

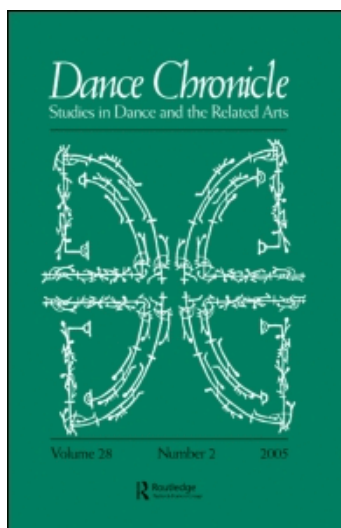
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## Auditory Turn: William Forsythe's Vocal Choreography

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## AUDITORY TURN: WILLIAM FORSYTHE'S VOCAL CHOREOGRAPHY

FREYA VASS-RHEE

*William Forsythe's recent investigations of the sonic potentials of dance movement have led him to generate improvisational modalities that extend dancing into the body's interior by means of translations between movement and vocalization. Analyzing visuo-sonic choreographic processes in Forsythe's works De-creation (2003), You made me a monster (2005), Heterotopia (2006), and Yes we can't (2008) from a perspective informed by cognitive research, and focusing particularly on intermodal counterpoint, I argue that his turn to the auditory extends his earlier investigations of perceptual performativity while also complicating linguistically based dance analyses.*

In November 1984, William Forsythe presented his first concert program as the new director of Ballett Frankfurt. The three-part evening, *Audio-Visual Stress*, consisted of *France/Dance*, created one year earlier for the Paris Opéra Ballet, *Say Bye Bye*, made in 1980 for the Netherlands Dance Theater, and the 1984 film *Berg AB*.<sup>\*</sup> *France/Dance* featured a sound collage of music by Johann Sebastian Bach, animal sounds, and text spoken by a dwarf moving between cutouts of historic monumental buildings. *Say Bye Bye* juxtaposed the ensemble's aggressive physicality with Stan Kenton's brassy "The Peanut Vendor," and paired raucous, screaming dialogue with the percussive music of Chinese New Year. As was the case with Forsythe's *Gänge*, created the preceding year for the Frankfurt company, theatergoers expecting the typical sights and sounds of ballet performance were surprised or even offended to hear dancers breaking the aural "fourth wall," through which only the occasional hand clap or tambourine jingle typically passes.<sup>1</sup>

During Ballett Frankfurt's two decades of existence, from 1984 to 2004, Forsythe continued to produce works that transgressed ballet's traditional auditory barrier, challenging audiences

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<sup>\*</sup>Dates given in this article generally refer to premiere performances of works. However, many of Forsythe's works have undergone repeated and often substantial reworking. Where pertinent, I indicate specific versions of works discussed.

with both their sonic and visual aspects. Forsythe's aural compositions from the Ballett Frankfurt period shared many of the performative aspects that distinguished his visual *mise en scènes*: engaging thresholds of perception; saturating performance spaces with complex, competing information; and thwarting expectations through unexpected juxtapositions, shifts or interruptions. The visual and aural composition of these works, at once highly challenging and deeply musical, reveals intense choreographic scrutiny of the connections between seeing and hearing.

During the final years of Ballett Frankfurt, Forsythe began to extend his research of dance's aural dimensions by investigating the potential of using the dance's own sounds. Works created during this period featured what Forsythe calls "breath scores,"<sup>2</sup> whose elements include not only breath gestures but also footfalls, sounds resulting from physical contact, and other sounds produced by bodies in motion. By 2003 Forsythe and his ensemble had developed improvisational paradigms in which the movement of dancing engendered fully vocalized sound. This integration of vocal and kinetic performance continued through the 2005 closure of Ballett Frankfurt and the establishment of The Forsythe Company. As I hope to show, the works produced by the ensemble during this period demonstrate a profoundly performative aural-visual *intermodality*, or integration of perception across the senses. Within complex, dynamic webs of structured relations that emerge within and across the modes of vision and audition, the performers produce sound and movement linked by the physical and perceptual processes through which they are generated. By acknowledging the muscular contiguity of the dancing body's external surface and vocal apparatus, and by probing the range of improvisatory interaction afforded by this contiguously conceived body, Forsythe has extended the corporeality of dancing in ways that traverse the body's inside-outside boundaries. This has enabled exploration of dance as a *visuo-sonic* practice and choreography as an engagement with the intermodal potential of bodies in motion.

Throughout Forsythe's directorship of the Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company, the ensemble has developed improvisational methods and staging practices that not only challenge the perceptual abilities of performers and observers, but also, crucially, choreographically engage with perceptual *inabilities*. Heidi

Gilpin has discussed the key role of failure in both the production and reception of Forsythe's work, noting how the choreographer's abandonment of the fundamental classical ballet dictate of balance has enabled emergent movement composition and enhanced visibility of dance's ephemeral trace.<sup>3</sup> Sabine Huschka aptly refers to Forsythe's choreographic practices as "perceptual technologies": ways of structuring perception and movement that relocate ballet's propositions "in the unpredictable territory of corporeal perceptual processes."<sup>\*</sup> I view Forsythe's choreographic methods as a continuous investigation of *perceptual performativity*: the capacity of the performance of perception to inform the ensemble's movement research in practice as well as spectatorial experience of dance events. The improvisational modalities<sup>†</sup> and choreographic structures developed by Forsythe and his ensemble confront the limits and proclivities of performers' and audience members' perceptual performance, activating awareness of the perceptual conventions surrounding dancing, dance performance, and spectatorship.

The ensemble's recent focus on visuo-sonic choreographic intermodality constitutes the most recent stage in Forsythe's examination of the performative potentials of perception. In what follows, I focus specifically on the linkage of movement to vocally produced sound, referring to relevant research on intermodal perception, cognitive linguistics, performance theory, and literary studies to show how Forsythe directs attention within and across the senses not only to heighten audience focus but also to direct attention to attention itself.<sup>‡</sup> Intermodal translation from dance gesture to vocal gesture and vice versa productively divides attention; Forsythe has employed this strategy, along with others, to disrupt the body's coherence and to facilitate the production of improvised movement and contrapuntal structure. Below, I detail

<sup>\*</sup>Sabine Huschka, "Verlöschen als ästhetischer Fluchtpunkt oder 'Du musst dich selbst wahrnehmend machen,'" in *William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung*, by Gerald Siegmund (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2004), 96. My translation.

