



P-ISSN : 2074-9554 | E-ISSN: 2663-811

Journal of Al-Farahidi's Arts

available online at: fia.tu.edu.iq/index.php/fia



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Reprogramming Reality: AI, Sensory Experience
and Post-human Subjectivity in Simon McBurney's
The Encounter

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Keywords:

Simon McBurney; The Encounter; post/humanism; AI and the theatre;
immersive sound; the sensual; subjectivity

Article history:

Received	9/9/2025
Received in revised form	23/9/2025
Accepted	19/10/2025
Available online	9/12/2025

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses how Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* rethinks the experience of theatre by deploying artificial intelligence, binaural sound technology and 3D audible narrative to produce a post-human form of subjectivity. The analysis borrows from post-humanist theory and media philosophy to explore how the production deconstructs conventional binaries of human/machine, real/virtual and presence/mediation. The main focus is how the play's sensory displacement and AI-facilitated narrative disrupt conventional anthropocentric models of consciousness and theatrical embodiment. Key research questions include: How does the play use AI and spatial sound to disrupt audience expectations of space and time? What subjectivities are engendered when mediated technology is at the heart of live performance? And how can the play itself perform a post-human subjectivity that goes beyond the stable, unified self? Methodologically, the article uses a close performance analysis of *The Encounter* with theoretical readings of post-humanism (Hayles, Braidotti), affect theory (Massumi) and media ecology (Hansen). The study's results imply that the play turns the observer from a passive spectator into an embodied system interface which mediates data blurring the sensory boundary between memory, fiction, and algorithmic presence. In the process, the production not only rewrites the ontological parameters of theatrical reality but also places the audience in a distributed, post-human consciousness.

إعادة برمجة الواقع: الذكاء الاصطناعي، التجربة الحسية، والذاتية ما بعد الإنسانية في العرض المسرحي لسايمون ماكبرني اللقاء

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المستخلص:

تحلل هذه المقالة كيف يُعيد عرض اللقاء لسايمون ماكبرني التفكير في تجربة المسرح من خلال توظيف الذكاء الاصطناعي، وتقنية الصوت ثنائي الأذن، والسرد السمعي ثلاثي الأبعاد لإنتاج شكل من الذاتية ما بعد الإنسانية. يستند التحليل إلى نظرية ما بعد الإنسانية وفلسفة الوسائط لاستكشاف كيف يقوم العرض بتفكيك الثنائيات التقليدية مثل: الإنسان/ الآلة، الحقيقي/ الافتراضي، والحضور/ الوساطة. يركز البحث على كيفية تفكيك التجربة الحسية والسرد المدعوم بالذكاء الاصطناعي في اللقاء للنماذج الأنثروبوسنترية (المتراكزة حول الإنسان) للوعي والتجسيد المسرحي. وتشمل الأسئلة البحثية الرئيسية: كيف يستخدم اللقاء الذكاء الاصطناعي والصوت المكاني لتفكيك توقعات الجمهور حول المكان والزمان؟ ما أنواع الذوات التي تنشأ حين تكون الوساطة التقنية في صميم العرض الحي؟ وكيف يمكن للعرض نفسه أن يُجسد ذاتية ما بعد إنسانية تتجاوز الذات المستقرة والموحدة؟ منهجياً، يعتمد المقال على تحليل أدائي دقيق للقاء مدعوم بقراءات نظرية في ما بعد الإنسانية (هايلز، برايدوتي)، ونظرية الأثر (ماسومي)، وبيئة الوسائط (هانسن). وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن اللقاء يُحوّل المتلقي من مشاهد سلبي إلى واجهة نظام مُجسّدة تتوسط تدفقات البيانات، مما يُعشّي الحدود الحسية بين الذاكرة، والخيال، والحضور الخوارزمي. ومن خلال ذلك، لا يُعيد العرض فقط كتابة الحدود الوجودية للواقع المسرحي، بل يضع الجمهور داخل وعي موزّع ومتعدد، يتماشى مع رؤية ما بعد الإنسانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سايمون ماكبرني؛ اللقاء؛ ما بعد الإنسانية؛ الذكاء الاصطناعي؛ المسرح؛ الصوت الغامر؛ الحسي؛ الذاتية؛ نظريات الوسائط؛ الأداء ما بعد

