
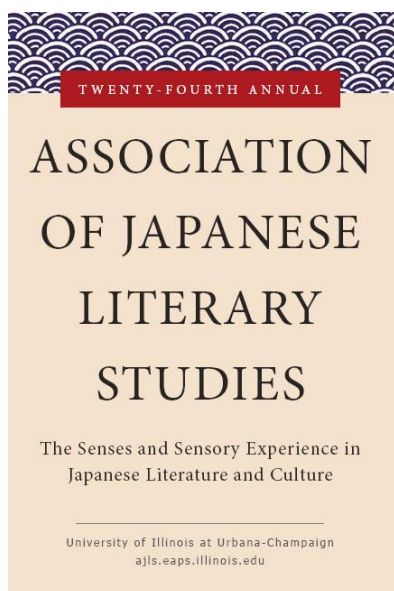


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Shinsengumi: A Talkie Rensa-geki”

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**THE SOUND OF LIVENESS:
THE ZENSHINZA'S SHINSENGUMI: A TALKIE *RENSA-GEKI***

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In November 1937, the Zenshinza theater/film troupe released a talkie *rensa-geki* production about the *bakumatsu* police corps known as the Shinsengumi, the group that was organized to defend Kyoto for the Shogunate in its final days. Titled *Shinsengumi: A Talkie Rensa-geki*, this new production was released in tandem with a feature length talkie that shared the same cast, adapted the same screenplay, and from which it borrowed footage for the film scenes. *Shinsengumi* was not the first attempt by the Zenshinza to produce the story of this ruthless band of masterless samurai in this innovative new form. With a script written by Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977), this film and talkie *rensa-geki* were preceded by a failed 1934 attempt to stage another talkie *rensa-geki* script written by Kubo Sakae (1900-1958) with the same title and subject matter. The sustained interest in portraying this story in this particular form by the Zenshinza and two of the proletarian theater movement's most prominent figures is surprising on a number of levels: not only did the Shinsengumi stand diametrically opposed to Kubo's and Murayama's Marxist political ideals—after all, its leaders Kondō Isami and Hijikata Toshizō died defending Japan's feudal system—but the format also ran counter to key artistic tenets of the proletarian theater movement. Bridging these incompatible elements and holding these interests together was the powerful new technology of recorded sound in film. In the late 1930s, other members of the proletarian movement were writing narratives that dramatized the disintegration of the movement in the face of an onslaught of government oppression. By contrast these productions scripted by Kubo and Murayama utilized the new genre of the talkie *rensa-geki* to perform unity in a time of chaos through the use of sound as an artistic mechanic that fused disparate artistic elements and political ideals.

Film and live theater share many obvious properties, a fact highlighted by the flow of technical, acting, and production talent back and forth between stage and screen. They are often presented in the same venues, and in early twentieth century Japan, the genre of the *rensa-geki* (linked theater) actually brought the two forms together into a single performance with alternating filmed and live sequences. Film is not a better, more advanced, and more efficient method of representing stories told by performing actors. If it were, this mixed format would have been moot in the 1930s, and live theater would be as rare now as telegrams or typewriters. Yet the exact nature of the relationship between film and theater is not a settled question. The fact that live theater has not been eclipsed by film and is still a vibrant cultural presence more than a century after the advent of cinema highlights what some in performance studies see as the unbridgeable ontological divide between liveness and mediation. Others, however, point to the continued close relationship of film and theater to argue that the differences are actually not so great. In 1930s Japan, the performance world was still in the early stages of understanding and negotiating that relationship when it was further complicated by the dazzling new technological advance that allowed audiences to actually hear the actors on screen speak in their own recorded voices. One attempt to

understand what this new technology meant for liveness can be found in the evolution of the *rensa-geki* into the “talkie *rensa-geki*”, a venue uniquely suited to exploring the interplay of live and recorded voice. Focusing on two examples of the form, this paper will examine the interaction of live and mediated sound in Murayama’s and Kubo’s scripts *Shinsengumi: A Talkie Rensa-geki* and the critical response that the 1937 production generated. This approach will attempt to uncover the political valences of the artistic choices in the Zenshinza’s production.

