Drama on the Move:
Intermedial Dialogue in Caryl Churchill's
Love and Information

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Abstract
Staged at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2012, Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* is a dazzlingly kaleidoscopic piece about the way we know, feel and relate to our environment in the age of globalised media and digital information. In this article I look at Churchill's way of building these thematic concerns into her dramatic architecture. In particular, I focus on intermedial dialogue as the signature formal feature of Churchill's dramaturgy, and as a tool for engaging the audience in an immersive theatre experience that stimulates a cognitive process. Furthermore, I show that in addressing the complexities of today's digital milieu through the vocabulary of drama and live performance, the playwright also turns her gaze, self-reflexively, onto the boundaries and possibilities of the theatrical medium, testing its capacity to adjust to a world in vertiginous flux.
Key-words: Caryl Churchill, *Love and Information*, 21st-century British drama, intermediality.

1. Staging intermediality

More than forty years on from her professional debut as a playwright, Caryl Churchill continues to be at the forefront of theatrical innovation on the contemporary stage. Throughout her unmatched career, the revered veteran of British new writing has continued to experiment with dramatic form as well as dramaturgical process; with *Love and Information*, produced at London's Royal Court Theatre in 2012, she offered yet another compelling demonstration of her commitment to interrogate and reinvent the medium she works with in order to capture the changing face of our fast-moving world. Churchill's play is a dazzlingly kaleidoscopic piece about the way we live, love, feel and know in the age of globalised media and digital technology. It is also, typically, a striking *formal* response

to the pressure of the present moment, a paradigmatic attestation of, at once, the impact of the "digital turn" on playwriting, and its propulsive force in pushing the boundaries of contemporary theatre forward. As I illustrate below, Churchill builds on the theatre's capacity, as a strongly multimodal environment, to function as a hypermedium which stages other media (Kattenbelt 2010), thereby enacting a mimetic process which is at once creative and critical. In *Love and Information*, intermedial dialogue is mobilised as a heuristic device on account of its ability to simultaneously provide an immersive experience and the conceptual means for a shared process of cognition. Churchill's play thus points to a special suitability of dramatic structures and performance practices to provide a framework for understanding the complexities of today's digital environment; as I show in the final part of the essay, the dramatist's focus on intermediality also entails a self-reflexive scrutiny of her medium of choice – an impassioned mapping of theatrical DNA and an analysis of its ongoing mutations in the information age.

On the page, *Love and Information* consists of seven numbered sections, each comprising seven segments of text introduced by a laconic title. The segments vary in length between a few pages and a handful of lines; they are constructed as dialogues but the script is silent (with very rare exceptions) about the number of characters involved, the attribution of lines, and the context in which they are spoken. The text is prefaced by a note requiring that the sections be played in the order given, but otherwise leaves it to those in charge of the production to arrange the individual scenes within each section as they see fit (again, to the exclusion of the supplementary text included in the final section under the prescriptive heading of "Last Scene: Facts"). An even greater degree of textual mobility characterises the "Random" section appended to the main body of the script and providing additional scenes that "can happen any time" (Churchill 2012: 2). Under "Random", Churchill lists ten "Depression" scenes consisting of a single, incomplete line delivered by a speaker to a silent interlocutor ("*Each of these is a separate random item. Each is said by one person to another who doesn't respond*", p. 74) and designated as "*an essential part of the play*" (p. 74). These are supplemented by a repertoire of optional elements, all of them very short, often devoid of spoken text – Title: "Cold"; Content: "*Someone sneezes.*" (p. 75) – and in

some cases stripped down to a bare title ("Semaphore"; "Morse"; "Flags", p. 75).

Churchill's appendix reproduces, in condensed form, the key features of her dramaturgy in *Love and Information*. With these random fragments, the writer flags the openness of her work, its explicit investment of directors and performers with the authority to shape its narrative and govern its meaning. Churchill also draws attention to the way this call to power-sharing is written into the drama text: the "Random" section is marked by a significant contraction or outright demise of verbal interaction and, in parallel, a heightened reliance on nonverbal forms of communication for the production of theatrical meaning. In the context of the play's overall concern with the spread and omnipresence of information technologies in our everyday life, the multimodal collaboration required by Churchill's text also raises associations with the new textualities brought on by the digital revolution and the deep imbrication of word, image and sound that informs them – a connection clearly suggested by the presence of "Twitter" and "Google" (p. 77) among the titles of the random scenes. As I shall show, this twofold process whereby the features and *feel* of our contemporary digital landscape are both enunciated in the drama text and embodied in the play's texture constitutes Churchill's signature way of performing intermedial dialogue in *Love and Information*.