<sup>†</sup>Throughout this article I will be using two meanings of the word *modality*, the first referring more generally to a particular mode of action, and the second, more specifically to a particular form of perception. For example, "improvisational modalities" refers to the first usage, whereas "sensory modalities" refers to the second.

<sup>‡</sup>For a broad overview of Forsythe's recent intermodal choreographic paradigms, see Freya Vass-Rhee, "Dancing Music: The Intermodality of The Forsythe Company," in *William Forsythe*, ed. Stephen Spier (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

how the distribution of dance's sensory information across the modalities of vision and audition has offered the ensemble new perspectives on attention and new ways of researching perceptual performativity.

When dancers translate movement into vocal sound, they repurpose the voice—the common conveyor of textual meaning—as a vector for an aural-visceral rendering of corporeal significance. Dancing that *re-sounds* in this manner opens up a space in which to rethink the ways that dancing bodies convey meaning and to reflect on the centrality of vision and text in dance research. I echo the call for an “auditory turn,” first made in 1976 by postphenomenologist and philosopher of science and technology Don Ihde and recently reiterated by others, to argue for a reappraisal of the *ocularcentrism* that has historically governed research in the arts and humanities.<sup>4</sup> Forsythe's turn to the auditory highlights the sonic dimensions of dancing and their theatrical potential, as well as pointing to the effectiveness of a cognitive approach for their study.

### **Step, Inside: Translating Dancing and Dividing Attention**

Forsythe's choreographic methods are frequently based on successive procedural translations of movement, a concept rooted in his re-viewing of classical ballet steps as sets of codified movement tasks and their subdivisions. In these translations, which Forsythe has referred to as “algorithms,” individual or multiple procedural constraints offer potential movement parameters and allow performers to develop complex improvisational modalities.<sup>5</sup> Key examples include adding improvisational tasks or movement patterns to extant material, extracting or extrapolating individual constraints, splitting group improvisations apart into solos, and “crashing” together different movement structures. These operations result in profusions of new physical states, forms, and dynamics that serve Forsythe as resources for composing new pieces. Over time, works and sections of works develop reflexive physical-cognitive histories, to which the ensemble returns as they revise the composition of the choreographies produced.

Forsythe describes dance as “a kind of music—maybe a visual music,” revealing an intuitive understanding of the common physiological and cognitive ground shared by visual and

aural perception. He reminds his dancers that sound is fundamentally a product of movement: it begins when vibrating objects set air molecules into motion and continues when these moving molecules initiate a chain of motion in the organs of the ear.<sup>6</sup> At work in the studio, Forsythe vocalizes constantly, generating aural images of his own or others' movement.\* This common practice of onomatopoeic or *ideophonic* vocal reflection, in which vocal gestures (like "pow" and "bling") describe object attributes (such as size, constitution, position, movement, or the temporal structure of events), reflects the embodied nature of sound perception. Similarly, we unconsciously temporally correlate speech prosody (patterns of intonation, rhythm, and stress) with accompanying hand and head gestures.<sup>7</sup> We also make robust correspondences across percepts from different sensory modalities, such as the relative "brightness" of sounds or "warmth" of colors, and reflect these in synesthetic metaphors.<sup>8</sup>

Forsythe and his ensemble began to explore the vocal translation of movement during the making of *Decreation* in 2003, a work based on Ann Carson's essay "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God" and her book *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*. Carson's analysis of Sappho's poem fragment 2<sup>†</sup> captures the visuo-sonic structure of attention among the poem's subjects: "Sappho seems less interested in these characters as individuals than in the geometric figure that they form. This figure has three lines and three angles. One line connects the girl's voice and laughter to a man who listens close. A second connects the girl to Sappho. Between the eye of Sappho and the listening man runs a third. The figure is a triangle."<sup>9</sup> The themes of self-annihilation and jealousy in Carson's essay and book prompted the ensemble to further elaborate the counter-rotational dynamics and "disfocusing" perceptual effects of extrapolated *épaulement* on which Forsythe had first focused in 1991, while creating the second

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\*Forsythe's vocal rendering of the dance action in *One Flat Thing*, reproduced can be accessed by toggling the audio settings of the work's video score at the *Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing*, reproduced project website at [www.synchronousobjects.osu.edu/content.html#/fullVideoScore](http://www.synchronousobjects.osu.edu/content.html#/fullVideoScore).

<sup>†</sup>Theodor Bergk's numbering system.



**Figure 1.** Hear the dance: David Morrow, Georg Reischl, Allison Brown, Yoko Ando, and Christopher Roman in William Forsythe's *Decreation*. Photograph by Dominik Mentzos. Used with permission of The Forsythe Company.

version of *The Loss of Small Detail*.<sup>\*</sup> The ensemble developed a radical, emotionally driven corporeal dramaturgy based on complex, wringing counter-torsions of the entire body: limbs, spine, face, and eyes. Forsythe noted that this operation, in addition to confounding proprioception, also deforms and reshapes the vocal apparatus: mouth, trachea, larynx, and diaphragm. When he asked the dancers, "What happens now when you exhale?" the result was a sonic rendering of the state of the body—a translation of movement into vocal sound.<sup>10</sup> One is in fact "hearing the dance" in *Decreation*, to evoke Balanchine's famous edict. (Figure 1) However, rather than reflecting an externally-produced musical composition, the dancers' torquing, writhing bodies become the sources of both dance movement and spasmodic, allied sound. The sub-tasks of this visual-aural translation could also be distributed among watching, listening, and responding performers. In one of

<sup>\*</sup> Forsythe's refiguring of the gaze in *épaulement* can be traced farther back, to the work *Artifact* (1984). See Dana Caspersen, "Decreation: Fragmentation and Continuity," in *William Forsythe*, ed. Stephen Spier (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

*Decreation's* final scenes, a female performer contorts in bouts of twisted movement, watched by another female performer who sits with her back to the audience, translating the movement phrases into wrenching, guttural sound. The work's male protagonist completes the translational triangle, slowly deciphering the phrase "This is the deal: you give me everything and I give you nothing."

