



# Moving Words Move Bodies

Kinetic Textuality in *new skin*

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## KEYWORDS

Kinetic textuality, *new skin*, Hannah De Meyer, text-performance debate, text and movement

## MOTS-CLÉS

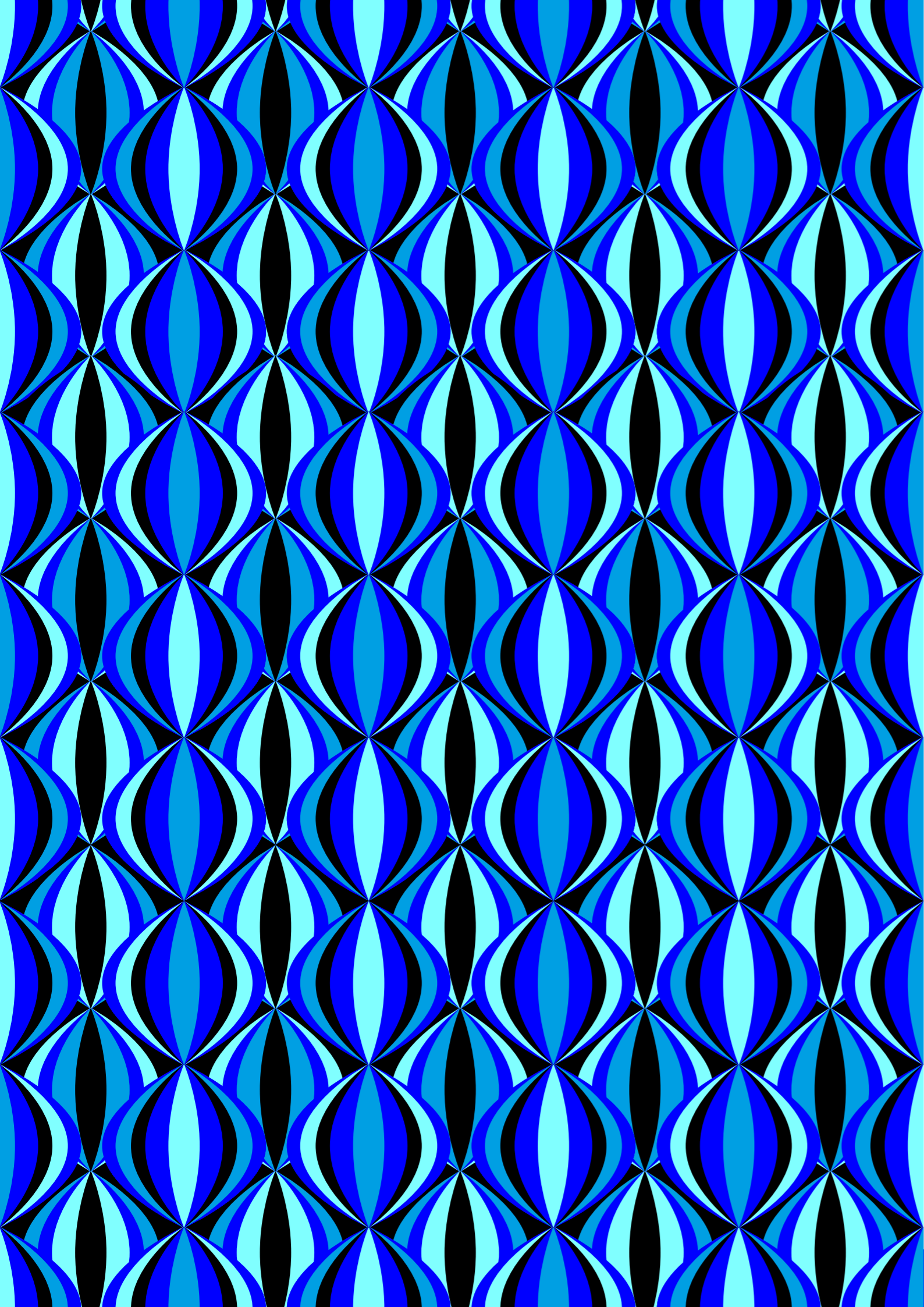
Textualité cinétique, *new skin*, Hannah De Meyer, débat texte-performance, texte et mouvement

# Summary

This article is structured around an in-depth analysis of the interplay between text and movement in Hannah De Meyer's *new skin* (2018). The use of language in this performance is approached as an example of what this article calls 'kinetic textuality', which refers to the contemporary tendency to use text in relation to — and as a locus of — movement. Kinetic textuality in general, and *new skin* specifically, allow for the reassessment of the text-performance debate in Theatre and Performance Studies. Whilst many contemporary scholars have switched the focus from the irreconcilable differences between text and performance to their productive interaction, less attention has been devoted to text's physical or kinetic dimension in theatre. This analysis of *new skin* sets off from a close examination of the network between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound. Not only does this article look into how these formal elements interact, it also approaches this interaction as a narrative strategy.

# Résumé

Cet article est structuré autour d'une analyse approfondie de l'interaction entre le texte et le mouvement dans la pièce de théâtre *new skin* (De Meyer 2018). L'utilisation du langage dans cette pièce est abordée comme un exemple de ce que cet article appelle la 'textualité cinétique', notion qui fait référence à la tendance contemporaine à utiliser le texte en relation avec et comme lieu de mouvement. La textualité cinétique en général, et la pièce *new skin* en particulier, permettent de réévaluer le débat texte-performance. Alors que de nombreux experts contemporains ont délaissé les différences irréconciliables entre le texte et la performance pour leur interaction productive, moins d'attention est accordée à la dimension physique ou cinétique du texte au théâtre. L'analyse de *new skin* repose sur un examen approfondi du lien entre le texte, le mouvement, le rythme, le corps, et le son. L'article examine non seulement la manière dont ces éléments formels interagissent, mais il les aborde également comme une stratégie de narration.