As Gobert (2014) rightly notes, *Love and Information* can be tentatively described, but not adequately summarised. The play hampers our critical urge to narrativise in order to elucidate because its author, in a spirit of mimetic fidelity to her subject matter, has jettisoned the linear-teleological model of conventional dramatic construction in order to embrace the loose connectivity installed by technologically mediated communication. Already announced by the "and" in the title, the playwright's surrender to the prevailing logic of parataxis is operative at all levels in the script. Each scene tackles a different facet of the central preoccupation announced by the play's title, namely, how we negotiate "love" with "information", or where and whether human emotions, affects and interactions fit the current paradigm of generalised information technology. A "Note on the Text" prescribes different characters in every scene, with the only possible exception of the depressive one-liners ("which could be the same two people, or the same depressed person with

different others", p. 2). This means that over the course of less than two hours[1], *Love and Information* exposes the audience to nearly sixty snippets of variable length featuring over one hundred nameless characters. Even when they approximate the length of a "regular" scene, conversations tend to open *in medias res* and simply break off, rather than come to an end: instead of the parts of an organic whole, they suggest an assemblage of discrete fragments from as many self-contained worlds that we only briefly glimpse. Although they unfold sequentially, moreover, Churchill's textual segments are not related consequentially and they refuse to develop into a plot: narrative is replaced by accumulative presentation, something approaching a Google Search results page triggered by the titular keywords. In this perspective, the variable arrangement of scenes within each section might likewise be seen to allude to the dynamic and volatile textuality of today's world of SERP (Search Engine Results Page).

Churchill's intention to move away from narrative and rely on alternative formal constructions is also manifest in the play's subdivisions into sections, rather than acts. Despite their progressive numbering and mandatory order of performance, the sections are equally disengaged from a causal and/or chronological organisation of the material. As the play unfolds, the data we gather do not align themselves into a dramatic arc but instead tend to aggregate around thematic clusters that are underwritten by a principle of counterpoint – a binary, not causal, logic. The play's structure thus continues to direct attention to the forms of connectivity implied by the titular "and", with its concomitantly conjunctive and disjunctive meaning. At a closer look, the opening pair of sections read as a theatrical study in opposed feeling-states connected with the exchange of information. The first section presents instances of information sought, or indeed craved: a character trying to wrench a secret from his/her partner; a researcher's relentless pursuit of scientific knowledge; the use of torture to extract intelligence from a prisoner. In the following section the perspective is reversed, with scenes providing as many variations upon the theme of unwanted

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[1] The running time of the original Royal Court production was 110 minutes without an interval; the 2014 American revival, also directed by MacDonald but featuring a different cast, was two hours long.

information, from the merciless verdict received by a terminally-ill patient, to the employee who vocally objects to being fired by email, and down to the much-dreaded "message" of terrorism:

> It's a message
> killing people
> yes because then they understand
> killing yourself
> they understand what you're telling them [...]. (p. 20)

The same contrastive pattern is repeated in the ensuing pair. The third section centres on the use and abuse of information, in private as much as public spheres: from the lovers who playfully engage in a session of dream interpretation in order to justify their tryst, down to the phony evidence about weapons of mass destruction used by Western political leaders to legitimise the war on Iraq. Conversely, in the fourth section we witness examples of information taking control over human experience. The main thematic focus, here, is on memory and its pitfalls: the difficulty of managing the process whereby the human mind records and recalls the information in which our identity is rooted; the inability to remember but also the difficulty of forgetting, of deleting traumatic memories from brain data. These defaults are more directly related to the digital revolution in "Wedding Video", the only scene in the play to be expressly designated as a group conversation ("*Several people*", p. 34). As they watch a video recording of their wedding day in the company of (unspecified) friends and/or family, husband and wife blithely agree that they "can't remember anything about that day that's not on the video" (p. 35). In raising the issue of technology as a faulty memory aid – of the tendency of "information" to surrogate and ultimately cannibalise "love" – Churchill continues to insist on the overlap between private and public conversations or, in this case, between individual and collective memories and identities:

