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1-1-2004

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The definitive version was published in *Kunst-Stimmen*, 2004, pp. 85-100.

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John Durham Peters

The Voice and Modern Media*

I would like to offer a few basic observations about the voice and modern media. These will come in the form of theses, honoring the land of Luther, Marx, and Benjamin.

1. The voice is at the center of the sciences and not only the Geisteswissenschaften.

As we reflect on art voices, it is good to place ourselves on the largest intellectual map and reflect that the study of the voice is common to the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and natural sciences. The voice functions as art precisely because of its happy links with other zones. The voice is a preeminent object of interdisciplinary interest. Ever since Aristotle privileged the voice in his writings on the soul, rhetoric, politics, and poetics, it has been at the center of the curriculum for physicists and poets, singers and sociologists, dramatists and democratic theorists. For the humanities, the voice is a founding interest, as the source of speech, song, and poetry. The humanities are, at their core, voice arts. “Voice” has become the characteristic term for a distinct literary or artistic style. For the social sciences, the voice is an implicit condition for the very possibility of sociability and human cooperation and having a voice is a chief metaphor for political power: in democracy, the ‘voice of the people’ is the ‘voice of God’, and oppression is widely held to ‘silence’ people. The natural sciences and fine arts, in contrast, focus on the materiality of the voice, its anatomy, physiology, acoustics, and aesthetics. Almost every field – from otolaryngology and physiology to physics, engineering, and speech pathology, from religion and philosophy, classics and comparative literature, to rhetoric, literature, and theater arts, from political science and law to history, anthropology, and linguistics – has its own take on the voice. Out of this welter of approaches, we can distill five main conceptions of the voice around which various academic fields of inquiry cluster. First, the voice is a metaphor of power. Theology

* Published in Kunst-Stimmen, eds. Doris Kolesch and Jenny Schrödl. Berlin: Theater der Zeit Recherchen 21 (2004), 85-100.

treats the voice of God (“in the beginning was the word”), politics the voice of the people, and military science the command of the general. Cultural studies, critical theory, and feminism all see voice as an index of the empowerment of oppressed groups in society. Here the physiological or acoustic faculties of voices are neglected in favor of a metaphoric view of the voice as agency, authority, and power. Perhaps this conception grows out of the near-universal human experience of infancy of vocal magic: the child wants (lacks) something, and by an exertion of the lungs and a playing of one’s pipes, the need is met: the mother, the breast, the other appears. The voice calls people and objects into presence: that vocal exertion changes the inner and outer world is one of the first and deepest experiences most humans have of power. The cry, the command, the shriek, the request are all ways that people summon the world to their needs.

Second, the voice is taken as a medium of communication. Here again, it is not the unique qualities of vocal production that are of interest but rather its carrying capacity as a signal system. In nonverbal communication studies, paralinguistics refers to all that is not linguistic in speech, and chief among these is vocalics, the speed, breathiness, pitch, pacing, pausing, etc. of the voice. In classics and African-American studies, there has been a huge interest in orality and literacy: in classics, the key question has been what happens when the muse learns to write, and in African-American studies, the blend of oral forms within literate culture in black speech styles and music; the first deals with pre-literacy, the second with post-literacy.¹ Here orality and literacy are treated as two different modes of consciousness, communication, and even being. Here the voice is understood as one of the chief media of communication, a competitor with writing and printing. In phonology, voicing is one of several possible distinctive features of language: the final phoneme of *buzz* is ‘voiced’, and that of *bus* is not. Here voice means simply phonation. In all their diversity these fields treat the voice as a medium or marker of communication, a carrier of distinctive features.