*Metre has another mode of action not hitherto mentioned. There can be little doubt that historically it has been closely associated with dancing, and that the connections of the two still hold.*

(Richards [1924] 2004: 131)

*The process of expression (...) brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience.*

(Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 212)

# Introduction

It might seem odd for a New Critics scholar such as I.A. Richards to trace textual metre back to *dance*, as he does in the first epigraph above. While Richards' literary criticism was primarily concerned with the text and nothing but the text as a self-contained and self-referential object, in his comparison it is suggested that a performative, even kinetic, energy can reside within texts. Recent theatrical and choreographic experiments seem to affirm Richard's speculations. The connection between dance and textual rhythm often resurfaces in performances where text is used as a form of and a means towards *movement*. As the analysis that follows will argue, these experiments take place on both the level of the text and of the performance. On the level of the text, artists 'choreograph' words by creating rhythmic compositions. Meanwhile, on the level of performance their 'moving' words interact with specific (spatial) movements of their body. Artists such as Mette Edvardsen, Hannah De Meyer, Abke Haring, Daniel Linehan, and Alma Söderberg, amongst many others, frequently use compositional strategies that blossom in diction and trigger a sense of movement in text: they emphasise inner rhymes, musicality, rhythm, harmony, and dissonance. Simultaneously, by integrating bodily movements into the wording of their texts, their

→ 1. In his article 'Kinetic Texts: From Performance to Poetry', Matt Cornish coins the notion 'kinetic text' to refer to the non-representational identity of experimental theatrical writing in the contemporary German performing arts scene, whereby he points to the difficulties of printing these pieces of writing into a play-text. The term 'kinetic text' allows Cornish 'to capture how they [kinetic texts] abjure mimesis' (2015: 305). Even though I will, in a similar move, try to move beyond (yet not fully abandon) the mimetic impulse of theatrical writing and focus on the 'unique literary qualities of poetry from performance' (*ibid*: 304), my use of the term *kinetic textuality*, differs slightly from Cornish. Kinetic textuality does not refer to a specific genre of plays and more specifically emphasises the mutual relation between text and *motion*.

words behave like triggers for movement, similar to music that instigates a body to dance. For that reason, these performances, not unlike Richards' quote, blur the dichotomy between text and performance — their dynamics take place at the very intersection of the two.

I use the term 'kinetic textuality' to characterise the vivid and intriguing interaction between the movements of written text and bodily movements within performance.<sup>1</sup> The adjective 'kinetic', which derives from the root word *kinetikos* in Greek, itself formed on the word *kinetos* to mean 'move', is used in this context with the aim to draw attention to the heightened affinity between language and movement as portrayed within these artistic experiments. In my use of the term, 'textuality' covers both speech and writing, so 'kinetic textuality' permits us to describe the kinetic quality discernible on both the stage (through its interaction with voice and the moving body) and the page (by emphasising compositional qualities, such as rhythm). As a whole, the term 'kinetic textuality' allows us to grasp both the kinetic dimension of theatrical speech and to unveil and emphasise the bodily and spatial aspects of staged writing.<sup>2</sup>

An intriguing example of kinetic textuality can be found in the performance *new skin* (2018), written, created, and performed by Belgian theatre artist Hannah De Meyer. In this performance, De Meyer's specific bodily movements continuously reverberate with the rhythmic text she utters. The use of kinetic textuality is her central artistic strategy to make a gentle but powerful political statement: fuelled by her reading of critical race theory and (eco)feminist theory, *new skin* is rooted in De Meyer's outspoken indignation towards racial, sexual, and

2. The notion of 'kinetic text' is developed and studied in Film Studies as well. See for instance Kim Knowles' 2015 article 'Performing Language, Animating Poetry: Kinetic Text in Experimental Cinema' where the author unravels the aesthetics of kinetic texts in experimental film and traces them back to their genealogical roots in modernist and futurist poetry and art.

environmental abuse. ‘This indignation can be a transformative power. I’m fascinated by how life-threatening situations provoke resilience and imagination’ (De Meyer n.d.: para. 3 of 3; my translation). *new skin* is presented by De Meyer as an invitation to pursue a way of thinking that differs profoundly from the predominantly Western, rational, and neo-liberal paradigm — the paradigm in which abuse and terror have been conducted and legitimised on a massive scale. Offering a sharply contrasting alternative to this Western narrative, De Meyer’s performance seeks to provoke an imaginary world in which a far-reaching sense of interdependency prevails. At the same time, kinetic textuality works as the central artistic strategy to give her ‘eco-feminist statement’ (Cousens 2019: para. 9 of 10) an energetic, gentle, and spirited dimension.<sup>3</sup>

This article will not so much focus on the way in which De Meyer incorporates the aforementioned critical voices into her performance (text), it will rather be centred around the formal strategies that underlie her use of theatrical writing as a way to appeal to the imagination of (the body of) the spectator. By using the two primary theatrical vehicles of kinetic textuality — language and movement — she composes and performs a meandering and associative monologue, in which we only see De Meyer talking and moving. There are no images, no décor, and no objects in the space. In her other performances as well, De Meyer has an enthralling way of performing: her smooth, elegant, and eerie way of speaking continuously intersects with quirky, alien-like movements. In *new skin*, this performance style is employed to invite the audience on an imaginary journey through various landscapes and memories. For example, with a joyous undertone, De Meyer asks her audience to imagine ‘fires [that] run through dry forests so fast they look like

torches burning down’ (*new skin*, 37) or tells them to ‘look around, where have you landed? You are in a land where everything points down, down to the earth’ (*new skin*, 17). She also tells the audience a few personal stories, for example about the death of her grandmother or about her own birth. She infuses her personal memory with earthly memories and creates an entangled web of connections between herself and her surroundings. The imaginative world that unfolds during the piece hinges primarily on words and movements, supported by music and light effects. The empty stage contrasts heavily with the dense story-world that is created in the audience’s minds: *new skin* makes tangible how theatrical writing can ‘transform the nowhere of the stage into a specific location’ (Worthen 2010: 205).