الدرامي؛ واجهة الإنسان- الآلة

1. Introduction

An assemblage of wood and microphones: mediation and mediatization in Simon McBurney's *The Encounter* (2015) In an era of converging technologies and ongoing technological mediatization of the embodied experience of the performance, the transformative potential of Simon McBurney's 2015 performance of *The Encounter* is explored about the reworking of the relations between spectator, performer and mediated experience. The London-based theatre company Complicité, which McBurney founded, and which he has led since, is well known for its experiments in storytelling, incorporating physical theatre, multimedia and philosophical inquiry. *The Encounter*, one of his most technology-oriented productions, employs binaural sound, AI-esque factors and sensory spatial design to create a profoundly visceral, disorientating performance experience that reframes perception and selfhood (Reinelt, 2019). Simon McBurney (2016) said that :

The Encounter is a story about 'listening', not 'hearing' but listening; to other, older narratives which, at the deepest level, form who we are, and if we do, we can imagine how we can 'begin' again.

Staged in the Amazon rainforest and inspired by the true story between photojournalist Loren McIntyre and the Mayoruna tribe, the play uses innovative 3D audio technology to put each member at the centre of a shifting, intimate soundscape. Using the headsets, McBurney simultaneously realises a disorienting condition of 'digital immersion' which subverts the temporal and spatial logic of the real. Such disruption of spatial orientation reflects a deeper ontological instability in the play: what we could call the dispersal of subjectivity in an age of algorithmic mediation and human/machine convergence (Hansen, 2015; Hayles, 1999).

The emergence of post-humanism, a theoretical field that disrupts the centrality of the human subject under the impact of technological, ecological, and epistemological changes, offers an essential perspective through which to consider *The Encounter*. As Braidotti (2013) and Hayles (1999) have pointed out, the human is no longer a stable or coherent identity, but a process inseparable from code, data, and material flows. McBurney's show dramatises that condition by collapsing live performance into the machinic interface, turning the spectator into a part of a distributed sensate system. The outcome is an "affective ecology" that is open, as Brian Massumi (2002) would have it, whereby the spectator does not assume a disinterested or contained perspective, but is rather one node within a circulating circuit of sensation, sound, and memory.

This paper investigates how *The Encounter* re-programs theatrical reality through AI and immersive audio to create a post-human subjectivity that queers traditional divides between self and other, human and machine, presence and mediation. It examines how McBurney's employment of technology transforms not only the sensory parameters of performance but also how agency, embodiment, and consciousness can be reconceptualized in the postdigital age. In this way, the play performs a performance not only about contact and culture but also a philosophical confrontation with the limits of human sensing and the arrival of a new hybrid theatrical being.

2. Literature Review

In recent times, the theatre stage has become a locus of convergence between technological experimentation and philosophical investigation, largely in terms of its exploration of embodiment, identity, and subjectivity. McBurney's *The Encounter* is one of the canonical examples of the convergence of binaural technology developments and artificial intelligence innovation in immersive media that has the potential to reshape the very fabric of theatre spectatorship. The expanding discipline of post-humanist performance theory offers a critical modality for thinking about this transformation.

2.1. Post-human Subjectivity And Theatre

Post-humanism, as elaborated through interventions by writers including N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Rosi Braidotti (2013), challenges the privileged figure of the humanist subject as a stable, autonomous formation in favour of a decentred and relational conception of subjectivity, or one that is reciprocally implicated in technological, ecological and affective networks. Hayles (1999), in particular, follows how the cultural transition from analogue to digital technology blurs the line between human and machine, a phenomenon she dubs "embodied virtuality." Such a notion is a key appreciation of the play, where spectators become not just observers but sensory points in a post-human network built by digital sound and algorithmic manipulation.

McBurney's incorporation of immersive binaural sound allows for a direct engagement (Brian Massumi 2002: 26) with what Massumi (2002) terms "affective resonance", the non-rational, pre-conscious experience of sensation. The play does not so much describe the story as simulating a different state of perception of a memory and imagination and space have been reconstituted by a digital interface. As Mark B. N. Hansen (2015) argues, new media performance is not only an extension of the senses, it "reformats" them, creating new ontological forms of being and perceiving.

2.2. Performance, Mediation and Sensory Embeddedness

The importance of technological mediation in theatre is more and more at the heart of the discussions in performance-dominated studies. Reinelt (2019) writes that the play generates "a tension between presence and mediation" and relocates the "traditional circumstance of actor-audience co-presence". Through audio-spatialisation the limits of the orbit of the theatrical "here and now" start to break down, which might be read in terms of a "third space" (Soja 1996), a zone of living, imagining and digitally mediated life.