The contiguous muscularity of this intermodal choreography controverts reifications of inside and outside boundaries of the body, extending the action of dancing to the body's sonorous interior and *re-presenting* visibly perceptible dance via the aural perceptual channel. This mode of improvisatory composition constitutes an innovative domain of not only the dancers' physical virtuosity, but also their perceptual virtuosity. It demands a manifold division of attention and action from its performers across the external-internal spaces and temporalities of the body and across their own and other performers' physical and sonic output. It is ironic, then, that *Decreation's* visuo-sonic choreography is often interpreted in terms of physical or even mental disability.<sup>11</sup>

In subsequent works, Forsythe's ensemble continued to elaborate the linkage between dance movement and vocalization, extending the idea of *kinetic isometry* first developed with Ballett Frankfurt in the late 1980s by conceiving of the vocal apparatus as exquisitely responsive to movement generated virtually anywhere in the body and refracted across its spaces.\* This system, says Forsythe, "takes a state of your whole body and connects it to your throat," such that "the sum of the body is in your windpipe."<sup>12</sup> For example, raising a heel from the floor produces what he calls "residual movement" of the leg in space. Amplifying the residual movement results in displacement of the hips, which in turn shifts fasciae between the hips and the rib cage, producing tensions differentially across the right and left ribs. Projecting the movement even farther compresses the lower lung and mobilizes the diaphragm, constraining breathing and finally influencing the motion of the tissues of the neck, jaw, and lower face. This action reshapes the trachea, buccal cavity, and finally the lips. Activating

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\* Forsythe describes the concept of *kinetic isometry* as "learning to develop a feeling for transferring the shape or form of one part of the body to another part, so, for example, the curve of an arm might be translated onto the whole body or the line between waist and neck." Quoted in Roslyn Sulcas, "Using Forms Ingrained in Ballet to Help the Body Move Beyond It," *New York Times*, December 9, 2001, Arts and Leisure, 11, 42.



the vocal chords during this process produces sound that provides a reflexive, self-generated accompaniment to the dancing.

Forsythe coupled this extrapolation of vocal sound from movement with another choreographic operation—the translation of visual scores into movement—which the ensemble first elaborated in works like *Limb's Theorem* (1990) and *ALIE/NA(C)TION* (1993). Such a coupling of tasks engenders a radical division of attention across vocal and kinetic modes of motor production, as well as visual and auditory modalities of sensory reception, affording a rich performative experience for both dancers and audiences. Forsythe deployed this manifold operation in the 2005 performance installation *You made me a monster*, an embodied study of love and grief created ten years after the premature death of his wife, Tracy-Kai Maier. At the beginning of the work, audience members are asked to add pieces to the twisted sculptures of paper skeleton pieces on tables and the pencil tracings of the sculptures' shadows that form the visual score for the work. After a short period, two male performers invade the installation's darkening space, reeling erratically as they "read" the sculptural objects and responding with sound and movement to their visual detail. The skeleton sculptures provide a daunting array of choices for navigating visual structure: they can be parsed linearly or nonlinearly across their randomly connected pieces, and one can follow their surfaces or tunnel the vision through their depths. Arriving at a stagelike area at one end of the room, a female performer joins the two men for a brief interval to translate paper shadow tracings placed on music stands.\* In both translational tasks, the performers divide their attention by converting score elements at multiple locations into movement and sound. Forsythe also instructs the performers to "keep your drawing all over your body," in other words, to disperse their translation of the score elements across different corporal regions.<sup>13</sup>

In *You made me a monster*, the dancers' vocal sounds join the visual score to provide an additional emergent stream of information to which they can also respond. (Figure 2) Yet another aural stream is simultaneously created via a Max/MSP interface. As the

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\*The improvisational tasks of *You made me a monster* are sometimes performed as a separate installation called *Monster Partitur*. For this work, a large wooden wall covered with shadow tracings serves as the score.



**Figure 2.** Singing the bones: David Kern translating the visual score of William Forsythe's *You made me a monster* into movement and sound. Photograph by Julieta Cervantes. Used with the permission of The Forsythe Company.

dancers produce the vocal and danced translations of the twisted skeleton pieces and shadows, microphones worn on their foreheads pick up their vocalizations and breaths, as well as the sounds of physical gestures, and filter them through voice-treatment programs that composer-programmer Hubert Machnik tunes in real time, altering, augmenting, and feeding the voices back into the performance space. Each of the four programs, which Forsythe calls “a set of virtual instruments that the dancers play with their whole bodies,” responds to a distinct set of sound qualities with an idiosyncratic spectrum of pitches and timbres and a specific delay and echo structure.<sup>14</sup> The thundering, wailing, and chiming feedback of the Max/MSP programs doubles the work's vocal component, offering the performers an additional set of musical voices to which to respond with movement and/or sound.

Forsythe explains that the skeleton pieces, taken from a build-it-yourself kit received as a Christmas gift by his terminally ill wife, are translations of three-dimensional bones into two-dimensional paper representations. The audience first reenacts as a group Forsythe's own assembling of the paper pieces into a twisted

three-dimensional “model of grief,” then the dancers translate the visual artifacts into ephemeral performance.<sup>15</sup> *You made me a monster* enacts a wrenching, multisensory *re-incarnation*, fleshing out the paper bones with muscle, sentience, movement, and harrowing lament. Acutely attuned to the environment through the demands of attention and action, and teetering intentionally at the edge of perceptual coherency, the performers offer a poignant visuo-sonic image of the fear and sorrow unleashed when terminal disease alters bodies and lives.