Since the interlacing of words and movements in *new skin* is predicated on text’s twofold condition as both an embodied and written sign, the following reading of the performance will be structured with this ambiguous status in mind, which will eventually unveil the dynamics of kinetic textuality as it figures in this specific performance. First, I will examine the features of kinetic textuality in light of the debate on text and language in Theatre and Performance Studies. Since kinetic textuality requires giving more serious attention to the role of embodiment in theatrical writing, I will then specify how my understanding of kinetic textuality is profoundly shaped by a Merleau-Pontian framework on language and speech. This theoretical examination offers the necessary background to consider the different formal characteristics that underlie kinetic textuality in *new skin* as text and as performance. An analysis of how rhythm is established in the text will be followed by a consideration of the various connections between textual and bodily movements in performance. Further, I will demonstrate how the interactions between textual and bodily movement as exposed in *new skin* draw attention to the centrality of sound within this phenomenological interaction. Once *new skin*’s artistic interventions in terms of the

3. For an insightful elaboration on how *new skin* engages with (eco-)feminist thinking, see Roels, Lieze. 2019. ‘De weerbarstige kracht van het ding: materiële agency in de podiumkunsten’, *Etcetera: tijdschrift voor podiumkunsten*, 156: 54-63.

composition and the staging of writing are clarified, I further aim to elucidate its effect on the audience. As the second epigraph suggests above, in the act of expression words can become a shared organism between artist and audience. Towards the end of the article, I will unravel this shared organism and argue that kinetic textuality in *new skin* can be interpreted as a narrative strategy that both draws the audience into the story-world of the performance and simultaneously activates their imagination. To do this I will discuss the effects of perceiving movement on stage (in body and in text) and focus on the specificity of *new skin*'s compositional strategies such as the stylistic features of rhythm and the monologic genre. These textual characteristics, as I will argue with reference to North-American theatre scholar Julia Jarcho's insights on the theatricality of writing, emphasise the 'writtenness' of the text and thereby stimulate the engagement of the audience.

## Kinetic Textuality and the Text-Performance Split

Before delving into kinetic textuality in *new skin*, it may be useful to contextualise kinetic textuality within the broader discourse on the relationship between textuality and performativity in Theatre and Performance Studies. The story often goes that the unease around this relationship originated during the foundation of Theatre Studies as a discipline at North-American and European universities. This new discipline primarily wanted to dispose of the textual bias that characterised the literary studies from which it sought to emancipate itself (Philipsen 2017: 100). The discomfort with text and language resurfaces later in Performance Studies, whose founding scholars reinforced an antithetical relation between text on the one hand and performance on the other (Worthen 2004: 18). An overall anxiety around the 'faithfulness'

of a performance in relation to the text (which dominates performance because it contains the blueprint for performance) continues to distort the relation of text vis-à-vis performance (Worthen 2010: 17). At the turn of the previous century, along with Lehmann's publication of *Post-dramatic Theatre* ([1999] 2006), the suspicion towards textuality was reinforced. In the first place, this had to do with a large misunderstanding of Lehmann's project — postdrama was often misconceived as a theatre without text (Itler 2015: 247). However, although Lehmann includes textuality in his account on postdrama, his argument does remain structured along a salient binary between text-based and non-text-based theatre (Tomlin 2008: 58) where he 'defines the theatrical against the literary' (Jarcho 2014: 297). These developments have contributed to the notion that text is something stable, permanent, and bodiless, and that it cannot be fitted into the attractive, fleeting, and corporeal logic of the performative, let alone the kinetic.<sup>4</sup>

4. See Worthen's first chapter 'From Poetry to Performance' in *Drama, between Poetry and Performance* (2010) for an extensive overview of the approaches towards theatrical writing in both New Criticism and Performance Studies.

To some extent, the contemporary debate is still largely dominated by Lehmann's framework. His typology is for instance often used to analyse how playwriting can expose a postdramatic aesthetics (Barnett 2008; Jürs-Munby 2009; Itler 2015). This explains why many accounts concerning text and language in theatre are primarily preoccupied with a metaphysics of presence and representation. The view of Jarcho, whose work I will discuss in more depth towards the end of this article, is a good example of how the limiting dichotomy of presence and representation can be abandoned (2017: 8). She also conducts close analyses of plays, yet focuses on how their compositional strategies create friction within performance because they complicate performance's logic of the here-and-now. Overall, among contemporary scholars dealing with text and language, there seems to be an agreement that the very friction between text and performance is a productive site for experiment and analysis

# Kinetic Textuality and Merleau-Ponty

(Jürs-Munby 2010; Meisner and Mounsef 2011; Vanhoutte and Swyzen 2011; Worthen 2012; Cull 2013; Rodríguez 2016; Sugiera 2016). However, with notable exceptions in the work of North-American theatre scholars W.B. Worthen (*Drama: Between Poetry and Performance* 2010) and Stanton B. Garner (*Bodied Spaces* 1994), few scholars explicitly address the relation between text and body within the interaction between text and performance, or only mention embodiment in passing. In the context of kinetic textuality, however, a central focus on embodiment is necessary since kinetic textuality evolves around the interplay between textual and bodily movement.