> and look at the dresses I mean
> because now you wouldn't dream
> it shows you it's history
> yes the children like it because
> and the grandchildren are going to
> and it can go down in the family and they can see

and all the ones of them as babies and little
and all the ones of their weddings and their
but it's sad we haven't got our grandparents' wedding video
or great great
or everybody that lived videos of
Henry the Eight
Jesus walking on the
no further back if we had cave if we had Neanderthal
and dinosaurs
but who'd be working the camera?
and things coming out of the sea and tiny specks
then we'd know we'd know […]. (pp. 34-35)

In its exploration of the workings of memory, this scene highlights the gap between information and knowledge, thus bringing to the fore a thematic throughline that is already detectable, for example, in the "Torture" scenario: "He'll get to where he'll say anything", one character worries; "We're not paid extra for it to be true", the other replies (p. 9). At the same time, "Wedding Video" introduces the main conceit weaving together the last three sections, namely the mutual translatability of "love" and "information". As also underscored through the enactment of translation *stricto sensu* in "Linguist" (Section 5) and "Poetry" (Section 7), Churchill's final triad stresses the processual aspects of the interplay between the titular keywords. The fifth section is concerned with lived experience ("love") becoming codified as information, and asks whether the intervening languages are truly able to capture and carry over its meaning and its feel. With typical clear-sightedness, Churchill insinuates doubt about the arbitrary nature of this operation, pointing to the fundamental disjunction of sign and referent, and raising suspicions about the inescapable self-referentiality of all systems of representation ("If an equation wouldn't work without there being an infinite number of universes there really must be an infinite number of universes", is a scientist's paradoxical claim in "Maths", p. 49). A similar vein of scepticism pervades the interrogation of the reverse process in the following section. The evidence presented relates to "information" that cannot be translated into "love": scenes like "The Child Who Didn't Know Pain" or "Wife" feature different types of signs that fail to produce an effect/affect in the human sphere; in "Censor", they are actively prevented from doing so.

Churchill's seventh and final section turns instead to explore the translatability scenario. This finds a literal enactment in "Chinese Poetry", where a single line composed of three unrelated words generates a surprising number of divergent renditions:

"The girl waits at the door of her house on the mountain."
What it literally says is
So maybe
A girl from the mountain is waiting outside my door. A girl climbs the mountain and comes to a door.
To get the girl you have to go through a door into the mountain.
The mountain is a door only a girl can open.
The girl's as big as a mountain and can't get through the door.
What's the next line? (p. 62)

In this funny performance of freewheeling exegesis, a set of inert textual data are shown to be able to generate a potentially inexhaustible flow of different and unexpected meanings. In another scene that overtly thematises the performativity of information, the same process is cast in a more ambivalent light. "Fate" shows two characters engaging in a philosophical debate on free will; while one insists on one's prerogative, as a human being, to make choices in which the outcome is not determined by a pre-existing genetic or behavioural script, the other observes that if that level of information about people were accessible, it would then be possible to accurately predict each and every move and reaction. Hardly a solution to the dilemma, the comforting mantra that "No one could possibly have all that kind of information" (p. 65) is quickly losing authority in the age of massive data harvesting and the fast expanding role of algorithms in shaping our individual and collective futures[2].

2. "Like I'm in the front seat of a roller-coaster"

Churchill's mimetic approach is not limited to taking stock of the

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[2] The role of data analytics firms in "managing" Western democracies is only beginning to be adequately documented. See e.g. Cadwalladr (2017) for a highly informed analysis of how the use of voters' personal information mined from their Facebook accounts may have influenced the result of the recent EU referendum in Britain.

world we live in and reproducing its underlying structural features. As often happens in her more recent productions, the critical firepower of *Love and Information* is predicated on its ability to involve the audience perceptually and affectively in a theatre experience that stimulates a particular cognitive process. The conceptual framework I have sketched out above only becomes detectable *ex post*, in a process of reflection that falls outside the actual apprehension of the play on stage. In the here and now of the performance, spectators are exposed to a barrage of theatrical data – characters, images, concepts – that they are tasked to process in real time. The difficulty of handling this overload of uninterpreted, erratic information is further increased by the dramatist's concomitant withdrawal of the basic information whereby we habitually grasp the meaning of actions and situations in a stage production: the incomplete, fragmentary nature of the scenes and their lack of contextual indications are clearly designed to hamper the hermeneutic process. From the point of view of a theatre audience, the experience of watching *Love and Information* might be said to approximate a ride "in the front seat of a roller-coaster" (p. 65), to quote from the closing line of "Fate".

