Walter J. Ong
(1912 - 2003)
Orality, Literacy and Modern Media
In this text, Ong discusses the differences between orality and literacy.

Walter Ong starts his argument by saying that in the oral culture there is, by definition, no writing and no awareness of even the possibility of writing. **Words are just sounds.** There are no way to see them, there is no trace.

To literate people like us, this idea is disconcerting.

> reflect on the nature of sound itself.
Sound has a particularity: his special relationship to time compared to the other fields that register human sensations.

All sensation takes place in time whereas sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is evanescent. There is no way to stop it and have it. By definition, sound disappears.

(Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power; it is dynamic.)
In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes.

How to recall?

The solution is an organization of material that has been created to recall

> Think memorable thoughts.

by thinking in mnemonic patterns. Thought must come into being with rhythm and balanced patterns. > Formulas (used permanently, not occasionally)

Formulas are the substance of thought. Impossible to communicate without, waste of time because no thought can be recovered with any effectiveness.
Sound and Interiority

Sound has a relation with time and also has a relationship with interiority. It’s interesting and important because of the interiority of human consciousness and of human communication itself.

Only sound can perceive the interiority of something. Sound comes from the interior of what produces it.

The sound envelope simultaneously from all sides. > Unity, harmony

Interiority and harmony > characteristic of conscience. Individual conscience is internalized, internal and inaccessible to anyone else. The body is the frontier between the inside and the outside, myself and the rest. In orale culture, a word exists only with sound, there is no reference to a text, therefore the sound is directly involved in the existence of being.
Orality  ➔  Literacy

• All this is useful to describe and understand what happened when writing and print reduced the oral-aural world to a world of visualized pages.
SECONDARY ORALITY

Telephone, radio, television...age of Secondary orality is both similar and different from primary orality.

Similar: common sense, concentration of the present moment, use of formulas but writing and print are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well.

This implies the loss of cognitive processes.

The primary orality allowed the secondary orality to look outward, to be spontaneous. But despite their air of spontaneity, these media are totally dominated by a sense of closure which is the heritage of print.
This is what brings me to talk about improvisational theatre. Improvisational theater is a kind of theater that has been around forever (also an important part of the training of the actor). It is a form of theater apart.
Oral culture and improvisational theater are two different things but, they have a common point: The similarity between oral culture and improvisational theater is based on the fact that nothing is presented on a written text, nothing can be saved on matter. Like orality, improvisation does not come from something written. Everything disappears.

In order to function, both oral culture and improvisational theater develop techniques.

Orality

In order to allow people to evolve in their society, they have to recall what they say to each other. For this, as I mention before in the presentation, they develop techniques.

Ong says: « In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. Aides-memoire such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated series of assertions » and « How could you ever call back to mind what you had so laboriously worked out? »

The only answer is: Think memorable thoughts. In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. »

>>> There is therefore the development of a communication technique. The syntax is the media somehow.
I thought talking about improvisational theatre could be interesting because it can be linked with what Walter Ong says about orality and this technique of recalling. Indeed, here, even if it is improvisation, there is a need in having some methods and disciplines, like orale culture did with formulas.

Improvisation is the art of being effective in the moment. This moment. Right now. Keith Johnstone, pioneer of improvisational theatre, worked on creating those « techniques » of theatrical improvisation methods.

The precepts of Johnstone are:

- Tells a story.
- Do not try to be good nor intelligent.
- Do not do too much.
- Be efficient and the audience will perceive it as excellent.
- Take risks and do not be afraid to fall out of inspiration.
- The principles of improvisation are the exact opposite of those we learn in life.
- The fear of the unknown makes us do the grossest errors. The analysis of these errors allows us to move forward.

Other comedians specialized on improvisation talks about « being specific », « saying “Yes, and…” », « playing from the top of his intelligence », « letting go of his inhibitions »…

>>> So an actor doing improvisation have to respect this if he wants to be effective in his, like people in oral culture have to respect the use of formulas if they want to communicate.
Louis and Auguste Lumière

"The arrival of a train at La Ciotat »"
Film challenges what Walter Ong says about the relation of orality and time (« Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. »).

Sound is an important part of cinema.

« For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to take an impression of time. And simultaneously the possibility of reproducing that time on screen as often as he wanted, to repeat it and go back to it. He acquired a matrix for actual time. Once seen and recorded, time could now be preserved in metal boxes over a long period (theoretically for ever). »

_Sculpting in time_ (chapter III) by Andrei Tarkvosky

(Soviet film-maker, writer, film editor, film theorist, theatre and opera director.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dgLEDdFddk
TO CONCLUDE...

Writing is probably the best invention of humanity, but we must be aware that the oral culture, so a culture without writing and no awareness of even the possibility of writing, has brought a lot of things to the way we communicate today, and our way of conceiving art today.
Question:

Today, with the arrival of new media that are always more connected to our body (as an extension of our body), can we say that we are going to come back to a situation in which the only media is our body itself, like during the time of orality culture when communication was based in the way people were talking to each other?
SOURCES

- Keith Johnstone - Improvisational theater
- Lumière’s Brother’s - «The arrival of a train at La Ciotat » (1895)