As a performance genre that tells a single story using a combination of both staged and filmed scenes, the *rensa-geki* form lies at the fissure between liveness and mediation. That is, at a very fundamental level, the function that it serves is to question the boundaries and role of the live in an increasingly mediated world. This was a role that the form had played when it first emerged during the early years of the silent film era as an exploration of the limits of both film and theater. Coupled with its subject matter, *Shinsengumi: A Talkie Rensa-geki* demonstrated artistic choices which struck at the heart of the ontology of performance itself and political choices with consequences for the proletarian theater movement as a whole. After all, the proletarian theater movement was grounded in ideals of performance that foregrounded the live and politicized the unscripted, improvisational, un-repeatable nature of performance.¹ In other words, the political agenda of their theater was dependent upon an understanding of performance that aligns with Peggy Phelan’s argument that performance is inherently unrepeatable².

Rensa-geki was hardly a new genre for a 1937 Japanese audience. Performers had been combining live performance with film since before the turn of the century, and the popular *benshi* engaged in a related practice of hybrid performance in their explanations of silent film. Additionally, even though regulations in the early 1920s reduced the number of performances compared to *rensa-geki*’s heyday in the 1910s, the genre was still vibrant enough that a production would not turn heads simply by virtue of combining film and live performance. Yet while pairing film with theater may not have been new, the notion of incorporating the talkie’s recorded sound in the *rensa-geki* was indeed novel and not necessarily an obvious choice. After all, to the extent that *rensa-geki* existed as a technical solution, live theater’s spoken voice was rendered redundant through the technology of recorded sound. Even Murayama saw this functional aspect of the *rensa-geki* as an important characteristic of the form. Writing in 1928, Murayama

¹ Murayama was typical of many in the Proletarian theater movement in seeing the expensive infrastructure of traditional theater as a barrier to proletarian performance. Beginning in the 1920s, Murayama was affiliated with the Trunk Theater, a troupe that actually traveled to striking workers and other local venues to provide entertainment and encouragement rather than make audience members travel to a theater. His avant-garde group MAVO advocated for what they termed the “anti-theaters movement” which along with a radical rethinking of the performer-audience relationship, sought to put performances near mines and places easily accessible to workers. In the December 1931 issue of *Engeki shinbun (Theater News)*, Murayama proposed to create theater spaces in non-traditional venues with easily accessible materials. Likewise, he championed the practice popularized in the West of creating “living newspaper” performances, so even lack of scripts would not act as a barrier to workers staging proletarian theater.

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1992), 146.

argued that a key benefit of *rensa-geki* was its ability to overcome fundamental technical limitations of both film and theater. Film, after all, had greater control over both the space and time of the performance. It could pan out to show a wider perspective than the stage, and it could zoom in closer than even the best seats in a live theater house; it could double expose film; it could speed up and slow down action; and it could realistically represent scenes such as car chases or airplanes in flight that would be costly, dangerous, or impossible on a real stage. A crowded theater for instance is not the place where one might want to play with real fire, a notion that was ironically highlighted by the fact that at least one factor in the decline of the *rensa-geki* after the 1910s was regulatory concern over fire safety, which limited venues for performance.³ Other critics have noted that *rensa-geki* allowed for a more seamless performance by facilitating instantaneous scene changes by means of a simple cut as opposed to closing the curtain and having stage hands perform the change in real time.⁴ Conversely, Murayama noted that live theater was able to employ both the sound and color that were absent from the screen at the time. In other words, from a technical perspective silent film and theater were perfectly compatible with each other. They were, Murayama noted, a fusion of two performance forms with no drawbacks.⁵ Yet even if silent film was so well suited to a pairing with theater, the advent of recorded sound would at first glance to obviate the need for this technical work around.

It is clear, then, that there is more to these experimentations than just an attempt to overcome technical challenges. After all, mediated and live performances are more intimately imbricated now in the twenty-first century than they have ever been previously. In the nearly eighty years since *Shinsengumi*'s release, theater and other kinds of live performance have become ever more dependent upon recorded and electronically amplified sound, recorded music, and video. As Philip Auslander argues, it can be difficult or impossible to locate the ontological division between liveness and mediation. If all that was gained by combining theater and film was the convenience of technical synergies, then the advent of recorded sound films would have reduced demand for blending live performance with cinema. The notion of a "talkie *rensa-geki*" would have been technologically redundant.