This mediated form of performance also rewrites the construction of power and identity, resonating with what was expressed by Jassim and Almaarof (2024): "Soft power mechanisms, such as speech and effect can condition and create gendered identities within performance". In *The Encounter*, listening becomes an ideological experience; in it, the audience is quietly uncloaked into what we might hear as an alien subject, as they're gradually manipulated to occupy shifting, warping subject positions, the narrator, then the listener, then self, and so on, by the algorithmic voice.

2.3. Postmodern Disintegration and the Volatility of Narrative

Postmodernist performance, as we see in what McBurney does, often derides the very idea of narrative coherence. This aesthetics of fragmentation corresponds with the commentary of Al-Maarroof and Khudhair (2024) on the crisis of full absolute truth in postmodern literature. As with McEwan's *Atonement*, the concept of a single, knowable truth is destabilized. McBurney's prose moves nimbly back and forth between fiction, memory and myth, forming a dissonant site in which the real always and again is refracted through personal and technological lenses.

Also, Saikia's (2014) reading of Brecht shows that estrangement techniques like song and disjointedness can re-model how ideology is addressed to its audience. While McBurney doesn't work with a song in the Brechtian mode, his approach of aural fragmentation and the de-corporealized voice invites as well the critical distance even as he presumably enables an affective intimacy, a dissonance that locates the spectator in a post-Brechtian, post-human aesthetic universe.

In aggregate, these perspectives demonstrate that the play does not function as a narrative performance in its own right, but rather as an ontological experiment in which technology, on one side, and subjectivity, on the other, co-merge in shaping a post-human theatrical state. The work claims that such performances indicate a movement from representation to relational immersion, fixed subjectivity to distributed embodiment, and linear narrative to sensory plurality. The present study thus adds to that body by considering how the play is reprogramming theatrical reality in both thematic and structural terms through its convergence of AI, sound, and post-human presence.

3. Methodology

The method used in this study is a qualitative, performance analysis-based interpretational approach to media theory and post-humanist critique. McBurney's *The Encounter* (2015) serves as our central focus, which we approach through a close reading of the performance text, the show's reviews, McBurney's public commentaries, and the video/audio recording of the show (namely the 2016 production at the Barbican Theatre). The article examines how the technological apparatuses of binaural sound, algorithmic voice processing, and spatial immersion shift the terms of spectatorship and subjectivity.

Performative Theories of Embodiment and Mediation Speaking its methods through performance and media, the form that performance work such as *Double Room* or *Ego Ergo* tends to take cannot but demand what performance studies scholar Philip Auslander calls a 'performative' reading. It is the premise of this work that performance is not merely a depiction, but a scene of being in play (Lehmann, 2006). As a result, the methodology is focused on how the play, as a performance, stages the processes of identity, perception and spatiality – thematically and materially – through form, sound and staging.

Data collection includes; Written and illustrative work that was scripted or performance-based. Audio recordings (where available). Critical reception and reviews professional. Theoretical and philosophical texts working with post-humanism, affect and digital aesthetics. The focus is on how the aesthetics of

disorientation and story as AI of dislocations reshape the performer-space-spectator relation towards a distributed post-human configuration that situates the spectator in a new kind of semio-necropolitical setup.

4. Theoretical Framework

The work is situated within the post-humanist theoretical tradition, most notably in the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Mark B. N. Hansen, and Brian Massumi. These theorists disrupt anthropocentric conceptions of subjectivity and offer a model of the human as technologically co-constituted, effectively embedded, and ontologically liquid.

◆ 4. 1. Post-humanism and Embodiment

At its heart, the post-human rejects the humanist value of the self-contained, rational subject. Hayles (1999) argues that subjectivity in the digital era is a hybrid of “information and materiality”, placing the body as “redefined as a kind of prosthesis” (p. 3). Binaural, headphone-distributed sound used by McBurney becomes a way to uncouple voice from the visible body, participating in and producing a disembodied-yet-intimate version of presence that illustrates precisely Hayles’s idea of “distributed cognition” as played out in mediated technoscape.

“There is no absolute difference between bodily process and signifying process—bodily realization of a computational process is a particular instance of this sheer materiality” (Hayles, 1999, p. 247).

