larger hearing audience started to enjoy and appreciate sign language performances. This prompted the Deaf to look at their own existence and to sign language differently.

Padden and Humphries stress the critical impact of this sudden interest of the hearing in Deaf performances:

[o]nce seen by others, the actors turned their lives into material for the stage and began to objectify themselves. The fact of their signing and their not speaking became a matter of public curiosity and was an object of discussion. Where silence was not noticed, it was now a commodity, and for that matter, made even more emphatic by voice

¹⁴ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, Helen Tiffins, *The Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (2nd edition, New York: Routledge, 2007), 15-16.

¹⁵ Simona Zinna, *Dar voce alla cultura sorda. Il teatro come strumento di comunicazione e partecipazione culturale* (Villalba di Guidonia: Aletti Editore, 2010), 57.

¹⁶ Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, Ben Bahan, eds., *A Journey into the Deaf-World* (San Diego, California: DawnSignPress, 1996), 145.

interpretation. Signing was the manner of performing, and it was itself the performance. Astonished, the Deaf actors began to look at their own hands, and literally began to watch themselves sign.¹⁷

¹⁷ Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, "Anxiety of Culture", in *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 123-124.

The type of audience to reach out to determined the stylistic and theatrical choices of the NTD. As mentioned above, the massive presence of hearing people among its spectators and supporters made it necessary to grant them a reasonable understanding of the performances. This meant to implement the simultaneous use of sign and voice and a creative transformation of the signs accompanying the words spoken on the stage.

Although this choice was appreciated by the hearing, who could now enjoy Deaf performances, it was criticized by the Deaf, who complained about the obscure nature of some signs, too distant from daily usage. David Hays, one of the founding members of the NTD, was positive that such a choice would have gradually led the hearing to appreciate the beauty of sign language, while spurring the Deaf to learn a new artistic use of signs. When describing the NTD, Hays stated: "This is not, let me repeat, a theatre *for* the deaf. It's a theatre *of* the deaf, just as the name says: a new form of theatre, aimed at a general audience, but always to remain intelligible to the deaf".¹⁸

¹⁸ Cit. in Zinna, *Dar voce alla cultura sorda*, 65 (italics mine).

As to the IVT, it was born in the Seventies in France thanks to the cooperation between Alfredo Corrado, an American Deaf artist, who had worked with the NTD, and Jean Grémion, writer, journalist and dramatist, who was focusing on forms of non-verbal theatre. The target audience of IVT was a mixed public including deaf and hearing spectators. Its artistic choices show the Deaf communities' desire to look for an opening toward the hearing society: starting from original works created by the company itself – the IVT later performed classical works of the hearing theatre as well as more recent plays. The desire to let the hearing participate in the Deaf culture implied the use of techniques suited to enhance the meaning of signs (use of music, mime and subtitles projected on the walls or on the actors' bodies).

The simultaneous use of sign and voice can raise problems when staging Deaf performances. Indeed, if it is true that these performances can carry on claims of a specific identity politics, it is also true that this choice carries the risk of leaving sign language in a marginal position. To what extent does the translation from sign to voice grant the former expressive autonomy? If the presence of hearing actors speaking out the lines signed by deaf actors allows the hearing public a fuller participation as well as an awareness of the artistic possibilities of sign language, is it still true that in the process of translation from one language into another the very 'voice' that Deaf actors want to retrieve remains mediated?

Using simultaneously words and sign also generates a further reflection, closely connected to the issue of reception: who is Deaf literature created for? A Deaf audience or a hearing public? And in which language: signs or words? It is maybe worth pointing out that writing a work first in a spoken language and then translating it into signs still remains a problematic issue for many Deaf. Indeed, vocal language

represents the language of oppression, of many decades of phonocentric practices and attitudes that for long forbade the deaf to use sign language by imposing a hardly successful learning of spoken language. The outcome was in fact isolating the deaf from both the deaf and the hearing community.

Moreover, what are the consequences, in terms of addition/subtraction, of the use of one language rather than another or of both at the same time? Is the much sought-after integration thus achieved? What is it that is left out while trying to integrate? Brueggemann defines the body and the act of translating and interpreting it as “a body that matters”¹⁹ and emphasizes how the classical rhetorical triangle of speaker-public-subject (in this context, the interpreter-hearing-deaf) is completely overturned when communication is mediated by the interpreter’s voice. On such occasions, indeed, who can be referred to as the speaker: the deaf or the hearing? What is more, who is the audience made up of, if one considers that all the three parts involved can be spectators at different times?