Yet, contrary to this plausible expectation, the re-invention of the *rensa-geki* for the sound era elicited an enthusiastic critical response in the media. In other words, addressing the technical limitations of film was not essentially Murayama's aim in tackling the *rensa-geki* form. In his book *Eiga nyūmon*, which he subsequently republished in excerpt form in *Nippon eiga* in conjunction with the release of *Shinsengumi*, he argued that regardless of the technological advancements that would be made in film, theater would always have liveness (現実感 *genjitsukan*) as a trait

³ Aaron Gerow, *Visions of Japanese Modernity: Articulations of Cinema, Nation, and Spectatorship, 1895-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 179.

⁴ Shibata Katsu 柴田勝, *Jitsuen to eiga rensageki no kiroku* 実演と映画：連鎖劇の記録 (Tokyo: Shibata Katsu, 1982).

⁵ 芸術形式を総合した殆ど欠点のない劇場芸術 (*Geijutsu keishiki wo sōgō shita hotondo ketten no nai gekijo geijutsu*): "a theater art that is a fusion of artistic forms with no with no downsides", in Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義, *Puroretaria eiga nyūmon* プロレタリア映画入門 (Tokyo: Zen'eī Shōbō: 1928), 16.

that could not be duplicated on film.⁶ Both Murayama's writings about *Shinsengumi* and the production's wider critical response demonstrated a new interest in emerging possibilities available in blending liveness with mediation precisely because of the advent of recorded sound in film, as Murayama discusses below. Critics and the promotional materials for *Shinsengumi* cued in on this key feature in the various responses to the work in print media, and the show prompted critical discussion on both sides of the production's generic divide. In other words, the discussion took place in both the theater journal *Engei gahō* and the film journal *Nippon eiga*. The consensus opinion of these critics was that the talkie *rensa-geki* represented something fundamentally new (a "new genre", or 新しいジャンル) and conceptually innovative, and by extension something different from a traditional *rensa-geki*.

Japanese audiences were not alone in their interest in the blending of film and theater, and prewar performances in both Europe and Japan generally took one of two approaches. European avant-garde artists such as Erwin Piscator focused on the fissure between the two forms, relying on juxtaposition and montage to generate meaning.⁷ *Rensa-geki*, on the other hand, tended to strive for narrative continuity and attempted to reconcile what Phelan sees as irreconcilable ontological differences. In the critical discussion about Murayama's 1937 *rensa-geki*, the vocabulary used to describe the interaction of the two elements of live and mediated performance speaks of a meeting of equals. Murayama himself describes film and theater as "extremely close sister arts" (非常に親しい姉妹芸術 *hijō ni shitashii shimai geijutsu*)⁸, while Chiba Akira sees them as "two completely different artistic forms" (全く異なる二つの芸術形式 *mattaku kotonaru futatsu no geijutsu keishiki*).⁹ In both cases, however, *rensa-geki* is seen as representing a "fusion" (結合 *ketsugō*) of these two forms. The discourse in 1937 Japan is notable for not framing the two elements in a hierarchical relationship, as Phillip Auslander has observed is often the case in conceptualizing liveness in relation to mediation. In short, the critical response in both film and theater journals do not generally talk about bringing theater in to film or vice-versa. Thus neither ought to be subordinated to the other, and in the instances when they do see examples of one taking precedence, the critics point this out as an artistic weakness in the production. The elements are seen as having a complementary rather than hierarchical relationship.

But while these writers may have described this relationship as equal in these 1937 discussions, historically *rensa-geki* relegated filmed and live scenes to separate

⁶云うまでもなく映画は何處までも進んでもえいがである以上実際の人物の持つ現実感を持つことができない (*Iumade mo naku eiga ha doko made mo susundemo eiga de aru ijō jissai no jinbutsu no motsu genjitsukan wo motsu koto ga dekinai*: "It goes without saying that no matter how much film progresses, it will never possess more liveness than actual actors"), in *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷ Iwamoto Kenji 岩本憲児, *Nihon eiga to Modanizumu: 1920-1930* 日本映画とモダニズム: 1920-1930 (Tōkyō: Riburo Pōto, 1991).