Third, the voice is taken as vehicle of art and aesthetic expression. If the second approach is interested in the sorts of signals it can carry, this approach is interested in what happens when information is surpassed by sound, when a surfeit or absence of semantic meaning derails the informational function. We have already mentioned the ineffable quality of voice as personal style in literature and art. The art of elocution has made the nonverbal qualities of the voice not only into a means of sharing meaning but as a whole range of gesture and emphasis. In the ancient world the exercises prescribed for preparing the voice for public performance in the

theater or assembly were intimidatingly gymnastic: the aged Sophocles is said to have died of exertion while practicing a part for the theater, and the emperor Nero was known for his fussy dietary regimen designed to support his voice, and in this, he was no exception to the classical grooming of the voice as the chief instrument of public appearance. Vocal performance, in music, oratory, and theater, including dialect coaching, focuses on the sensuous pull of the voice as such, its own inherent beauty, as well as its effectiveness or range. The art of singing is of course the most venerable and detailed tradition of vocal discipline. The system of voice types for singing (there are at least eight different kinds of soprano, for instance) suggests the importance of flavor and color for its own sake over any intent to communicate semantic meaning. Sound design and architectural acoustics likewise seek to enhance voices as audible art-works and performances. One of the most universal pleasures for the human species is the sound of a voice. (Every time I hear my favorite singers or speakers, I am immediately tempted to forget all the compunctions about phonocentrism that Derrida has induced in voice-scholars since.)

Fourth, the voice is treated as a physical (or physiological) organ. Here all the metaphors are put on hold, and the interest is in lungs and throats and sinuses, in air-flow, vocal folds, oscillations, resonance, even moisture, polyps, and mucus. The voice is a core interest in acoustics, anatomy, physiology, otolaryngology, and speech pathology. Consulting a few issues of *The Journal of Voice* will show just how vital and diverse is the research in the natural and health sciences on human and other kinds of voices. As a sound producer and as an organ, the voice poses many fundamental problems about physics and physiology, such as chaos, biofeedback, and layering of functions. The voice as a sound-maker turns out to be very complicated to model in all its distinctness and voice simulation at a concert-level quality is extremely difficult; communications engineers who worry about the intelligibility of voices over the telephone lines, for instance, have historically been more interested in getting signals across than reproducing the full range of the voice as an acoustic organ. The explosion of metaphors about voice in the humanities and social sciences since the 1960s has gone together with an explosion of research on the voice itself in the natural and health sciences, but curiously, there has been little cross-fertilization between scholars interested in the voice as power or communication and those interested in it as a bodily organ. There has, however, been much cross-over between artists and scientists of the voice, perhaps often because of a common interest in song, an interdisciplinary

confluence that goes back at least to the great Hermann von Helmholtz, who studied the acoustics, physiology, *and* aesthetics of the voice in a remarkable work of synthesis. Finally, the voice can be understood as a love-object, a site for the collection of desire. (Perhaps we should also mention hate-object: think of the reactions some people have to yodeling or American Country Music.) If we follow Plato in the *Symposium* that eros is always betwixt-and-between and that desire means lack rather than a fullness of possession, there can be little so erotic as a voice. The voice can get under the skin in a way impossible for any other kind of touch. Especially in the Lacanian branch of psychoanalysis, the voice has been understood as a fetish and fantasy, as a part-object and one of the key sites of desire and horror. Feminist studies of cinema have also implicated the voice as a site where the work of sexual differentiation is most clearly, and most routinely, accomplished. That most of us instantly think that voices have genders is actually a rather curious fact. On average, men's and women's voices are different, and on average, the vocal tract for men is longer than that of most women so as to produce voices that are about one octave lower. Even so, within the natural and unnatural range of variation, gender categories saturate the voice perhaps as much or more than any other part of the body – face, hands, hair, or posture. How the voice is gendered is a specific puzzle of a larger issue: How do bodies get into voices? And how do voices get out of bodies?

This too simple reduction of approaches to the voice – as power, medium, art, organ, and eros – could perhaps be reduced even further by collapsing the first and the last (eros is a kind of power), and the second and the fourth groupings (the organic properties of the voice are the medium of its communication capacity). Whether there are three or five or some other number of categories grouping intellectual approaches to the voice, it is clear that the voice remains the contested heart of learned debate in many fields.