The rationale of Churchill's deliberate sabotage of normalised theatrical watching is probably best elucidated through reference to Aristotle's prescriptions about magnitude. In the Aristotelian model of drama, not only the arrangement of events but also their length and scope are a matter of utmost importance. Audiences will only grasp the organic unity of a story, and therefore its sense, if the materials presented on stage are quantitatively compatible with the scope of their gaze and their memory capacity. The playwright's commitment to adjust the magnitude of the story to the gaze of the spectator is one of the main epistemological advantages afforded by dramatic constructions of the real over the mere recording which, according to the *Poetics*, is the province of history (Aristotle [c. 330 B.C.] 1996: 16). Subverting this convention is precisely what enables Caryl Churchill to turn her play into a "perception-*lehrstück*", to borrow Elin Diamond's Brecht-derived definition (Diamond 2014: 465). Overwhelmed by this vast and unprivileged flow of material, audience members experience first-hand the gap between knowledge and information which forms the thematic backbone of the play; they share in the narrow perceptual horizon that delimits

Churchill's densely populated theatrical landscape even as they are made aware of the cognitive deficit generated by this particular spectatorial position.

As critics have not failed to remark, the "inability to see, think, or feel the bigger political picture" (Aston 2014: 212) is a persistent concern in Churchill's work, dating back to at least her history plays of the 1970s and 1980s – *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979), *Top Girls* (1982) – and reaching up to her post-millennial dystopia, *Far Away* (2000), as well as her more recent protest piece *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009). In *Love and Information*, it is the audience's own gaze that becomes politicised by being turned into the object of theatrical mimesis. The play's action is in its sustained, coherent interrogation of modes of perception installed by the technological revolution: spectators are interpellated as the more or less cognizant actors in a global political scenario where societies are being transformed into loose aggregates of hyperconnected but fundamentally disconnected individuals, lacking any real ties and affiliations, and therefore more readily amenable to the all-powerful rule of the market. Churchill's intermedial frame, however, is also imbued with the power to counter the debilitating bafflement and passivity induced by the "roller-coaster" effect. By elevating disconnection and fragmentation to a structuring principle, and thereby refusing to make the content of the play significant in itself, Churchill's dramaturgy requires spectators to perceive their gaze as an action in its own right, an operation whereby they apprehend and partially create the objects of their cognition. Dislodged from their customary position of reception, viewers are invited to find their authority, and confront their responsibilities, as the co-creators of the experience they are being put through – in other words, to rethink their subject position as that of potential political actors.

3. Mapping theatrical DNA

As discussed above, *Love and Information* deploys theatrical mimesis not only to make visible the existing order but also to produce a politically relevant disturbance in the perceptual field or, to say it with Rancière, to effect a change in the normalised "distribution

of the sensible" (Rancière [2000] 2013: 7ff)[3]. Almost inevitably, Churchill's engagement with the "digital revolution" through the language of drama and live performance has prompted a parallel reconsideration of the very fundamentals of her medium, of its boundaries, possibilities, and capability for adjusting to our fast-changing environment.

The considerable presence of intermedial dialogue, and especially the way in which this dialogue is conducted, are clear indicators of the self-reflexive impulse that informs the play. Marking a departure from our customary understanding of the intermedial as a heightened version of the multimedial (Giesekam 2007), Churchill opts for a distinctly low-tech, "unplugged" method for bringing our current repertoire of digital communication practices on stage. The impact of electronic media on the contemporary landscape is frequently mentioned in the samples of human interaction that *Love and Information* holds up for clinical scrutiny. On the formal level, the play's dramaturgy repackages face-to-face conversation as media content, simulating a whole range of digital environments running from the "cacophonous, decontextualised world of Twitter" or "an aimless browse through the web" (Allfree 2012: 978) to "the dramatic equivalent of an instagram" (Diamond 2014: 463), as suggested by reviewers. These as well as other medial forms are referenced, but invariably reframed as live performance, thereby drawing attention to stage space as a quintessentially multimodal environment. This aspect was further emphasised in James MacDonald's original production at the Royal Court. Scenes were located inside a stage-sized white cube designed by Miriam Buether, a blank space in which characters and props simply appeared and disappeared as if by magic. Snapping shut for a few moments at each scene change, the set clearly suggested a medial frame, a dematerialised, virtual kaleidoscope that stood in sharp contrast to the social particularity which elevated even the sketchiest of dialogues to a fully realised world. Occasionally, the impression of "a giant iPad" (McGinn 2012: 978) was also sustained by specific staging choices. This was the case, for instance, of the scene called "Sleep". In the dialogue, one of the speakers identifies information as the cause of insomnia

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[3] For an insightful application of Rancière's thinking to Churchill's political drama in the new millennium, though not to *Love and Information*, see Adiseshiah (2012).