⁸ Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義, *To-ki-rensa geki "Shinsengumi"* "トーキー連鎖劇「新選組」," in *Gekkan Zenshinza* 月刊前進座 (Nov 12, 1937), 4.

⁹ Chiba Akira 千葉昭, "Engeki to eiga no ketsugo" 演劇と映画の結合, in *Nippon eiga* 日本映画 (Oct 1937), 99.

scenes in practice. In promoting his 1937 production, Murayama spoke about older *rensa-geki* as being a fairly simple progression of clearly demarcated scenes. In other words, live and filmed sequences were closed units separated by a musical interlude played by a flute, a practice borrowed from scene changes in kabuki performance, while the screen was raised and lowered. The live and mediated portions of the narrative formally had little to do with one another, even though they both served to advance the same narrative.¹⁰ On the other hand, both Kubo's and Murayama's *Shinsengumi* talkie *rensa-geki* went out of their way to make these elements interact in their own productions by playing with and overlapping the transitions. Aurality continued to play a key role in the transition between live and film scenes, but it served to draw the elements together rather than divide them as Murayama saw with the flute interlude in previous practice. Thus, rather than obviating the need for live voice, the advent of recorded sound actually allowed for greater artistic possibilities than had previously existed. *Shinsengumi* as a talkie *rensa-geki* has at least four different options to contrast liveness with mediation by overlapping the two during the scene changes. The transitions could (and did) feature the following juxtapositions: live sound with a live image; recorded sound with a live image; live sound with a projected image; or recorded sound with a projected image. Murayama even went further in complicating the interaction between liveness and mediation by combining the visual live and mediation as well as aural live and mediation at the same time, as will be seen below. The fact that Kubo and Murayama embraced the possibilities of mediation with the advent of recorded sound was key to this experiment in liveness, and in this their interests meshed well with the Zenshinza troupe with which they both had long been associated. Although the troupe was made up primarily of trained kabuki actors, they were keenly interested in the possibilities of film—the Zenshinza had only recently opened up a studio that they billed as a “theater and film research center” which they used as rehearsal space for both modes of performance. In addition to their active theater repertoire they also experimented in the production of feature length films.

Just as the choice of this format was a complicated mix of political and artistic ideals, so too the choice of content might not at first glance seem like an obvious one for everyone involved. *Shinsengumi* was perhaps a natural choice for the politically neutral Zenshinza. It was, after all, an outgrowth of the troupe's dual interest in historical dramas and film, as the release of *Shinsengumi* followed the Zenshinza's first period film *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (人情紙風船 *Ninjō kami fūsen*, 1937). Both starred Kawasaki Chōjūrō, and were produced with the help of Tōhō and PTO film companies,

¹⁰ This description overlooks *rensa-geki* practices such as *kageserifu*, in which actors spoke lines of dialog from behind the screen (and of course *benshi* performance in which live performance existed in parallel, or overlap, with film). These alternate methods for contrasting liveness and mediation, which Murayama does not discuss as characteristic of *rensa-geki*, actually foreshadow Murayama's own *Shinsengumi* experiment. However, this was not how Murayama himself remembered productions he saw as representative of the specific form of *rensa-geki*, and it was this construct that he was working against in bringing the talkie *rensa-geki* to the stage.