2. The most revolutionary developments in modern media may lie less in the visual than in the acoustic register.

The image has always been potentially storable: drawings and paintings are as old as *homo sapiens*. Though writing and the alphabet and musical notation were all motivated in some sense by a desire to capture and store the sound of the voice, only in the late nineteenth century, with

Edison's phonograph among other sound-inscribing devices, does the capturing of time, the recording of temporal sequence, become possible. Images can be frozen in time, sounds cannot. Sound exists uniquely in time. Indeed, its instantaneous dissipation is a condition of its intelligibility and audibility. Thank heavens for the disappearance of sound! If sounds did not fade into the void but kept vibrating forever, we would live in a hell in which no speech could be understood and no music heard: the cacophony would grow into a muddy drone, brown noise instead of white noise. Sound is the ultimate in self-sacrifice, dissolving to give way to the next sound: the sonic marking of time is only possible because of sound's incessant dying. Music, especially, gives us great lessons about the shape of time and the constant succession of the present moment. (Sound's temporal character may explain a general preference among some thinkers for acoustic metaphors for being, something that is particularly marked in Heidegger.) Phonetic writing does not store sound, it encodes instructions for vocal discipline (where to place your tongue and lips), leaving enormous openness for variability in oral performance: rarely, and only in the crudest way, can the alphabet make specifications of pitch, tempo, prosody, dialect, etc. If modernity is the story of rupture or break, it is hard to find a better one than 1878, where a voice, for the first time, became immortal on the phonograph. It is ironic that one of the first possibilities of eternal recurrence was a banal nursery rhyme in Edison's voice: "Mary had a little lamb."

To be sure, long before the phonograph people long dreamed of bottling up voices. The disappearance of the voice is one of the characteristic concerns of the Romantic period, as my colleague Judith Pascoe has suggested. John Keats' "Ode to A Nightingale", for instance, indulges in a fantasy of a voice that lasts across generations of time.

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.²

The notion of a voice that traverses the spread of time and space – in ancient days and faery lands – is pervasive in romantic poetry and prose. It even shows up in someone few consider a romantic, the mathematician and forerunner of the modern computer, Charles Babbage, in his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1838): “The pulsations of the air, once set in motion by the human voice, cease not to exist with the sounds to which they gave rise”.³ If one had “a larger command over mathematical analysis”⁴ it would be possible to trace such impressions without possessing infinite intelligence. Such a being would be able to trace events backwards, to read history by following perturbations back to their causes.

Thus considered, what a strange chaos is this wide atmosphere we breathe! Every atom, impressed with good and ill, retains at once the motions which philosophers and sages have imparted to it, mixed and combined in ten thousand ways with all that is worthless and base. The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as with the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle, the testimony of man’s changeful will.⁵

The atmosphere itself is a vast recording medium for voices in their infinitesimal tracings, and “the air we breathe is the never-failing historian of the sentiments we have uttered.”⁶ Babbage concludes with a thought that is both dire and hopeful: “No motion impressed by natural causes, or by human agency, is ever obliterated.”⁷ Long before the phonograph, thinkers longed for ways to preserve voices against the erosion of time.

3. The voice is a unique identifier.

Each person’s voice is a creature of the shape of one’s skull, sinuses, vocal tract, lungs, and general physique. Age, geography, gender, education, health, ethnicity, class, and mood all resound in our voices. Anatomically, the voice is set on the most bottlenecked (literally) part of the body, along the passageways of the spinal cord, esophagus, and windpipe – it is a busy highway there, as my colleague Ingo Titze says. This setting makes the voice reflective, in some deep ways, of the body’s being, and hence its preeminent status as the organ of emotion (it is