("my head's too full of stuff"); the proposed remedy of hot milk, however, is rejected in favour of a more up-to-date homeopathic option: "I think I'll get up and go on Facebook" (Churchill 2012: 12). Adding to the irony, in the Court production the lines were spoken by an aged couple; with a further touch of the absurd, the director placed them in a double bed standing on end, creating an image of pinned specimens in an anthropology collection, or media content posted on a Facebook wall.

In its way of turning the spotlight onto theatre as a platform that is able to encompass different modes of medial articulation, *Love and Information* also implicitly raises the question of what a play is and what it can stretch to include. Several textual elements point to a probing inquiry into the fundamentals of drama, a sort of laboratory experiment in theatre-making. The utter compression of the dramatic form in the "Random" fragments, reminiscent of Beckett's provocatively reductionist *dramaticules*, definitely signals in this direction. The text of "Genes" (Churchill 2012: 76), in the same section, is to all effects a DNA sequence ("AGT CTG AGC CCT…", and so on for about ten lines), the minimal information required to produce human life and therefore, as R. Darren Gobert (2014: 189) perceptively observes, data awaiting embodiment just like those encoded in a play script. With its radical indeterminacy, Churchill's writing throws into sharp relief the basic mechanism whereby dramatic information becomes actualised in performance – from this point of view, the sketch about "Chinese Poetry" quoted above is also clearly invested with metatheatrical relevance.

The Royal Court production fittingly honoured this conceit by offering an impressive demonstration of the broad range of resources – aural, spatial, visual, kinetic – whereby the stage can create significance out of dramatic DNA. At each scene change, props, costumes, lighting, sound combined to create a new theatrical habitat, rooting Churchill's abstract conversations in a specific context of utterance. By the same token, James MacDonald's decision to rely on a remarkably diverse group of actors – in terms of gender, ethnicity and age – very effectively worked to underscore the crucial contribution of performers' individual identities in creating characters and establishing situations. More in general, because Churchill's play systematically prevents its fictional scenes from generating drama, the ability of *Love and Information* to produce

emotional engagement is to a large extent entrusted to the theatrical vocabularies of the production. Rather than the drama's fragmented, reticent, disconnected narratives or depersonalised characters, it is the material reality of the stage-as-stage, the shared actuality of the present moment, that holds the audience in its spell and secures their aesthetic reward. My personal experience of watching the play at the Royal Court Theatre chimes with the accounts offered by reviewers: I found myself gripped by how scenes were presented, more than what they represented; I empathised with the amazing acrobatics of the performers, rather than the all-too-fleetingly glimpsed vicissitudes of the characters. This maximisation of theatre as an event in the here and now was clearly sustained by the structural looseness of Churchill's writing, with the disorienting volatility of her scenic fictions intensifying, by contrast, the pleasing coherence of the unchanging white cube and stable acting ensemble (sixteen performers sharing over 150 characters between them, in MacDonald's production).

In his hugely influential study, *Postdramatic Theatre,* Hans-Thies Lehmann, looking at recent trends and developments in theatre practice in response to the new technological environment, concluded that the representative model was no longer in tune with the contemporary experience, and that the "caesura of the media society" (Lehmann [1999] 2006: 22ff) had irrevocably doomed to obsolescence the dramatic paradigm of theatre. With a play like *Love and Information*, however, the opposition between drama and performance, imitation and presence, which informs Lehmann's thinking appears hardly tenable. Churchill's work gives prominence to theatre as an event while never departing from the mimetic paradigm; it moves beyond the representational level while remaining firmly rooted in a "closed fictive cosmos", to again borrow Lehmann's words (p. 99). Like much innovative new writing produced at the turn of the millennium – by Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane and Simon Stephens among others – *Love and Information* powerfully attests to the vigour and vitality of the dramatic form of theatre while at the same time calling for a more nuanced way of conceptualising its mutations. As a creative intervention in the contemporary digital environment, Churchill's thought-provoking play offers a powerful demonstration of the theatre's capacity to handle progressive forms and to harness the cognitive-critical power

of intermediality; a statement of poetics, it asks us to recognise that, like so many other things in our lives today, drama is on the move.

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