respectively.¹¹ However, while Murayama and Kubo were both affiliated with the Zenshinza from the founding of the troupe, the choice of subject matter for *Shinsengumi* is perhaps not as obvious for the Marxists Kubo and Murayama as it might have been for the Zenshinza troupe as a whole. The Zenshinza maintained an essentially apolitical stance and is not generally grouped with the proletarian theaters. Yet while the proletarian theater movement is generally remembered for plays set in contemporary times, it was keenly interested in the Meiji Restoration and produced a collection of plays set in the period in and just after 1868. It is true that the historical Shinsengumi oppressed the residents of Kyoto during their time as a police force for the bakufu, and fought to the death to support their feudal values. However, Murayama saw in the group's story a tragic misunderstanding of the historical forces at play, which distracted their revolutionary energies. Rather than focusing on the oppression of the feudal system and using its inherent contradictions to bring about its collapse as they should have done, Murayama says the Shinsengumi mistakenly saw their troubles as deriving from foreign sources that hindered Japan from progressing to the next stage of history.¹² In the 1930s the Japanese leftist movement as a whole was in retreat and engaged in destructive infighting in the face of brutal repression. For Murayama, the Shinsengumi story represents a key point in time where history could have been made other than what it became. Thus, while the choice of the Shinsengumi subject matter might at first glance seem counter-intuitive from the perspective of Kubo's and Murayama's left wing activism, the playwrights saw in this group of feudal holdouts the counter-historical roots of Japan's hoped-for proletarian revolution. In the dark days of the late 1930s (for performance generally and politically resistant movements in particular), the form and content of *Shinsengumi*: A Talkie *Rensa-geki* thus represented a confluence of interests in the Zenshinza's commitment to experimenting with live and mediated performance as well as the two playwrights' leftist political ideology and avant-garde artistic goals. In the face of increasing disunity in the movement, *Shinsengumi* as a talkie *rensa-geki* performed a fusion of artistry and political ideals.

This context helps bring an added emphasis to the otherwise prosaic technical decisions at play in producing this script, and it helps to explain the critical interest in the show. In the three particularly illustrative examples below from Kubo's 1934 and Murayama's 1937 scripts, aurality acts as a key element to probe the questions outlined in the surrounding political and artistic discourse on the talkie *rensa-geki*. Each one of these transitions utilizes sound to create continuity over what might otherwise be irreconcilable logical gaps of time, space, and ontology. This may sound like a burden that this new technology of recorded sound in film could not bear, yet such a view would underestimate the power of mediated sound. As Michel Chion points out, sound among all the available effects at the disposal of the filmmaker has the greatest ability to defy the bounds of logic and disbelief.¹³

¹¹ Kawasaki Chōjūrō 川崎長十郎, "Shinsengumi" zakkō 「新選組」雑考, in *Nippon eiga* 日本映画 (Dec 1937), 528.

¹² Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義, *Jidai eiga no riarizumu* 時代映画のリアリズム, in *Nippon eiga* 日本映画 (July 1937), 269-273.

¹³ Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 239.

The first transition that highlights this particular use of aurality in these two Zenshinza talkie *rensa-geki* comes early in Kubo's 1934 version. The scene recounts the often-told episode in the history of the Shinsengumi where Serizawa Kamo, in a pique, burns down a building in a village they are traveling through. This was an example of the kind of scene that Murayama noted earlier, which would be most realistically and safely represented on screen. Yamanami and Harada, in a film scene, hear an alarm bell sound that alerts them to what Serizawa has done. In this example, the recorded sound that begins in the filmed sequence of the fire continues into the live sequence and connects one temporally contiguous but spatially separate episode from screen to stage.

[On screen] *Yamanami splashes his face with water and cocks his head, listening. "Harada, be quiet." Harada stops singing. The sound of alarm bells. "It's a fire!"[...] The screen fills with a flaming pile of timber. Appearing in the flames, Serizawa stands waving his iron fan with Hirayama. Serizawa says in a loud voice, "If anyone disturbs this fire, I will cut you down" Out of the public bath comes running with kimono half untied or wearing loincloths: Yamanami, Tōdō, Nagakura, Harada. They run out through the hall. Fade out.*

[On the stage] *The alarm bell continues. From the dark stage running along the hanamichi comes Kiyokawa Hachirō. As the curtain rises, Ishizaka Shūzō enters onto the hanamichi, and the spot focuses on the two.*¹⁴

A second scene in Kubo's script utilizes these transitions to fuse a temporal gap. The setting is the day after Kondō has killed Serizawa on the orders of the Aizu Daimyo. On stage, Kondō hears the sound of rain as the scene changes to film, and the following scene is a flashback to when Kondo was working to isolate Serizawa from the power structure of the Shinsengumi. In this scene, the sound of the rain begins just at the end of the live scene, and as Kondō walks out the door and the rain continues across the change into a filmed sequence, the scene that follows is a jump backwards in time. In other words, the aural cue creates continuity across the rupture of a temporal jump. It provides both a conceptual and sensory link as the scene jumps into the past.