*You made me a monster* exploits perceptual behavior, in all its dynamic motivation, to stage a radical division of audience attention among performers' movements and displacements, their live and mediated voices, the shifting directions of their attention, and the labyrinthine sculptures on which they focus. The audience's search for what performance theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to as “traces of connection”<sup>16</sup> is rooted in the so-called “lower” level of sensory perception, which encompasses the immediate sense perception of the environment and the action that precedes and underpins “higher” reflective cognition. Theatrical attention, like all attention, is guided by manifold cognitive goals and strategies of which we are commonly not consciously aware. These attentional strategies are the subject of research on intermodal perception, which aims to define the faculties that underpin our cognitive engagement with the world. Research in this area has shown how the degree of intermodal congruency influences attention to events. A few months after birth, humans are already sensitive and attentive to the robust *amodality* (congruence of information across different senses) of everyday visual-aural phenomena, for example, the redundant spatial, temporal, and kinesthetic information generated by fingers tapping a table.<sup>17</sup> As adults, however, we also respond to cognitive imperatives to discern patterns in complex intermodal phenomena. In addition, our perception is guided by others' attention to events. We remain highly sensitive to gaze in adulthood, following early acquisition and refinement of the ability to “read” the focus of others' interest from their visual gaze.<sup>18</sup> The intense attention of the performers in *You made me a monster* provides vectors that guide the audience's search for linkages between the room's surfeit of visual and sonic information and the performers' actions at the boundary of intention and incoherence.

Finally, the architecture of the installation's space adds a further division of attention for the audience by staging a very real danger of collision. Viewers, trying to attend to the dancers' erratic trajectories, actions, and sounds, must also attend to the movements of other spectators in the room as they make way for performers, skirt around the skeleton tables, and vie for position near the "stage" space. The darkness of the room and the echoing multiplicity of the dancers' voices destabilize observers' ability to locate performers, tables, and other spectators, hence heightening attention. In this way, the network of competing intermodal information makes simultaneous and diverse perceptual demands, threatening to overwhelm the senses of performers and audience alike. The sensory inundation of *You made me a monster* thus pushes performers and audience members to the edge of perceptual performance, affording a visceral engagement with the emotions of grief.

In summary, the visuo-sonic choreography developed by Forsythe and his ensemble, by extending movement into the vocalizing regions of the body, moves dancing across the perceptual boundaries between visual and aural modalities. In doing so, it affords access to the intermodal performativity of bodies in motion. Forsythe's compounding of dancers' performance in multiple modes with translational methods of improvisation afforded a new way to take spectators and performers to the perceptual limits that have long served him as productive choreographic territory. *You made me a monster's* intermodal performance at the brink of perceptual coherency taps the cognitive effects of dividing both attention and action to underpin a physical dramaturgy of the incomprehensible sadness of terminal illness. The dangerous comingling of mobile audience members and dancers reeling in response to surfeits of information further extends the impact of the perceptual performativity that is a hallmark of Forsythe's larger body of work.

### **(E)merge: Intermodal Counterpoint**

Forsythe seeks to emphasize the phenomenological and embodied moment of the experience of dancing over reflective elaboration of narrative or conceptual meaning. As he remarks about performance, "The only valuable thing that is produced is the

attention of the audience . . . and also the sense of desire. . . . Your attention, I want to steer it—I want you to stop thinking and just experience [the performance].”<sup>19</sup> The staging of spectatorial attention is a key factor in generating focus on the moment of performance. A principal means through which Forsythe accomplishes this is by saturating environments with concurrent loci of action. Delineating simultaneity as a principal stylistic trait of post-dramatic theater and citing Forsythe’s work as exemplary in this regard, Lehmann holds that the simultaneous presentation of a multiplicity of signs causes an inevitable “parceling of perception” that engenders two responses in the spectator: opened perception to the possibility of connections and relations, and to the appearance of clues at any given moment, due to the calm and rapid contemplation simultaneity encourages; and inability to process the totality of information presented and perceptual overstrain by the effort to take in as much of it as possible. This overstrain elicits an emotional response that is driven not by narrative content, but instead by spectators’ engagement with the perceptual potential of the performance environment itself.<sup>20</sup>

In Forsythe’s works, informational saturation occurs at both the individual and ensemble level, with performers generating complex systems of contrapuntal relations across different parts of their bodies as they move in complex spatial and temporal relation to one another. Forsythe describes contrapuntal dance structure, a key choreographic element that the ensemble first began to investigate early in Ballett Frankfurt’s second decade, as “one way of providing organization without narration.”<sup>21</sup> He recognizes the principle of counterpoint, commonly associated almost exclusively with music, as fundamental across all forms of art and design.<sup>22</sup> In music theory, counterpoint involves two distinct axes: one producing “vertical” or harmonic relationships among components, and another facilitating “horizontal” or dissonant relationships, to some degree independent of one another. French literary scholar Anne Holmes, exploring the structure of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem “L’Après-midi d’un faune” from a musical perspective in order to draw parallels between musical and literary

<sup>19</sup>Forsythe and *Synchronous Objects* team members, in discussion with the author, Frankfurt am Main, May 16, 2007. Forsythe is not alone in considering counterpoint a visual phenomenon. See, for example, Robert Enggass, “Visual Counterpoint in Venetian Settecento Painting,” *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 64, no. 1 (March 1982): 89–97.

forms, points out that “the listener to musical counterpoint is encouraged to ‘listen horizontally,’ that is, to hear two or more separate strands individually and, only when the distinctness of each has been registered by the mind, to consider their combined effect vertically.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, English literary scholar Hilda Hollis, analyzing the counterpoint of rhythm and meaning in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Windhover,” notes, “The concept of counterpoint directs us to see contradiction rather than immanent meaning.”<sup>23</sup> Such views highlight how counterpoint divides attention between percepts and between differing means of parsing structure.