connected to the limbic system, the fight-flight response that dwells in all of us at the most animal level). Our voice is at once the part of us that is our own and most alien to us. We all know people who love the sound of their own voices, as we all do to some degree. Hearing our voice in our heads is in some sense an assurance that we are alive, a form of auto-affection as Derrida, following Rousseau, calls it. But who likes the sound of their own voices on tape or a telephone answering machine? (I hear my brother, not me, in recordings of my voice.) Nothing quite provides the ontological security and comfort like the sound of your own voice resonating so richly inside your head, just as nothing is quite so uncanny as the sound of your recorded voice, so rudely wrenched away from its familiar habitation. “What I say goes”⁸, as Steven Connor says. The voice, though uniquely our own, is also uniquely strange. In the voice our individuality is made of the most evanescent stuff. We are always broadcasting our voices, projecting our selves constantly, offering a bit of who we are to the world with every sound we make. Even sighs, coughs, sniffs, and breathing are individual signs of embodied being. I find the whistling flute sound my wife makes when she has a cold perfectly lovely. This is not to say that the voice is the unique sign of the soul; it is to say something more indisputable, that it is the unique sign of the body.

The voice, together with the face, is both the oldest and the perennially newest form of human expression. Voices are full of meaning and richness but do not operate according to linguistic codes of signification. *Stimme* is not the same as *Sprache*: how is it that a couple of sounds from a great singer or actor can be so saturated with meaning and yet not say anything? Charles Sanders Peirce made the key point that vagueness is often a condition of meaningfulness. ‘Hello’, ‘goodbye’, ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘thank you’, ‘I am’, ‘it was’, are the most mundane of all terms, and the most powerful. An open, expressionless face may not send any kind of message, but what strange wealth of meaning lies there. The voice, like the face, operates at a level of recognition rather than verbal logic. It taps something more primordial, the existence of a creature who shares the same mortal fate you do, a being that breathes through a throat.

4. Modern media disembody and reembody the voice.

The voice in an age of electronic media becomes removable from the body, from a world of ostensive reference, from the limits of singularity, from its original spatial signature, tempo, intonation – with all kinds of uncanny results. We drop CDs into our players, chat on our cell phones, and turn on the radio without much thinking about it, and have alarm clocks and cars that talk to us, but it is profoundly weird at some level to live in a world full of so many voices without bodies (as Rudolf Arnheim called it in the 1930s of the radio) – a condition that was historically subscribed only to gods, devils, angels, and ghosts. The telephone allows interaction without presence; the microphone extends the voice at close range at a great distance; the phonograph allows, as we have seen, writing without a superintending author; the radio allows intimate address to millions of people simultaneously; and cinema and television put voices and bodies together again, with only partial success. (When the visual and audio tracks do not match, as in dubbing and lip-synching, it is often comic: compare the hilarity of a child playing peek-a-boo, who hears the voice but sees no face, and then sees the face as well. This primordial suturing of image and sound is perhaps part of the pleasure of film and television.)

Modern media leave the voice in a curious limbo between body and machine, text and performance, animal and angel, singular event and endless repetition. When Thom Yorke of Radiohead sings, to take one example, it is unclear whether he is to be heard as a man, angel, machine, demon, or animal, or all variously. The capacity to store, distort, and remix voices creates curious kinds of unprecedented sacrilege. A scandal erupted in Great Britain recently when a 78-rpm record was found in the attic of the deceased actor Norman Shelley, who, it turns out, had served as voice for some of Winston Churchill's most famous war-time addresses broadcast over the BBC. The House of Commons, where Churchill gave the speeches, was not yet wired for sound during World War II, and he was too busy to make studio recordings of the speeches so an actor was chosen, in consultation with Churchill, to record the speeches for popular consumption. Discovery of the 78-rpm record somehow threatened the huge impact his speeches were long held to have on British resolve by charges of imposture. Evidently, the fact that the voice was persuasive was not enough: it had to come from the right body. Even if the voices of Churchill and Shelley had been completely indiscernible, some would still be outraged at the body-substitution. As Connor shows, the concern of voices divorced from the body –

ventriloquism – has a hoary history, and Churchill’s lip-synching is only one of many historical slips between sound and source.⁹ That many people were outraged shows the depth of the intuition that voices belong in particular bodies and not others.