It is because the interconnection of textual and bodily movements leads us beyond predominant thinking on theatrical writing that kinetic textuality is a suitable avenue to assess the relationship between text and performance from the perspective of embodiment. By introducing the term ‘kinetic textuality’, I not only wish to draw attention to a contemporary tendency in the performing arts, I also aspire to respond to the reduced attention for embodiment in contemporary scholarship on textuality. The affinity between language and movement in *new skin* is portrayed by means of a careful composition of the interaction between the performative elements of text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound. For that reason, this performance requires an analysis in which embodiment functions as a *sine qua non* condition of theatrical writing and in which the reciprocal and dynamic assemblage between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound is foregrounded. This implies that we cannot consider text without movement, sound without rhythm, or body without text, etc. To phrase it differently: a thoughtful assessment of kinetic textuality in *new skin* compels a mode of textual and performance analysis that moves beyond the aforementioned scholarly tendencies in the study of staged writing.

My analysis of kinetic textuality as a performative feature that portrays the interaction between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound is highly influenced by the phenomenological work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. His thinking allows us to take the simple observation that theatrical writing is always already ‘an encounter with embodiment’ (Worthen 2010: 76) seriously.<sup>5</sup> Since the intricate intertwinement of body, language, and the material world is a fundamental concern within Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, his work offers the tools to navigate between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound as they interact in *new skin*. For that reason, I will first briefly consider his reflections on speech and language, in order to explicate the main theoretical groundwork that underlies my conceptualisation of kinetic textuality.

Merleau-Ponty’s writings are situated within the phenomenological tradition, the first seeds of which having been planted by German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Merleau-Ponty — drawn to Husserl’s work and aspirations to move beyond a Cartesian worldview — further developed a mode of thinking that countered the prevailing philosophical assumption at the time that the mind can be separated from the materiality and

5. In my understanding of the network that constitutes kinetic textuality, I also linger on what Belgian dance scholar Rudi Laermans has called ‘dance in general’, a notion he uses to account for contemporary dance’s interest in the assemblage of human and non-human movement. ‘In such a performance’, Laermans explains, ‘not only the human body but also sound, imagery or light are treated as media of dance, as having the potential to produce a variety of movements and poses’ (2008: 10). Similar to my conception of kinetic textuality, Laermans’ ‘dance in general’ does not place the performing body as the central focus of the performance but rather emphasises the mutual cooperation of different performative elements.



*new skin*, by Hannah De Meyer, performed by Hannah De Meyer  
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lived experience of the body (Coole 2008: 85; Murray and Holmes 2013: 345; Dreon 2016: 54). Even though their central line of inquiry was a careful and precise observation on the interaction between the embodied subject and the world, a considerable amount of Merleau-Ponty's writings were also devoted to language and speech. His phenomenological analysis of language and speech substantially contributed to an understanding of the world and the body outside the Cartesian paradigm and to a more dynamic conception of the interaction between the (moving) body and its environment (Lewis 1966: 35; Adams 2008: 160; Apostolopoulos 2018: 355). Merleau-Ponty's interest in language only increased throughout his career. Towards the end of his life, language was no longer simply an element that provided access to the experience of the world, it now functioned as a model upon which he mirrored his understandings of perception, being, and consciousness.

Influenced to a great extent by linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language depend largely on the structuralist notion of signifying networks (Adams 2008: 157; Silverman 2008: 104; Hayden 2018: 423). As Merleau-Ponty explains himself — 'meaning appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words' (1964: 42). Thus here meaning is dependent on and constituted within a *network*. A crucial difference between Saussure and Merleau-Ponty is the latter's emphasis on embodiment: the continuous interaction between language and body is foregrounded in his attempt 'to restore to the act of speaking its true physiognomy' ([1945] 2002: 211). This interaction takes place on two levels: language, on the one hand, structures and fundamentally impacts our bodily experience of being-in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 210), while the body, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in the communication of meaning in speech. Merleau-Ponty 'insists that bodies are not mere vessels of minds or vehicles of intellectual messages, but also actively evoke, interpret and transform meaning' (Adams 2008: 153).

In speech, the meaning of a word is not communicated merely through the word itself, rather 'the meaning of words must be finally induced by (...) a kind of deduction from a gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech' (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 208).

The common ground between speech and gesture to which Merleau-Ponty points here is crucial for my understanding of kinetic textuality. His reflections elucidate that speech cannot be thought of in isolation from embodiment and movement and that speech fundamentally structures our way of being (and moving) (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 43). Merleau-Ponty positions the speaking body right in the middle of Saussure's network and gives a phenomenological (and primarily embodiment-oriented) twist to it. His reflections on language mark the contours of a network not only between signs but also between the body and the world. For this reason Merleau-Ponty's work ties in with the intersection of language and the (moving) body in kinetic textuality and offers valuable insights to reassess the stakes of the text-performance debate in Theatre and Performance Studies.