Forsythe’s contrapuntal dance structures subsume numerous aspects of his re-envisioning of the conventions of classical ballet, including its insistence on verticality, codified configurations of rotated limbs, spatial organization of steps, and a close relation between movement and music.<sup>24</sup> However, the improvisational possibilities of differentially coordinating the distinct mechanics, trajectories, and dynamics of simultaneous movement events are not unique to ballet but inhere in all codified movement forms. In Forsythe’s work, temporal, spatial, and dynamic linkages among movement events take the form of “hookups,” or concurrent sequential relations occurring either within individual bodies or across those of ensemble members. In rehearsal, Forsythe optimizes contrapuntal complexity by fine-tuning balances among dissonant and consonant relational possibilities and by encouraging some translational variance in the dancers’ responses. Performers attend to the forms and dynamics of movements and to the timing of structures resulting from specific task constraints, responding in ways that, critically, exhibit varying degrees of spatial, temporal, or dynamic linkage with other single or multiple events. They also ensure that they offer contrapuntal opportunities to others in the ensemble as they move. The performers take particular care to insert pauses in the flow of action, which not only provide other performers with time to respond, but also create phrasal or “musical” structure in the flow of events. (Forsythe often notes that the critique he most frequently gives the ensemble is, “Don’t forget to stop.”) Within the parameters of their improvisational tasks, the ensemble thus produces a range of values between quasi-congruency and pronounced incongruity, and between immediate and delayed response. This creates a zone of

performance constrained by tacit, shared perception of events, within which actions, while diverging parametrically from their referents, nevertheless still afford discernment of structural coherence.

The Forsythe Company has continued to explore the linkage of contrapuntal dance movement to the movement vocalization practices initiated in works like *Decreation* and *You made me a monster*. In recent works, performers produce both sound scores and movement scores, structuring improvisational intermodal counterpoint as individuals and as an ensemble immersed in complex arrays of visual and sonic information. The installation-performance *Heterotopia*, which premiered in Zurich in 2006, is a virtuoso exercise in the generation of contrapuntal intermodality. This work, which Forsythe has referred to as both a concert and an oratorio, is performed in a two-room space that effectively optimizes opportunities to combine movement and sound production. The room through which the audience enters contains a large square grid of fifty-six unevenly aligned tables, whose arrangement offers several holes, small thrust spaces, and raised ridges. The performers move within and around this table constellation, performing and “conducting” through their movements an ensemble sound composition comprised of a broad range of pseudo-speech, animal noises, and vocal punctuations reflecting movement, architectural forms, or other sounds in the room. In this first room microphones on stands and attached to the tables pick up vocal and ambient sounds and convey them into the almost-empty adjoining second room via a large bell speaker. Muted sounds can also pass between the two rooms through a floor-to-ceiling screen barrier that separates them. The area beneath the tables in the first room, fitted in places with mirrors, constitutes a third, silent space of torpid, mechanical movement. Composer Thom Willems adds an understated live accompaniment of shimmering tones and intermittent synthesizer gestures from the sound booth.

The front “orchestra” room, as Forsythe calls it, visually displays the performers of *Heterotopia*'s sound score (with the exception of Willems) in an installation-like setting (Figure 3). Most members of the ensemble employ several vocal registers in the course of the performance: Jone San Martin, for example, utters nonce words in a raspy, guttural timbre as well as her normal voice,



**Figure 3.** Intermodal counterpoint: David Kern, Francesca Caroti, and Ander Zabala (foreground); Jone San Martin and Christopher Roman (background) in William Forsythe's *Heterotopia*. Photograph by Stephan Burianek. Used with the permission of The Forsythe Company.



while Roberta Mosca produces high, sustained whistles and convincing but completely fake Russian dialect. The back room, by contrast, offers a more conventional theatrical arrangement of performers dancing to accompanying sound in a black-box setting before an audience seated on risers. Two of the three objects in this room—the bell-shaped speaker emitting the front room's sounds and a piano that remains untouched throughout the evening—tacitly prompt consideration of the work's sound score as music, while ironically evoking the distinction between live and mediated performance. The third object, a long ribbon coiled on the floor, becomes a swirling, cracking audio-visual instrument “played” during an extended solo late in the performance.

*Heterotopia's* informational sources and improvisational tasks are concatenated in intricate networks of cause and effect, scattered across the installation's spaces, objects, and bodies. In one scene, for example, a dancer on the tabletops in the first room performs a silent improvised solo that visually conducts a vocal-and-movement trio of performers standing in holes between the tables. Two of the three dancer-vocalizers respond with contrapuntal sounds, which they physically translate into movement. The trio's third member uses the overall vocal score to guide his selective reading in movement and voice of an alphabet of black letters, which another performer moves into constantly changing, pseudo-word formations. In another hole, yet another dancer performs a solo, eyes closed, in which she tries to avoid moving simultaneously with the third trio member by focusing on his voice and moving only when she senses that he has stopped.\* The sounds of this front-room scene, emanating from four voices linked by differing degrees of agency and counterpoint, performers' movements, and Willems's subtle score, issue from the bowl-shaped speaker in the back room, where they serve as “music” for a silent trio of performers there. The physically shifting, contrapuntal action and sound, coupled with the audience's liberty to move around the perimeter of the performance space,

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\*As with many of Forsythe's works, the exact specifications of the improvisational tasks in *Heterotopia* have changed over the history of the work's performance. The task series described here was altered somewhat in 2008, two years after the work's premiere.

motivate attendees to optimize their visual and auditory perspectives, choosing between the two rooms and among the multiple targets of *monomodal* and intermodal attention available at any moment—including other spectators' gazes, postures, vocal or gestural responses, and perambulations.

Simultaneity clearly pervades *Heterotopia*, with its multiplicity of spaces, voices, and centers of visual action. The work's intermodal counterpoint, however, permits a reappraisal of Lehmann's presentation of the concept of theatrical simultaneity, in the experiencing of which, he notes, "A systematic double-bind arises: we are meant to pay attention to the concrete particular and at the same time perceive the totality." The spectator is deliberately made aware of the fragmentary character of perception that everyday conscious experience typically disavows. Confronted by an unavoidable apportionment of perception and, in the absence of informing narrative, spectators structure their own experience through selective attention to events. However, as Lehmann explains, this organizing process "remains an aesthetic of 'meaning in retreat,'" since it requires observers to focus on individual units of structure within the staging and to defer reflection on meaning to a later time.<sup>25</sup> Lehmann's analysis agrees with those of Holmes and Hollis, who also note how contrapuntal structure encourages focus on immediate events, delaying holistic processing of the larger event.