5. The Lines Between Vocal *Aufzeichnung* and Performance are Blurring.

Recording technology makes possible the paradox of an identically repeatable performance. Every performance is unique and unrepeatable in some ways, just as every signature is both unique and identical. The aura of uniqueness clings to performance. Performance is singular and recording is multiple. A recording of a performance does strange things. We can listen to Astrud Gilberto or Elvis Presley sing the same song in the exact same way in the intimacy of our private spaces (home, personal stereo, computer) – something impossible when almost all music was performed live, before Edison. Recorded performances can then become new original material for transcription or editing, that is, for new performances such as the Grey Album (Jay-Z’s a cappella vocal tracks plus heavily edited Beatles White Album), mash-ups, or the long posthumous career of Tupac Shakur, whose vocals keep getting updated with new musical arrangements. Recorded performances become texts today, just as texts have long become performances.

Consider Stephen Hawking’s computer-operated voice synthesizer, which he controls by minute manipulations of two fingers.¹⁰ His voice machine stores around 3000 words and he can produce about ten words per minute. It lacks Hawking’s preferred Home Counties accent, and sounds too American for his taste, though he will sometimes get it to produce a Scottish burr. (Hawking eventually married the wife of the man who designed it, which closes his machine voice in a typically strange amorous circle.) Interaction in real time with Hawking is all but impossible. There are always delays between call and response, and in question and answer sessions after his lectures, pauses can take as long as ten minutes. Some times he will answer quickly with a single word, and other times he will wait five minutes and then answer with a single word as a joke. Hawking has willingly made himself a poster child for cyberspace, a rolling advertisement for the benefits of being wired and disembodied. He did ads for British Telecom and was the representative who negotiated with Bill Gates to build a complex in the city of Cambridge. He

“lives to communicate” as his BT ad said, and he even gave some free publicity: “I am Intel inside.” Hawking fuses distant and proximate communication: his voice works at the speed of e-mail. Dialogue can only ever be a series of one way turns with him. Is hearing a lecture from Hawking an experience of the live or the recorded? Can you ever hear anything from him but a lecture? Here is an example where interpersonal and computer mediated communication, conversation and broadcasting, are impossible to tell apart. It’s unclear if all this makes him fitter and happier... Hawking is an example where performance and *Aufzeichnung*, to borrow the terms of the conference, are indistinguishable. It’s unclear if this makes us fitter, happier.

Keats wrote, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter”¹¹ but what about unheard voices? Recently NASA announced a technology that does not require vocal utterance for people to communicate their thoughts. Sensors attached under the chin and on each side of the Adam’s apple pick up the nervous signals sent by the brain to the vocal cords and tongue so that people may form potential words, as if they were going to speak, without needing to make any sound. The sensors can read the musculature without ever audibilizing. Six words have so far been recognized reliably: stop, go, right, left, alpha, and omega – a curious list that blends basic terms of spatial orientation with the beginning and ending (being-in-the-world does belong together with genesis and apocalypse). Using a matrix, people can spell out the entire alphabet, allowing the disabled, for instance, to communicate, search the internet, or otherwise speak without breath or sound, lips, face or ears. Obviously this kind of technology might prove a great help for astronauts, the disabled, and others who cannot communicate in situations of normal presence. We continue to approach the condition Freud called “prosthetic gods”.

For the wealthier portions of humanity who communicate with interpersonal technologies human and machine voices routinely blur. Sonic simulations of our friends and loved ones’ voices jump into our ears from small electrical gadgets we hold in our hands: nothing is so strange, or so common, as talking on the telephone. If we care for people who are distant, we are consigned to care about phones and e-mail. Even more strangely, astronomers are discovering that the universe is full of acoustic communications sent at a distance. A sound was recently discovered emanating from the Perseus Cluster, a black hole, at 57 octaves below middle C, or as best as I can calculate it, one sound wave every 256,000,000,000,000 seconds! (This is 1 over 2 to the 48th power of a hertz, if we assign middle C 512 Hz for ease of calculation.) How a sound can exist that has oscillated only about 1600 times in the entire history of the universe is hard to fathom; perhaps to