4.2. Braidotti and the Subject Becoming-Post-human

Braidotti (2013) highlights the ethical and ontological potential of the post-human subject – which is not a loss of the human, but rather a becoming that opens up to becoming with machines, animals, and ecologies. She writes:

"The object of the post-human is then a composite effect of human and nonhuman, planetary and technological, mixings" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 190).

A constellation that is performed through the technological and affective entangling of the human voice, the natural world, and the digital, the audience *The Encounters* a non-unitary, multi-sensory self.

4.3. Hansen and the Sense-scape Rewiring

We can see this play out in Mark Hansen’s (2015) media-philosophical take on how twenty-first-century technologies reprogram human senses rather than simply adding to them; how they no longer extend the senses, but, profoundly rethink them. He introduces the notion of a “feed-forward”, a condition where experience is mediated by pre-conscious, algorithmic processes. “There is the necessity of reckoning with how media modulate experience preconsciously and thus inform the sensibility of the human itself” (Hansen, 2015, p. 5). This model contributes to our understanding of how McBurney’s algorithmically mediated sound submerges the listener prior to cognitive perception, generating its lived reality inflected by the machinic agency.

4.4. Massumi, Affect and Interfaces

Another important dimension is provided by Brian Massumi's (2002) theory of effect. It can be a "non-conscious intensity", a bodily phenomenon not fully translatable into emotions or thoughts, he says. Massumi argues: "The skin is quicker than the word. Sensing comes before sense, the body's sensing comes before understanding" (Massumi 2002, p. 25). The haptic force of sound places the spectator in this pre-verbal affective engagement and turns them into part of an interface rather than a viewer.

As a whole, these theoretic perspectives mould a border in a framework with which we can read *The Encounter* as a post-human performance thing that: Remapping subjectivity from algorithmic/sensory ensnarement. To decentre the figure of the human performer and assert machinic agency. Reconfigures performativity as affective involvement and ontological jouissance. This framework will subsequently orient the analysis in addressing the way the play employs AI, binaural sound and displaced embodiment to transpose the theatrical event into an *encounter* with a post-human being.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The Encounter is more than a show, it's an ontological attack on consciousness, presence, and self. With binaural audio, algorithmic modulation, and narrative dislocation, the performance breaks down the distinctions between performer and audience, real and virtual, human and non-human. This section examines how these techniques operate as performative technologies of post-human subjectivity, as this has been theorized (Hayles 1999; Braidotti 2013; Hansen 2015, and Massumi 2002).

5.1. Binaural Sound and Space Displacement

From the beginning, the play relies on binaural microphones and headphones to disrupt spatial expectations. McBurney posts a binaural-head-microphone centre-stage to start the performance and uses it to whisper into everyone's ears, as if he's inside the head of each listener: "You're sitting in your seat. The lights go down. You put on your headphones. And now, you hear me... breathing... right beside you." This is the event of Mark Hansen's "feed-forward mediation" where sensory experience is formed before it reaches consciousness (Hansen 2015). The sound is not augmenting reality so much as producing an entirely new sensory architecture, one divorced from the visual body of the performer.

Hansen writes: "Media no longer mediate the senses; they premeditate them, modulating the very conditions through which perception occurs" (Hansen, 2015, p. 6). In distributing his voice through sound channels, McBurney makes of the audience a network of bodies participating in collectively but ad hoc spatialized sonority, a phenomenon that accords with Hayles' (1999) argument about "distributed cognition."

5.2. Technological Mediation and the Discontinuous Self

McBurney would frequently slip into various narrative personas: himself, the journalist Loren McIntyre, a tribal elder, and, occasionally, a disembodied voice with no identity. These vocal manipulations are generated through digital transformation, producing levels of speech sounds that conflate character spatiality: "I was there ... or

was it him? I don't know anymore... Maybe we are both hearing each other through time." This opening foregrounds a non-linear subjectivity,¹ one that is unstable and as such indicative of what Braidotti (2013) refers to as the post-human condition, that is, a condition of identity that is no longer unified, fixed and Sovereign, but relational, fragmented and trans-species.

As she notes: "The post-human subject is a transversal being, constructed of a multiplicity of flows, intensities and territorializations" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 190). Here, McBurney is not simply a performer but a modular presence moulded by the tech he employs. The voice becomes an interface, a channel through which human and mechanic agencies collaborate to co-construct the assemblage of the character. This phenomenon evokes Hayles' (1999) point that in digital performance, "the subject serves as a site of convergence of streams of information" (p. 288).