Cognitive semiotician and aesthetics scholar Per Aage Brandt's theory of the neuro-semantic economy of meaning construction departs in some important ways from Lehmann's understanding of simultaneity in aesthetic perception. In Brandt's model, meaning is organized on five nonhierarchical strata, to which we can attend selectively or simultaneously: sensation (*qualia*),\* perception (objects), apperception (situations), reflection (notions), and affect (emotions). Thus, the processes of organizing meaning do not constitute linear, integrative "assembly lines" that culminate over and over again at the level of abstract or reflective thinking. Instead, Brandt claims, mental construction is "sloppy," involving overlays of attention that occur in orders that are not strict. Critically, for aesthetic perception, this mental

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\*Philosophers use the term *qualia* to refer to the subjective mental experience of sensory qualities, such as the "redness" of red, the taste of cherries, or the pain of a pinprick.

economy involves excesses of perceptual material that, remaining unelaborated, are not integrated into higher-order strata. Brandt claims that this excess material, which calls for completion by virtue of its lack of integration, is experienced as particularly salient within the aesthetic context.<sup>26</sup> This notion of simultaneous organization of meaning across different levels of cognition complicates Lehmann's view of spectators' search for connections and inability to parse the totality of events. On the other hand, Brandt's emphasis on the salience of input-level information resonates with Holmes's and Hollis's notions of how counterpoint directs focus to the emergent, phenomenal structuring of events.

In Forsythe's translational modalities, counterpoint can be either *intramodal*, involving purely visual or sonic linkages, or *intermodal*, with vocal gestures reflecting rhythmic, dynamic, structural qualities of movements, or vice versa. Importantly, our parsing of intermodal counterpoint involves two separate sensory channels—the visual and the aural—with only the visual channel requiring overt physical action owing to the limited spatial scope of the visual apparatus. In other words, seeing is primarily a serial process necessitating movement of the eyes and head and relinquishing one target of attention in favor of another; our ears, by contrast, are fundamentally global receivers, favoring “no particular ‘point of view.’”<sup>27</sup> Intermodal visual-aural perception thus runs in parallel, integrating information from a more active, mobile sensory system and a more passive, relatively stationary one.

While intermodal counterpoint simultaneously directs attention to the particular and the holistic aspects of event structure as Lehmann claims, it also creates a different kind of “double bind” in which dual-channeled intermodal attention must compete with the serial process of visual target selection. Forsythe's staging of diverse contrapuntal modalities provides performers with precisely honed ranges of improvisational choices. The intermodal and intramodal choices the performers make, in turn, evoke shifts and overlaps in the ways that audience members allocate their attention. This heightens perceptual awareness and contributes to what Lehmann, referring to a term used by Sigmund Freud, delineates as an “evenly hovering attention” (*gleichschwebender Aufmerksamkeit*) that remains open for potential connections among any sources or along any dimensions.<sup>28</sup> Finally, by staging a mobile and visible audience around four sides of the

table grid and across the two rooms, *Heterotopia*, like *You made me a monster*, scales up audience attention from covert observation into overt action, staging their performance of perception in tandem with that of the performers, and, in doing so, dividing audience attention yet again.

Forsythe's intermodal deployment of theatrical and choreographic simultaneity does not merely confront audiences with complexity or speed at the limits of perception. Dividing attention between atomistic and holistic qualities of presentation, intermodal counterpoint strategically intensifies performer and audience perception by choreographically merging the activities of sensing within and across modes. This invites attention to both the composition of the works and the dual performances of perception, engendering an inherently reflexive performance of perception in observers. Intermodal counterpoint thus constitutes a highly refined extension of Forsythe's inquiry into the perceptual-performative economies of postdramatic theater.

### Sensing Meaning, Moving Theory

Thus far, I have described task strategies developed by Forsythe and his ensemble for translating between movement and sound, offering a cognitive approach for analyzing their performative effects. The visual-aural scores of *You made me a monster*, *Heterotopia*, and similar works interrogate commonly accepted distinctions between choreography and improvisation, between the body's interior and exterior, and between vision and audition. In this section, I argue that they stage a deconstruction of the linguistic and musical qualities of vocal utterances, and, by complicating the perception of language and action, challenge assumptions about the ways that bodies project meaning.

Forsythe directly addresses the theme of comprehensibility in *Yes we can't*, which was first performed in 2008 at the Festspielhaus Hellerau in Dresden.\* Through a shrewd mix of vocal and physical truncation, multilingual speech, word and movement play, non

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\*On April 16, 2010, Forsythe produced a completely new version of *Yes we can't* that was performed in Barcelona, Spain, and subsequently in Köln, Germany. The descriptions of action, text, and dramaturgy herein refer to the version performed during the work's first two seasons.

sequitur, and dark verbal and physical innuendo, this work directly confronts spectatorial desire to understand meaning. Moreover, it undercuts the dominance of discourse, which historically subordinates bodies in action to the texts that are produced about them. Forsythe has said that the work's title addresses "the demand audiences place on artists to explain themselves," noting that works are "read" for content or meaning by general or specialized theater audiences, each of which has its own interpretive agenda, and are deemed more or less valuable based on the set of criteria imposed for such interpretation.<sup>29</sup> In the opening section of *Yes we can't*, vocal roars are interspersed with tense, fragmentary actions, with the dancers spitting fragments of speech at on-stage microphones as they are whipped past them in the course of rapid, disjointed movements. In a later scene, a performer wryly encourages the desire to understand, lasciviously coaxing the audience to "Make a wish. . . . Yes, you can't! . . . Come on, take it out of the box. . . ." Later, another performer pointedly quizzes the audience about the topic of the work, which he blithely reveals to be "cake."

The ensemble's vocal performances in earlier works had critically commented on the assumed communicative superiority of text. For example, in *Decreation* and *Heterotopia* dance action is translated into sound that is lexically incoherent but nonetheless comprehensible as language by virtue of the nonverbal components of speech: gesture, prosody, temporal structure (duration and rate of utterances and pauses), volume, pitch, timbre, and inflection, as well as paralinguage—culturally delineated nonverbal vocal signals such as back-channel cues (like "mm-hm"), laughter, sighing, snorting, and coughing.\* These works offer up the *atextual* body in action, a body whose efforts, experiences, and intentions we recognize in and through our own. The interplay of coherent and incoherent utterance in *Yes we can't* takes matters a step farther by pointing out how our construction of meaning, although guided by human linguistic capacities, is fundamentally rooted in our embodied and situated comprehension of events

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\*Gesture and proxemics are also considered to be paralinguistic components of communication. For further consideration of paralinguage, see, for example, Fernando Poyatos, *Nonverbal Communication Across Disciplines*, vol. 2: *Paralinguage, Kinesics, Silence, Personal and Environmental Interaction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002).

and behavior. In short, Forsythe's return to text in *Yes we can't* positions the work as a foil to the vocal paradigms elaborated in *De-creation* and *Heterotopia*.