## Theatrical Writing in and as a Network of Movement(s)

Now let us return to *new skin* and imagine that we are gathered together in the theatre space where De Meyer's monologue is about to begin. *new skin* does not communicate the inner thoughts of a character, the text is rather a poetic and associative piece of writing. Instead of offering a clear-cut storyline, *new skin* meanders freely. By explicitly addressing us through the recurrent personal pronoun 'you', De Meyer actively encourages

us to use our imagination. For example, in the beginning of the piece, De Meyer asks us to picture absence, ‘absence with no face, absence with no name’ (*new skin*, 9). This absence becomes filled with a ‘tiny crumble of light’ that ‘grows bigger and bigger’ until ‘you can see water, land, fires burning the land, and waves rising and crashing and tumbling across each other’. After a ‘bang’, De Meyer tells us that ‘you’re in a body now’ (*new skin*, 10-11). Now that we are (imaginatively) reborn and that we have an (imagined) world in which to live, she takes us on a journey through various (imaginary) landscapes. Together with De Meyer, we walk through forests, valleys, museums, and caves, until we are offered a place to rest in a hole in the ground. While we are sleeping, De Meyer tells us two stories: one about an astronaut that is connected to the earth through an umbilical cord and one about her own birth. Her text is written in a diegetic — rather than a dramatic or dialogic — mode of narration. De Meyer’s invitation to imagine various sensations and images in our minds and bodies is reminiscent of meditative practices, where an appeal to our imagination works to activate sensations in our bodies and to restore corporeal awareness. Importantly, *unlike* in most meditative practices, we do not close our eyes: while imagining the various scenes that De Meyer describes, we simultaneously notice how De Meyer moves on stage. Sometimes she fluidly follows the cadence of the text by slowly shaking her upper body from left to right; sometimes she vividly and brusquely reacts to the words by moving her torso in a strange bend. Through both the text and the movements, a fictive (although not dramatic since the text does not function as the speech of a dramatic character) universe is created.

*new skin*’s use of kinetic textuality makes tangible how language can accommodate and portray a sense of movement *in* text. In De Meyer’s writing, this movement is primarily evoked through the stylistic feature of **rhythm**. In the following excerpt, the movement described in the text of digging is evoked through and further enhanced by the movement of the textual rhythm.

you start digging  
you dig into the ground  
and digging into the earth is like  
digging through time  
layers and layers of rocks  
layers and layers of time  
and you  
you dig for hours  
you dig for days  
for weeks  
for months  
for years  
you keep on digging back in time  
(*new skin*, 31-32)

In this excerpt, the repetition of the words ‘dig’, ‘digging’, ‘layers’, and ‘for’ establishes a certain repetitive cadence. Rhythm, then, is provoked by the rupture between ‘you dig for hours, you dig for days’, followed by a new set of repeated constructions, ‘for weeks, for months, for years’, then again followed by ‘you keep on digging back in time’. Richards explains that ‘rhythm and its specialised form, metre, depend upon repetition, and expectancy’ ([1924] 2004: 122). After reading or listening to repetitive patterns, readers or listeners come to anticipate that repetition and rhythm emerge out of the text’s *failure* to meet these expectations (*ibid*: 128). The reason could be, again according to Richards, that ‘the mind after reading a line or two of verse, or half a sentence of prose, prepares itself ahead for any one of a number of possible sequences, at the same time negatively incapacitating itself for others’ (*ibid*: 122). Thus the ‘departures from and returns to the pattern has come to be regarded as the secret of poetic rhythm’ (Richards 1930: 227).<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, in this excerpt, the ‘fixed point of orientation’ (*ibid*: 231) that structures the repetition and establishes an anticipation, switches

frequently. This increases the pace, the rhythmicity, and also, I would argue, the *motility* of the excerpt: audible rhythm produces or enhances the perception of movement (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002: 265). As a result, the meticulous composition of rhythm in *new skin* establishes the first dimension of movement in the performance, one that is located *within* the text.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of rhythm on the audience will be further discussed in the next section. For the moment, it is important to emphasise that the rhythmicity of the text interacts with the (moving) body of De Meyer. As such rhythmic movement operates on the visual as well as auditory level of the performance. As the next step in drawing the network of the interacting performative elements in *new skin*, I will now turn to the various **bodily movements** that De Meyer performs while delivering her text and discern the different ways in which verbal movement triggers physical movement in her performance.<sup>8</sup> To begin with most of De Meyer's movements directly correspond to the rhythmicity of the text.

← 6. Although Richards primarily outlines how rhythm emerges through repetition and expectancy, he also admits that the analysis of rhythm is highly dependent on the reader's individual experience: it is something not found in the verse, but as an effect of verse. Rhythm, he writes, 'is not due to our perceiving a pattern in something outside us, but to our becoming patterned ourselves' (Richards [1924] 2004: 127; my emphasis).

7. The use of rhythm differs here from rhythm in postdramatic theatre, which was theorised by Hans-Thies Lehmann as an important quality of text in postdrama. According to Lehmann, rhythm in postdrama is 'used for the destructuring and deconstructing of story, meaning, and totality of form' ([1999] 2006: 156). It is one of postdrama's primary means to present 'signifiers that have been drained of their communicative character and can no longer be grasped as a part of a poetic, scenic or musical totality of a work' (Lehmann [1999] 2006: 156). This runs counter to *new skin's* effort to activate the junction between meaning and rhythm.

8. De Meyer's movements are not neatly choreographed or pinned down. Her gestures slightly differ in each performance, depending on the impulses that De Meyer receives from the text while performing. There are however some basic bodily reactions and basic movement patterns that were established beforehand and that re-appear in each performance.

For example, when she asks the audience to imagine a painting of 'two men holding sticks, hitting each other with sticks, giving blow, dodging blow, giving blow, dodging blow' (*new skin*, 12-13), her head alternately moves to the right and then to the front. She does not literally mimic the movements of the two men but in following the rhythm of the text her movements do evoke the scenery that she is describing. Here the connection between De Meyer's movements and her words is similar to the connection between movements and music: the movements react to the rhythm of the text.