very old and long-lived intelligences, this is the music of the spheres. The voice of this black hole makes the lowest bass in any choir sound like an inaudible cicada. Sometimes the term ‘hearing voices’ is taken to be a sign of mental disturbance but don’t we all hear voices constantly? The isle, as Shakespeare said, is full of noises. This is the point of the name of a post-rock band like Radiohead – modern media are themselves schizophrenic. The past, aliens, whales, black holes – everything seems to have a voice lately.

6. A key innovation in modern media, characteristically with photography and the phonograph, is the recording of contingent, bodily details.

Some media historians treat writing as an ancient innovation that made civilization possible as if that were the end of the story. The nineteenth century saw the biggest revolution ever in writing, in new varieties of graphic practices especially light writing (photography) and voice writing (phonography). Both, unlike the previous practices of painting or writing, allow for the recording of contingent details that were not intended by the author. Everything in writing previously had to pass through the grid of the symbolic, but analog media like the phonograph and photograph allow a different relationship to the real. Benjamin spoke of the “tiny spark of contingency” in the photograph and Edison’s phonograph liberated the larynx from the logos, from the duty to make linguistic sense when it is recorded. Sighs, snorts, yawns, laughs, whispers, vocalizations of all sorts are after 1878 start to become subject to recording, just as are clouds, sneezes, water droplets, or horse’s steps with the camera. Writing, we might say, is cooked, phonography is raw. The real, whatever it is, can now break through its grids in all its jaggedness and fractal impossibility and imprint itself upon paper. Accidental details become essential details for authenticity.¹² Analog media are physiological media. They do not partake of the abstraction of writing or the printing press, but rediscover archaic, primal modes of human interaction. The camera discovers the face, the phonograph discovers the voice, film discovers the body in motion. Such media take apart and reassemble sensory order and bodily experience. This was McLuhan’s point about the reversion of new media toward older media.

I sometimes ask my students to identify which medium of communication Americans spend the most money on annually. They usually guess newspapers, books, cable, movies, magazines, etc.

In fact, American outspend on telephones by a factor of five over all other media, over \$350 billion annually, and surely ratios are similar in Germany. The voice remains the most prized medium in an age offering many other modes – the text of e-mail, the image of photography, the handwriting of a letter, the data of a file. Communication expenditures on voice might be exceeded only by those on travel – that is, if we counted transportation as the prerequisite for physical proximity, the body being the most important of all media of communication. Voice is the next best thing to being there in person. Its physiological sensitivity provides meanings that the word alone (say in e-mail) cannot carry. Bodily presence has not been surpassed as something prized, even if it's modified and distanced in its electronic setting. Of course the body and the voice provide no guarantees of authenticity and truthfulness, but they do have a bandwidth of meaning not available to other modes. New media do not pass the body by or make it obsolete; they extend it and supplement it. We might call this the archaism of new media. The latest media do not surpass the old media of face, voice, presence: they return to and reinforce them. Handwriting, long predicted to go the way of the dinosaurs in a QWERTY world, has a new lease on life thanks to hand-held devices (whose owners must be trained to write the proper script); computers, cars, and house appliances can be voice activated; and cell phones are equipped with cameras so that we can talk face to face. The blurring ('convergence') of media continues apace, and the body remains at the center of them all. In the midst of all the electronic gadgetry sit the old positivities, primordial modes of communication such as the face, voice, hand, and gesture.