The *vocality* of Forsythe's intermodal choreographies, in addition to stimulating reflection on the bias that privileges textual over embodied understanding, also provokes a reconsideration of the practice of translating dance performances into textual, theoretical perspectives. In particular, it encourages interrogation of the tendency of linguistically motivated models of dance studies to implicitly devalue perceptual experience in favor of language-based comprehension. Forsythe's atextual vocality and its intermodal translations assert the communicative power of the moving body in dance performance while simultaneously questioning dance's "readability."

While the metaphoric use of the term *reading* within the humanities commonly delineates the application of critical theory in order to interpret implicit meaning couched in artworks and cultural phenomena, a cognitive approach *re-considers* reading as an act of sensory-perceptual engagement. Cognitive film theorist David Bordwell, in a 1989 essay, "Why Not to Read a Film," takes a staunch position against interpretive conventions, calling on critical analysts to devote more attention to the "surfaces" of films.<sup>30</sup> Although not highly influential at the time of its publication, Bordwell's critique anticipated the current "sensory turn" in humanistic studies and the burgeoning of interest in cognitive approaches to the study of the arts and literature.

Cognitive literary theorist Howard Mancing advances Bordwell's argument by drawing a firm distinction between the perception of events in the world and the reading of texts: "Perceiving and knowing something is simply not the same thing as reading and knowing something. Perceptual understanding, the primary cognitive mode in nature, is not at all linguistic, and by definition it cannot involve 'reading.'"<sup>31</sup> For Mancing, the theoretical predilection to "read" performances perpetuates the primacy of verbally expressed over sensory, affective, and kinetic knowledge. He argues that, while reading narrative text is an essentially *diegetic* experience, in which readers creatively imagine as they read, theatrical performances are embodied, multisensory events that are tangibly present for audiences. The experiencing of films or theatrical performances, in other words, fundamentally

requires both vision and audition of physical phenomena at the moment of exposure. In the act of reading, however, the eyes do not actually see the events of the narrative, but rather, letters and words on a page. Similarly, any sounds evoked by reading occur via the creative imagination rather than via the aural channel.<sup>32</sup>

Audiences of Forsythe's visually scored modalities, such as those in *You made me a monster* or *Heterotopia*, see and hear *performers* in the act of score-reading. Given that their readings result in vocal utterances, it seems logical to consider these modalities instances of oratory performance. However, Forsythe's voiced dancing in these works specifically elides the textual aspects of speech while retaining the embodied action of the voice. For example, in *Heterotopia*, performers read letters and nonce words and translate them into streams of vocal sound and dance movement. However, the words and sounds produced as visual or sonic artifacts do not constitute actual language. The performers nonetheless stage dialogues in which the structure and tenor of communication is clear and concrete.\* The nonce words formed on the tables and the monologues and conversations constructed by the performers afford comprehension at the level of the embodied experience of speaking and moving. Importantly, this comprehension, if it occurs, does so in the absence of text. Forsythe essentially divorces textual content from its assumed crucial role in communication by demonstrating how the action of the body and the nonverbal parameters of speech are capable of producing and sustaining communication by themselves.

The sounds produced by the dancers in these works are thus more aptly understood as vocalizations rather than orations. Literary historian and linguist Paul Zumthor offers a useful distinction between *orality*, "the functioning of the voice as the bearer of language," and *vocality*, "the whole of the activities and values that belong to the voice as such, *independently of language*" (italics mine).<sup>33</sup> Roland Barthes, borrowing Julia Kristeva's terminology, similarly distinguishes between the singer's "pheno-song" (content components) and "geno-song" (sonorous, diction-based qualities). For Barthes, the *grain* of the voice, specifically, evokes in the listener

\*During rehearsals for *Heterotopia* in September and October of 2006, several dancers who conversed in nonce dialects noted an uncanny sense that they and their conversation partners fully understood not only the emergent timbre but also the specific content of their discussions.

a sensual engagement with the body of the singer: “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” Farther on, referring to music without text, he says, “leaving aside the voice, the ‘grain’—or the lack of it—persists in instrumental music; if the latter no longer has language to lay open *significance* in all its volume, at least there is the performer’s body which again forces me to evaluation.”<sup>34</sup>

Forsythe’s intermodal choreographies are *dancing music* that extends dance into the other, inner spaces of the body, translating the “grain” across the senses of vision and audition. Through performative linkages of kinetic and sonic action, the performers visibly and audibly express the lived experience of their dancing. The body, so often silent in dance performance, is enabled to “speak for itself” and does so on its own terms, asserting its role in the construction of meaning and inverting the hierarchy of language and perceptual experience. Such dancing voices demand consideration within discourses about the works; they also call for analysis that proceeds across sensory modalities.

A cognitive approach offers a valuable opportunity to reassess and perhaps even retool extant and developing theories of art making and reception. Forsythe’s recent intermodal dance research *re-cognizes* the acts of dance production and performance by foregrounding the multisensory experience of dancing. Ultimately, as do others who have turned to the auditory, I believe that a rebalancing of the ideological power of the different senses, although desirable, merely perpetuates a nonintegrated view of human perceptual experience. An intermodal approach to the study of perception and (inter)action (with)in the world interrogates the dichotomy between visual and auditory experience, fostering awareness of the connectedness of the senses.<sup>35</sup>

Forsythe’s works have often made powerful commentaries about perceptual proclivities and limits, while promoting dance making and dance performance as resources for the study of human perception. His incorporation of the sounds of dancing reintegrates the senses in ways that continue to interrogate the concept of dance—conceiving of the perception of movement as an intermodal experience, extrapolating vocal performance into improvisational paradigms, and researching the perceptual potentials of theatrical events. The ensemble’s intermodal choreography thus carries forward Forsythe’s career-long project of



investigating the nature of sensory perception and the choreographic opportunities it affords, refining and extending the thinking of bodies in motion, and expanding the ways perception can inform the experience of dancing. From a broadly interdisciplinary perspective, the future of these intermodal investigations looks—and sounds—bright.