A small amount of movements, on the contrary, relate mimetically to her text. For example, when De Meyer asks us to imagine that we are in a body with no legs, she looks at her own body and legs, or while stating that 'you're in a body now' (*new skin*, 11), she breathes heavily, seems to break out of her body, and looks at her arms and hands that are spread before her. While the majority of the movements mirror the rhythmicity of the text, these mimetic movements directly mirror the content of the text. In these brief mimetic flashes, a connection is made between what her text activates in our (imagined) body and what De Meyer's own body performs on stage. Being immersed in the imaginative world that her words *and movements* evoke, De Meyer on stage suddenly becomes a representation of ourselves as if she is wandering in a world similar to the world in which we are wandering in our minds. These movements add a very precise interpretation to the text, which contrasts with the more open and associative nature of the rhythmic movements.

One specific movement sequence of De Meyer stands out and reappears on a regular basis throughout the performance: she shuffles restlessly with her feet, her upper body moves from left to right, while her head crawls upward and downward. This recurrent (yet each time slightly adapted) movement holds a specific emotional quality, and does not, at first sight, seem to correspond to the text in a straightforward way.

To grasp the specific quality of this movement, and how it relates to the text she utters, it is necessary to remind the reader of the fact that De Meyer is both the author and the performer of *new skin*. In a personal interview with me, De Meyer explained how particular sentences in the performance text still hold the echoes of the emotions — predominantly pain, anger, and indignation — that she experienced whilst reading the (eco)feminist and anti-racist literature that have inspired her to write and create this piece. The pronunciation of certain words allows De Meyer to activate these emotional and physical memories in her body. These in turn produce *new skin*'s characteristic movements, which are, in other words, essentially provoked by the act of embodying (and digesting) her written text. When De Meyer stumbles around on stage to abruptly and intensely straighten her back and look up to the ceiling, her movements function as bodily and visceral reactions to the texts that inspired her to write *new skin*. These visceral reactions to the uttered words correspond to British-Australian feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's view upon emotions: 'emotions', she states, 'can work in practice by circulating through words and figures and by sticking to bodies' (2014: 217). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed outlines how certain emotions can settle upon words, and how these words, infused by an emotional value, have a specific effect on the body that pronounces them. This dynamic explains how emotions (and the critical literature that evoked them in the first place) become incorporated in the entanglement of words and movements in *new skin*. In fact, these movements contain the intertextual traces of her writing and activate the echoes of the critical voices that have inspired her to write this piece.

De Meyer's bodily movements that always seem to emerge *out of* the text — rhythmically, mimetically or emotionally — emphasise the intricate intertwinement of text and body in kinetic textuality. As such, *new skin* illustrates that speech and gestures become part of one continuum. When De Meyer talks about 'whistles like waves, soundwaves, like

messages, messengers coming up from the ground' (*new skin*, 24-25), she slowly moves around without lifting her feet, while bending and moving her upper body around. This section resonates with Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the relation between speech and gestures: 'the spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its [meaning]' ([1945] 2002: 213). The whistles and waves coming from the ground are evoked through movements, which, without the words, would not immediately remind us of whistles or waves and vice versa. The quality of De Meyer's slow yet eager movements contributes to the expression of the quality of the waves. The text's interaction with embodiment is not only limited to the text on stage, we can observe it on the pages of *new skin* as well. The use of the deictic word 'this', for example, in sentences such as 'a video of a man standing in a forest holding a long wooden cane like this' (*new skin*, 13-14) or 'when they lift me out of the womb, I come out like this' (*new skin*, 31), not only triggers the reader's imagination but also reveals that *new skin* is written with an expected and/or previous embodied performance in mind. The entanglement between words and body in performance *and* in writing illustrates that it is impossible to analyse text without paying attention to the body that delivers the text.

Finally, the embodiment of language on stage also relates to specific choices of pronunciation and intonation. A careful observation on the use of kinetic textuality in *new skin* draws attention to the central role of the sounds that carry the words through space.<sup>9</sup> This adds an important layer to the language-body interaction as outlined by Merleau-Ponty. For instance, the excerpt 'branches (...) flung into the sky like weightless, like pieces of paper and then flung down in the lake below'

9. For this section, I invite the reader to read my descriptions as instructions for how to pronounce the quotes from *new skin* (either out loud or by activating an inner voice). As such, the specific sonorous quality of the words may become more tangible (and audible).

(*new skin*, 24) demonstrates how sound contributes to the communication of the meaning evoked by the sentence: the way in which De Meyer pronounces the words contributes to the imagery that is evoked through them. The first part of the sentence is pronounced at a higher pitch, which provokes the flying image of the weightless branches. In the last part — when the branches fall down — her pitch falls down as well. *new skin*'s use of sound differs considerably from natural speech that is 'primarily a matter of communication, of a "transparency" toward something that is not itself speech' (Ihde 2007: 156). In De Meyer's performance the sounds do not function as seemingly transparent vehicles that contain semantic meanings but rather they more explicitly draw attention to themselves. De Meyer's conscious use of the power of the sounds of words occurs also in a less literal manner. In the beginning of the performance, when she asks us to imagine a museum, her voice is rather low-pitched, she speaks at a low pace, and her way of speaking is close to singing. These sounds enrich the words with a sacral quality so that the museum is imagined as a very mystical place. Sounds, pitch, tone, and intonation of words and sentences are less used as devices to transform De Meyer into a dramatic character, than as tools to assist us in imagining the scenery that she describes.