7. Modern voice media allow for what I call the revenge of the consonant.

Consonants cannot exist in purity without voicing. They are limit points, mathematical asymptotes, abstractions of notation. The only pure B or P or D or T or G or K exists as an alphabetic mark, like a point or line in mathematics. Acoustically, consonants can exist only as syllables. The radical novelty of the alphabet was to turn its back on the dynamic world of sound and speech to the static world of notation and paper. A syllabary system, as in Japanese, does not imagine consonants as self-standing, voice-free creatures. In his grammar of the Hebrew language, Spinoza treated consonants and vowels in a metaphysical way: "Vocales apud Hebraeos non esse literas; & ideo apud Hebraeos vocales literarum animae appellantur, & literae

sine vocalibus corpora sine animā.”¹³ Vowels have long been celebrated as the spirit and voice (literally) of speech and there is a long tradition of vowel mysticism (Vokalmystik). Comparing the Jews, who did not write vowels, with the moderns in his *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, J. G. Herder called vowels “the hinges of language”: “Bei uns sind die Vokale das Erste und Lebendigste und die Thürangeln der Sprache; bei jenen werden sie nicht geschrieben.”¹⁴ Novalis used vowels to exemplify the principle that distance romanticizes: “Die Philosophie ist die Prosa. Ihre [Natur] Konsonanten. Ferne Philosophie klingt wie Poesie – weil jeder Ruf in die Ferne Vokal wird. [...] So wird alles in der Entfernung Poesie – Poem. Actio in distans. Ferne Berge, ferne Menschen, ferne Begebenheiten usw. alles wird romantisch.”¹⁵ Later studies in Gestalt psychology confirmed his finding: at increasing distances from the source of speech, consonants cease to be audible and everything turns into vowels. F. W. J. Schelling gave us the fullest version of vowel mysticism: “Denn der ewige Geist spricht die Einheit oder das Wort aus in die Natur. Das ausgesprochene (reale) Wort aber ist nur in der Einheit von Licht und Dunkel (Selbstlauter und Mitlauter).”¹⁶ Just as all things are a mix of light and darkness, so each uttered word is a blend of vowel (a self-sounder) and consonant (a co-sounder). Vowels are beloved because, as Novalis says, they project. They carry across distance. They are the hardest part of singing, since vowels involve not only color but also pitch. Choirs must tune their vowels, but they must also work diligently on consonants for the sound not to be muddy. (Many of the key articulators occur at high frequencies – the sibilants s, f, th are above 2000 Hz – so that is another reason for loss.) Consonants are the articulatory gravel of the voice, the incidental frictions the vocal tract produces.

The *voce robusto*, the singing style that developed especially for the male voice in the early nineteenth century, is all about projection, an unamplified voice that can carry in a crowded and large concert hall. It involves a stylized articulation for projection that many audiences today often reject as affected and artificial. The microphone creates a revolution in singing styles, popular ones at least, starting in that key period, the late 1920s, when cinema is learning to talk and radio is exploding. The microphone amplifies the proximate voice. The mic’d voice, starting with crooners, is capable of projecting what never would have carried in a concert hall setting: the little tremors, the sighs, the male falsetto. The microphone makes audible a vocal range that historically would have required not just physical proximity, but intimate contact, the distance of a mother or lover. Voices sing to us publicly, not with an impersonal *voce robusto*, but sighing

and emoting as if they were 50 cm away. Pillow talk becomes available on a mass scale.¹⁷ The microphone allows for an “auditory close-up”, as I believe Arnheim was the first to call it 70 years ago. The kinship of camera and microphone practices is deep. A peculiar kind of uncanny body is implied by such recorded voices with their intangible projection, a body without touch yet with acoustic traces of breath, saliva, warmth, pronunciation – this concert of teeth, tongues, lips, nasal cavities, epiglottis, vocal tract, lungs, and diaphragm. The microphone and the radio are perhaps not the origin of mass communication, where one person addresses many, but rather its demise, where one person can speak or sing to many as if they were all individuals.¹⁸