Shannon Bradford highlights the need to balance artistic freedom and cultural responsibility in her essay “The National Theatre of the Deaf. Artistic Freedom and Cultural Responsibility in the Use of American Sign Language”.²⁰ The author examines “sign language theatre” or “theatre of the deaf”, particularly the NTD pointing out the company’s merits: the popularization of the concept of deafness among the hearing; the simultaneous use of English and ASL with Deaf actors signing while hearing actors utter the lines; classical works of the hearing dramatic tradition made available to the Deaf and commitment to spreading a greater awareness of the distinction “d/Deaf”.²¹ Bradford also detects limits which consist in the theatrical conventions used by the company:

... despite NTD’s intent, its style inadvertently encourages the conflation of ASL and English, sometimes resulting in a belief that English subsumes ASL altogether. Further, I contend that the vast majority of NTD’s mainstage works present nonhearing people as neither medically deaf nor culturally Deaf.²²

As to the changing role of the audience, Krentz notes how nowadays artists themselves expect more from their audiences in terms of critical response: they should not simply enjoy the performances, but also make sense of their nuances and meanings.²³ Similarly, Cynthia Peters states that Deaf culture and theatre share a “collective ethos”, consisting in the “expectation of an intimate connection between actors and spectators”.²⁴ Deaf performers, in keeping with the central role of sight for deaf people, rely on a visual contact with the spectators, while Deaf dramatists “resist the idea of theatre as passive spectacle, seeking instead participatory, interactive, embodied communication”.²⁵ The tendency toward the communal, rather than the individual, is hence uppermost in Deaf theatre. The idea of a close link between actor and spectator is reminiscent of theatrical vanguards, where the role of the audience changes from passive to one actively involved in the making of the performance itself, thus spurred to acquire a stronger self-awareness.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 58.

²⁰ Shannon Bradford, “The National Theatre of the Deaf: Artistic Freedom and Cultural Responsibility in the Use of American Sign Language”, in Carrie Sandhal and Philip Auslander, eds., *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 86-94.

²¹ The distinction between lowercase “deaf” (referring to the physical condition of deafness) and uppercase “Deaf” (referring to a linguistic and cultural minority), commonly used in the field of Deaf Studies, was first introduced by sociolinguist James Woodward in 1972.

²² Bradford, “The National Theatre of the Deaf”, 87.

²³ Krentz, “The Camera as Printing Press”, 64.

²⁴ Cynthia Peters, “American Deaf Theater”, in *Signing the Body Poetic*, 87.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

The change in the makeup of the audience has occurred not only in the theatre, but also in storytelling. Ben Bahan claims that the presence of hearing people among the public has gradually affected the choice of tales and storytellers alike: some stories quite popular at Deaf clubs – like those portraying the hearing in a somewhat negative light – have been eliminated not to offend this new section of the public. Referring to the widespread use of video technology, Bahan considers that by replacing the face-to-face encounter it has changed both the composition of the stories and their ownership: the audience no longer sees live performances, but tellers who have carefully selected what and how to sign, bearing in mind the mixed composition of the potential public. These changes, however, are seen as “an inevitable consequence of a contemporary world where cultures and technologies cross borders”.²⁶

²⁶ Ben Bahan, “Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community: Dynamics of the Teller, the Tale, and the Audience”, in *Signing the Body Poetic*, 46.

Beyond conflicting interpretations about the changing makeup of the audience, and its consequent role in the making of performances, what remains interesting to notice is how considerations about Deaf performances at large can help envisage new intersections across cultures and disciplines, as well as original ways of involving audiences, by suggesting new perspectives on performance, language, and culture. When faced with new possibilities of expression, the audience is in fact invited to rethink the possibilities of literature at large and to envisage the limits of what Bauman (1997) calls “entrenched ideologies based on the normal hearing body”.²⁷

²⁷ H-Dirksen L. Bauman, “Toward a Poetics of Vision, Space, and the Body: Sign Language and Literary Theory”, in Lennard Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 171.