### Notes

1. See, for example, Anna Kisselgoff, "The Sound and the Flurry of William Forsythe," *New York Times*, July 19, 1987, sec. 2, 4.
2. Wendy Perron, interview by Roslyn Sulcas, "The Force of Forsythe," *Dance Magazine* (April 2006): 34–40.
3. Heidi Gilpin, "Failure, repetition, amputation, and disappearance: Issues of composition in contemporary European movement performance," Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1993, 174–82.
4. The term *ocularcentrism* was coined by Anthony Synnott in *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993). See also Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976; rpt., SUNY Press, 2007); Wolfgang Welsch, "On the Way to an Auditive Culture?" in *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage, 1997), 150–67; Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004); Petra Meyer, ed., *Acoustic Turn* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2008).
5. See Paul Derksen, "Forsythe's Image Breaking," *Mediamatic*, vol. 9, no. 4 (October 1999), [http://www.mediamatic.nl/magazine/9.4/derksen-forsythe/derksen\\_2gb.html](http://www.mediamatic.nl/magazine/9.4/derksen-forsythe/derksen_2gb.html) (accessed August 15, 2008).
6. William Forsythe, in discussion with the ensemble, Dresden, March 13, 2008.
7. See for example F. Quek et al., "Gesture cues for conversational interaction in monocular video," *ICCV99 Workshop on RATFGRTS* (1999): 64–69, and U. Hadar et al., "The timing of shifts in head posture during conversation," *Human Movement Science*, vol. 3 (1984): 237–45.
8. See, for example, Lawrence Marks, "Bright Sneezes and Dark Coughs, Loud Sunlight and Soft Moonlight," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, vol. 8 (1982): 177–93; Ernst Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963).
9. Anne Carson, *Decreation: Poetry, Essay, Opera* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 189.
10. William Forsythe, *Decreation* postperformance talk, Haus der Berliner Festspiele, Berlin, January 21, 2009.
11. See, for example, Ryan Platt, "Forsythe's Box: On the Afterlife of Choreography," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 31, no.1 (January 2009): 1–15; Debra Craine, review of *Decreation*, *The Times* (London), April 28, 2009, 16.
12. William Forsythe, rehearsal, Frankfurt am Main, August 21, 2006.
13. William Forsythe, rehearsal, Frankfurt am Main, October 10, 2007.

14. William Forsythe, public discussion with Toni Morrison, "Art is otherwise," Baryshnikov Arts Center, March 7, 2007. Voice treatments and DSP (Digital Signal Processing) programming for *You made me a monster* and *Three Atmospheric Studies* were produced by Andreas Breitscheid, Olivier Pasquet, and Maunel Poletti in collaboration with the Forum Neues Musiktheater of the Staatsoper Stuttgart. For detailed information about Max/MSP, see <http://www.cycling74.com/products/maxmsp>.
15. William Forsythe, rehearsal, Frankfurt am Main, October 8, 2007. The quotation "model of grief" is from the text, written by Forsythe, projected during the performance.
16. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1999), 144.
17. See L. E. Bahrck and G. Hollich, "Intermodal perception," in *Encyclopedia of Infant and Early Childhood Development*, ed. M. Haith and J. Benson, vol. 2 (Amsterdam & London: Elsevier Ltd./Academic Press, 2008), 164–76.
18. George Butterworth, "The Ontogeny and Phylogeny of Joint Visual Attention," in *Natural Theories of Mind*, ed. A. Whiten (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991): 223–32. See also Freya Vass-Rhee, "Dancing Music: The Intermodality of The Forsythe Company," in *William Forsythe*, ed. Stephen Spier (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
19. Forsythe, *Decreation* postperformance talk.
20. Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, 149–51.
21. William Forsythe, interview by Roslyn Sulcas, "Kinetic Isometries," *Dance International* (Summer 1995): 9.
22. Anne Holmes, "Counterpoint in Mallarmé's 'L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,'" *French Studies*, vol. 57, no. 1 (2003): 27–37.
23. Hilda Hollis, "Another Bird? Counterpoint in 'The Windhover,'" *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2002): 433–43.
24. See Roslyn Sulcas, "Theorems and Counterpoints," *Dance Now*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 9–14; Steven Spier, "Engendering and Composing Movement: William Forsythe and the Ballett Frankfurt," *The Journal of Architecture*, vol. 3, no. 2 (June 1998): 135–46; Derksen, "Forsythe's Image Breaking"; Anne Midgette, "Sound Ideas: The Music of Ballett Frankfurt," *Choreography and Dance*, vol. 5, no. 3 (2000): 79–85.
25. Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, 149–51. Translations of quoted material are taken from Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).
26. Per Aage Brandt, "Form and Meaning in Art," in *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity*, ed. Mark Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171–88.
27. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 111.
28. Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, 148.
29. William Forsythe, discussion with the ensemble, Dresden, March 5, 2008.
30. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 264.

31. Howard Mancing, "See the play, read the book," in *Performance and Cognition: Theatre Studies and the Cognitive Turn*, ed. Bruce McConachie and F. Elizabeth Hart (London: Routledge, 2006), 189–94.
32. Ibid.
33. Paul Zumthor, preface to *Flatus vocis: Metafisica e antropologia della voce*, by Corrado Bologna (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000), vii.
34. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 188.
35. See, for example, Veit Erlmann, "But What of the Ethnographic Ear? Anthropology, Sound, and the Senses," in *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity*, ed. Veit Erlmann (New York: Berg Publishers, 2004), 1–20; Christopher Witmore, "Vision, Media, Noise, and the Percolation of Time: Symmetrical Approaches to the Mediation of the Material World," *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2006): 267–92.