As the above paragraph aims to make clear, sound is an essential component of kinetic textuality in *new skin*. It highlights the text's rhythm and interacts with De Meyer's (moving) body. Throughout the entire performance we are enmeshed in the dynamics of words whose meanings are coloured by sounds, movements, and our own imagination. During the pronunciation of the sentence 'interrupted by flashes of light, white flashes, flashes of white light, white lights flashing' (*new skin*, 11), De Meyer slowly moves back and forth with blinking eyes. The phenomenon of white flashing lights corresponds with the rhythm established in the text of a rapid acceleration of repetition and revision of the words 'flash', 'white', and 'lights'. The meaning of the sentence

is communicated through the relations between the words, rather than through the separate words. The sounds evoked by this sentence, which are pronounced at a slow pace while pronouncing the 'f' 'l', and 'i' letter sounds for slightly longer than the other sounds, contribute to the image and pace of the white flashing lights. De Meyer's movements further contribute to both the rhythm and the meaning of the sentence, which in turn influence the movements. Importantly, and this is what De Meyer's unconventional performance style helps us to recognise, the interactions between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound are pre-existent to the separate elements — they are fundamentally and intricately intertwined. By foregrounding the central role of sound in the interaction between text, movement, rhythm, and body, *new skin* offers an important extension to Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the relation between gesture, speech, and embodiment in the creation of meaning.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>. For a phenomenological analysis of sound, see also: Ihde, Don. 2007. *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edn (Albany: State University of New York Press). Ihde's post-phenomenological studies of sound and voice are influenced by a Merleau-Pontian framework concerning speech and language. Where Merleau-Ponty primarily looks at language from the perspective of embodiment and signification, Ihde more explicitly emphasises the auditory quality inherent to the interaction between language and body, arguing that sounds actively contribute to the meanings and connotations of words.



*new skin*, by Hannah De Meyer, performed by Hannah De Meyer  
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# *new skin* as a Collective Song: Between Immersion and Critical Distance

Now that I have established the network of interacting performative elements, it is time to consider how kinetic textuality functions as a narrative strategy in *new skin*. As Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘words, even in the art of prose, carry the speaker and the hearer into a common universe by drawing both toward a new signification’ (1964: 75). It is against the background of the entire network of text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound that we can consider how this ‘common universe’ is created in De Meyer’s performance. To do so, let us turn to another excerpt:

inside you is the echo of a hundred million people  
moving inside of you  
moving your body  
moving their arms  
shaking their heads  
people that move  
move restlessly  
move in and out of schools  
move in and out of houses  
move in and out of work  
in and out of cars  
in and out of trains  
getting up  
getting up in the middle of the night  
in and out of bed  
(*new skin*, 21)

During the enactment of this excerpt, we are drawn into the performance by listening to the oscillation between the text’s rhythm and by watching the effect of rhythm on De Meyer’s body. By voicing this neatly composed rhythmic piece of writing, De Meyer not only communicates its content but also transmits the movement portrayed within the writing towards *our* bodies, the bodies of the audience members. When we digest poetic rhythm, as Richards explains, we experience ‘a vast cyclic agitation spreading all over the body, a tide of excitement pouring through the channels of the mind’ ([1924] 2004: 127). North-American literary scholar Tenney Nathanson terms this phenomenon ‘kinetic identification’, which primarily refers to the sensation of movement within the reader’s body, resulting from the reader’s interaction with a poem that exposes movement in terms of content and/or in terms of composition (2016: 397). As such, by listening to De Meyer’s rhythmic piece of writing, we experience the movement that her text portrays.

This transmission of movement is further enforced through her (physical) movements. Although De Meyer does not mimic the movements described in the previous excerpt (she does not perform the action of getting up out of bed, for example), her movements do evoke the scenery of people hurriedly and energetically moving. The pace of her movements slightly increases throughout the fragment: her upper body quietly bounces to the rhythm of her text while her head shakes — first slowly, then heavily — to follow the text’s rhythm. The sensation of movement portrayed by De Meyer’s bodily movements reaches the audience’s bodies by means of what dance scholars call ‘kinaesthetic empathy’ (Fabius 2009; Reason and Reynolds 2010; Hansen et al. 2017; Garner 2018). Kinaesthesia refers to the ‘the proprioceptive sense of movement within our own bodies’ (Sklar 2008: 87). Through kinaesthetic empathy, the spectators can register the movements made by performers in their own bodies. This explains ‘how dance communicates upon the assertion that viewers actively partake in the same kinaesthetic

experience as the dancers they are watching onstage' (Foster 2011: 7). So when spectators perceive movement on stage, they do not only grasp it visually, through their eyes, but also kinaesthetically, through their own muscular and sensorial system. As a result, the audience's bodies become entangled with De Meyer's moving body. Although they remain seated, the audience's sense of kinaesthesia enables them to move together with De Meyer. It is fascinating how in *new skin* this transmission of movement from the performer to the audience also happens through the text, through the 'kinetic identification' which is pursued by means of the rhythmicity of the text. As a result, *new skin* triggers a kinaesthetic sensation that is simultaneously textual and corporeal, simultaneously lingering on auditory and visual senses, while the spectator's body functions as the mediator in which all these experiences take place.