Sound of heavy rain.

Kondō: Raining again? Storming just like last night. Immediately after the Hamaguri Rebellion, I and six others who guarded the coffin were quickly summoned to the Aizu Daimyo's residence and were told directly that recently Serizawa's violence had reached the ears of the shogun. He is damaging the reputation

¹⁴ Kubo Sakae 久保栄, "Toki rensa-geki shinsengumi" トーキ一連鎖新選組, in *Kubo Sakae zenshū* 久保栄全集 (Tōkyō: San'ichi Shobō, 1961), 341.

of our group, and I was ordered to kill him. That night I secretly received the order, it was a heavy summer rain.

*While he says these lines, the frame closes, and only Kondō's figure remains. Using an effect, this figure changes to a filmed image. Gradually, his figure is layered over by the image of Kondō wearing a kappa. The evening rain pours down incessantly.*¹⁵

The end of Murayama's production sees not a bridging of temporal or spatial divides but rather a fusion of disparate genres. Kondō has been captured and the Shinsengumi has been obliterated. As he is being taken away, there is a projected image of him simultaneous to the live actor appearing on stage (played in both instances by Kawasaki Chōjūrō). The recorded image then speaks in place of the live actor, drowning out his voice with the final laugh.

Kaga: We will go together to our main camp. Walk!

Kondo, who is bound, stands up and begins to walk.

Kondo: I will not be defeated by these cowardly fools. There will undoubtedly be a chance to escape. I will think of something! Have no fear, have no fear. Hijikata, I still have tricks up my sleeve. Hahahahaha!

*Kondō on stage, suddenly begins to laugh in concert with Kondō on film. The projected image enlarges and the voice becomes louder, and as the curtain drops, the image is layered over the image on stage (ダブってうつり).*¹⁶

As the final curtain falls, live and mediated sound and image co-exist temporally and spatially through the disturbing blending of live and recorded sound and image. The use of sound in these two productions is particularly noteworthy when compared with Murayama's feature length talkie that was released in tandem with this talkie *rensa-geki*. In the film version, sound is never used in transitions in the way it is in these



Kondo Isami played by Kawasaki Chōjūrō in the final scene of Murayama Tomoyoshi's Shinsengumi. The projected image of Kondo appears on screen at the same time as the actor performing the same scene live.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁶ Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義, *Shinsengumi* 新選組, in *Gendai gikyoku dai 6 kan* 現代戯曲第6巻 (Tokyo: Kawade shobo, 1940), 470.

examples in the *rensa-geki*. Indeed, the *rensa-geki* relied primarily on footage from the movie for its filmed sequences. However, certain scenes were re-filmed and, more importantly, sound was re-recorded specifically for use in the *rensa-geki*. In the feature film version of *Shinsengumi* there are no examples of sound making a bridge across scene changes—while there are instances where incidental sound continues across cuts, these only occur when those cuts are part of the same scene. Thus this use of sound in transitions in the *rensa-geki* is clearly a deliberate choice for this performance mode. In each of these instances, sound functions to create continuities that span space, time, and ontologies.

Having the show end with this striking co-presence forces the issue over the place of liveness in the face of this new technology of recorded sound, and it anticipates the discussion in contemporary performance studies over the ontology of liveness and performance. Peggy Phelan famously holds that performance is inherently un-reproducible, while Philip Auslander contends that the border between mediation and liveness is less clear than most of us might think is obvious.¹⁷ In each of the examples I have shown here, recorded and live sound functions to create continuities over disparate space, displaced time, and across the split of a live/mediated actor. These aural bridges create continuity that would be impossible to create visually, and through sound these productions are asking whether liveness and reproduction can be fused.

This confluence of liveness and mediation bridges rifts that are bigger than simple generic distinctions. They reach across rifts in artistic and political ideologies that come in the context of unprecedented threats to the live from new media and from political pressure. These threats would require fundamental rethinking of political artistic ideologies as a result of this probing of the place of liveness in the performative and political world and the dichotomy between liveness and mediation.

¹⁷ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 1999).