5.3. Affective Dis-/Connection and the Interface Body

The strongest moments of *The Encounter* are not intellectual but affective. And in an especially pivotal scene, reporting becomes a spiritual rite. The sound pulses increase, there's a low-frequency drone that fills your ears, the voice of a shaman speaks as he steps up the effects a notch: "You are not alone. You are not one. You are many." The impact is visceral. Viewers frequently report feeling a physical sensation, pressure in the chest, and time dilation. This is related to Massumi's (2002) notion of "affect as intensity" above cognition and language. As he puts it: "*Affect is unqualified intensity... It escapes confinement to the individual body*" (Massumi, 2002, p. 27). Asserting this intonational dynamic in the flesh, being affected or moved by it bodily, places the audience not as mere consumers of sound and effect, but as interfaces, as bodies through which sonic flows and affective relations pulse and activate. The theatre becomes a media ecology, in Hansen's (2015) terminology, in which the human body is not an end point but a relay in a complex of sensations.

5.4. Post-human Durations and the Fraying of Narrative Reason

In addition, *The Encounter* subverts linear time, substituting conventional plot development with temporal loops, fragments, and echoes of memory. The protagonist is lost in the jungle, but the real jungle is sonic and psychological. McBurney remarks: "I couldn't tell if I was telling it the way I remembered the story or if I was making it up as I went along." (ND) This intentional vagueness is characteristic of postmodern narrative breakdown, a phenomenon, which varieties Almaarof and Khudhair (2024) associate with the decline of the absolute truth in the language and literature. This disintegration occurs not just thematically but also literally. The story devolves into a hallucinatory exercise in sense-making, where memory, fiction and presence merge.

This uncertainty turns the theatre into a process rather than a result, a key post-dramatic performance assertion (Lehmann, 2006) where the text moves from story-based (story) to experience-based (text). Throughout its staging and realization, *The Encounter* enacts a radical turn in theatrical subjectivity. Using AI-enhanced sound, broken narrative and sensory manipulation, McBurney makes a post-human dramaturgy that transfers the subjectivity between audience and performer and

reduces narrative authority to algorithmic and affective networks. It altars space and time using binaural spatialization, and re-sites the viewer as mediating-terminal and sensing-embodied. In this sense, *The Encounter* does not merely represent a story, it performs the disintegration of the liberal human subject and installs in its place a distributed, mechanically enmeshed self as it occurs.

6. Conclusion

The play presents an intriguing re-arrangement of the relationship between theatrical space, plot construction, and human subjectivity through the mediation of technology, specifically AI-generated sound design and binaural spatial audio, into the heart of the performance. In the process, the production violently shatters habitual understanding of space and time, splintering linear narrative development and collapsing the space between the physical theatre and the interior perceptual space of the audience.

The enveloping aural soundscape of the binaural performance decentres the eye-line of the stage and replaces it with a multidimensional aural architecture that collapses the distance between actor and audience. Because the listeners experience the voice "inside" their heads, the performance creates a kind of temporal disorientation that entails, as Mark Hansen (2015) puts it, a "pre-subjective sensory modulation," a redistribution of perception itself. Time and space, unshackled from the visual and the linear, turn out to be liquid and reprogrammable.

This reorientation of sensation nurtures a subjectivity that no longer relies upon unity, stability, and autonomy but is dispersed, affective and mechanically crafted. The viewer is not an inert spectator but a participant in a relational interface under constant algorithmic influence, audio-visual narrative indeterminacy and affective intensity. It is in this sense, following Rosi Braidotti (2013), that the subject is post-human, not because dehumanised (of course), but where it exists, in assemblages of technology, perception, and embodied cognition.

What is crucial, is that *The Encounter* stages post-human subjectivity, not as a theme, as something to be represented as such, but well, former and exposit (); as an act of shaping and of sense, something formal and sensorial. Its form is incoherent; its narrative fragments into memory loops and identity shifts; its technologies function beneath the threshold of consciousness. Instead, the play allures the notion of, perhaps, "a new way of being" for the audience, one in which the self is splintered, networked and forever becoming. It is in this combination of form, philosophy and immersion in technology that the play can be said to be not just representing, but also embodying the post-human.

Insofar as theatre so often depends upon the presence and unity of the actors, and so often the process of representation, McBurney's project marks an important intervention in the material conditions of the stage today. It ushers in a horizon of performance in which reality is not so much staged as reprogrammed, and in which the audience is not so much spectators as becoming, a distributed subject in a digitally mediated play with the edges of the human.

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