Even though a hypnotic effect is established through the perception of bodily and textual rhythm and movement, at the same time *new skin* actively engages us to use our imagination. This is primarily accomplished through the use of the recurrent pronoun 'you' as discussed above but is further enhanced by the text's miscellaneous narrative structure that is primarily built around rhythmicity and musicality. These interventions in terms of diction and composition draw explicit attention to the words' materiality and often somewhat less to their content. They thus challenge us in our attempt to keep track of what is being communicated. This extensive use of rhythm and sound in *new skin* affirms what Jarcho would call the text's "writtenness" (Jarcho 2014; Jarcho 2017). By being explicitly portrayed as writing rather than natural speech, *new skin*'s text remains an enigmatic entity 'whose verbal density [will not] dissolve into the immediacy of the performance, because its logic [is] somewhere else, somewhere beyond us' (Jarcho 2017: 206).<sup>11</sup> According to Jarcho, repetition and revision, as the means to anchor rhythm, are central vehicles to establish this sense of writtenness in theatrical texts (2017: 131-171). Through this, she explains, we 'find ourselves watching

a writer — or watching writing — work' (Jarcho 2017: 148). The genre of the monologue, then, following Jarcho, reinforces this quality of writtenness (2017: 181). By adopting certain compositional strategies, monologues can be portrayed as pieces of writing that 'elude our attempts to make meaning. In so doing, they enter the dimension of a content ungrasped and unrealized, a referent that disparages our co-presence by refusing to materialize here and now' (Jarcho 2014: 298). Jarcho's argument indicates how *new skin*'s formal features of rhythm, sound, and monologue profoundly impact the extent to which we, as an audience, have access to the text. Here the inaccessibility and sense of eeriness that results from the rhythmicity and associative character of the text occasionally complicate our immediate access to the text's content and meaning.

Within these moments, where we experience a certain distance between ourselves and De Meyer's performance, we become activated. By not being fully graspable within the here-and-now, the writing leaves room for individual reflection. As such, through the sense of elusiveness that these formal strategies activate, De Meyer's performance further mobilises our imagination. In this way, her compositional strategies tie in with and contribute to the dramaturgical intent of the performance of inviting us to participate in an imaginary journey through various landscapes and memories. In doing this, *new skin* activates rhythmicity and movement to draw us into De Meyer's story-world, yet not in a trance-inducing manner since the elusiveness resulting from the rhythmic and kinetic text counters the hypnotic effect and enhances the text's potential to address our imagination.

11. Jarcho's insistence on the friction between the inaccessibility of writing and the immediacy of performance should not be understood as a disguised form of the dichotomous view on text and performance, to which I referred at the outset of this article. Rather, she stresses that theatrical writing is primarily 'writing that demands enactment' (Jarcho 2014: 306). The friction between writing and the here-and-now of performance exists by virtue of their mutual involvement.



# Concluding Remarks

The two thinkers with whose words I opened this article — I.A. Richards and Maurice Merleau-Ponty — stem from two divergent epistemic traditions, yet both have profoundly shaped the contours of my argument. In her critical and historical analysis of the relationship between text and performance as theorised within theatre and performance scholarship, North-American theatre and literary scholar Julia A. Walker convincingly traces the split between text and performance back to the opposition between the analytic and continental philosophical traditions, arguing that the ‘opposition upon which they are founded is essentially the same as that of the text/performance split’ (2006: 20). In the analytic tradition, Walker includes New Critic approaches to literature that ‘bore within...[them] a bias against explicitly performative genres’ (2006: 25). Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl’s work epitomises the other position of continental philosophy wherein the focus on subjectivity functions as a crucial methodological strategy. In order to think and move beyond this split between two seemingly irreconcilable stances, Walker explains, it is useful to merge the objective analytical viewpoint with ‘an experience of the world as registered within our body’ (2006: 39). According to her, this dialectical approach is especially useful for theatre and performance scholars. Not only does it help them to move beyond the text-performance split, they are also dealing with ‘an art form devoted to just this kind of oscillation’ (Walker 2006: 38). I have sought to adopt this oscillation as a methodological framework through which I looked at *new skin*. It has offered me a way to approach the folds in between text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound, that is the fascinating junction where theatrical (and even choreographic) experiment takes place.

In *new skin* I found an exemplary case of what I call ‘kinetic textuality’. This is the tendency to use text in relation to or as a means for movement.

Since speech presents itself as writing on stage and performative traces reside within text, this two-fold approach was crucial to analyse the network of text, movement, rhythm, body, and sound in *new skin*. De Meyer, by being both the playwright and the performer of *new skin*, personifies the now commonly accepted intertwinement of text and performance. Her extensive use of bodily movements in relation to a ‘moving’ text, however, urged me to place more emphasis on embodiment as the locus of this interrelation. By analysing De Meyer’s performing style in relation to her specific style of writing, I have demonstrated how text and movement relate to each other in different ways and emphasised the intricate intertwinement of body and language. I have outlined how rhythm operates in the performance and how sound plays a central role in the verbal delivery of writing. In the last part of the article, I approached kinetic textuality as a narrative strategy. Even though rhythm and monologue sometimes establish the hypnotic effect of the performance, they just as much undo this effect by refusing to become fully accessible in the here-and-now and by activating the spectator’s individual thoughts. In the ambivalent space between these two divergent effects, De Meyer’s performance simultaneously establishes embodied immersion and critical distance. Consequently, by using kinetic textuality in the genre of the monologue, *new skin* moulds, kneads, and weaves an entangled web of images that nourishes the audience’s imagination.

The close analysis of *new skin* outlined here has frequently emphasised that the act of speaking is not simply done ‘by a mind to a mind, but by a being who has body and language to a being who has body and language, each drawing the other by invisible threads like those who hold the marionettes — *making* the other speak, *think*, and become what he is but never would have been by himself’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 19). Above all, in this article, it has been my intention to indicate that any analysis of theatrical language eventually has to take the body seriously — both the body that produces the text through voice and gesture and the bodies of the spectators perceiving the text. •

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