8. Bodies imply voices, and voices imply bodies – including bodies politic.

The voice is the king’s second body. There is an ancient connection between royalty and singing: King David, Odysseus, the Emperor Nero. In modern times, the relation goes the other way: Elvis is the King, Frank Sinatra the Chairman of the Board, Bruce Springsteen the boss, Ma Rainey the queen of the blues, Benny Goodman the king of swing, among many others. (*Meistersinger* may be a redundancy.) Singers stand in for peoples and power. Brudda Iz is the voice of Hawaiian nationalism, Bob Marley of pan-African liberation, Johnny Cash of left-wing populism. All political leaders since the 1920s, if not before, have necessarily been vocalists in some sense: Adolf Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, or Ronald Reagan. Modern sound-recording media, again, are physiological: they magnify and amplify the body in its details. The voice figures bodies, both bodies mortal and bodies politic, and eminent vocalists drip with erotic and political power.

9. The voice, as Mladen Dolar points out, offers not only metaphysical reassurance, but metaphysical (or erotic) threat.

The voice may stand for self-presence, as Derrida noted, but also for the threat of otherness, of loss of self. The voice threatens impregnation. Kurt Schwitters, who was certainly among the twentieth century’s most interesting vocalists, wrote a funny little story about radio around 1930.

The strongest man in the world announced that he would “hinein funken” on the radio. Nine months later, all the women of the world give birth. *Funken* is a term that an English-language reader can’t help but find resonant in the context of this story due to its closeness to the common English vulgarism for the sex act; George Clinton of Parliament Funkadelic picks up on this tradition of funk: they “do it to you in your eardrum.” *Funk*, which is still the main German word for radio (a mobile phone is a *Funktelefon* or more commonly a *Handy*), preserves the early radio notion of the spark and suggests a contagious transmission of some sort. This transmission follows in more venerable models, such as Mary becoming pregnant, as St. Augustine said, through the ear by the Holy Ghost. The radio as *Empfangsapparat*: the word itself almost suggested the pun of the story to him. The passivity of the ear threatens feminization (Plato already).

Consider the words of a late 1920s popular song called “Die schöne Adrienne”:

Manche Maid, wenn schon Schlafenszeit
steigt ins Bettchen empfangsbereit
und sie genießt mit dem Ohr ihren Lieblingstenor
horizontal, ideal.

Here again one hears the potentials in the wonderful German term *empfangen*. (Hitler’s radio receivers were called *Volksempfänger*.) And it is not accidental that it was a tenor! The three tenors have found global success, but could one imagine the three basses? Men who sing high, like women who sing low, hit the angelic tones of what Michel Poizat calls the “transsexual voice”¹⁹. These vocal ranges, betwixt-and-between the genders, reach toward the angelic. As Goethe said: “Und jene himmlischen Gestalten/ sie fragen nicht nach Mann und Weib.”

10. The voice is an organ whose performance sustains the attitude of witnessing.

Witnessing requires presence in the sense of time less than space. Witnessing always concerns the *hic et nunc*, here and now, Hier und Jetzt.²⁰ The present moment dissipates (Hegel).

Everything about the present that seems so obvious – I am here, now, with you, today, in Berlin –

will vanish tomorrow. And I don't know what about the present will prove fruitful tomorrow. Non-expert witnessing involves gathering traces of the real, relics, tiny sparks of contingency. What color shirt did the man have on, did the glove fit? The witness is always necessarily vulnerable (compare the passivity of the ear); it is deeply dangerous to be a witness: it can ruin your life. Liveness is not only ideological, it has a root in the nature of time: not being there, you can miss the event. To be there is to be awake to potential catastrophe, emergency, apocalypse. You watch every second of the game because you don't want to miss being a witness to history. In a second the penalty kick scores or misses. To be at a live performance of music or theater means the possibility of imperfection, of mistakes, of bits of mortality, of hearing the voice strain or crack. Because time moves in one direction (an outgrowth of the second law of thermodynamics) we are all necessarily witnesses. The voice only exists in real time: hence its eminent value for being witnessed as a performance. The voice's unique temporality and embodiment makes it much more "der Angstschrei der Endlichkeit", as Hegel put it. The voice is a paradigm of the event, because it comes to an end. All events must end; texts can live on indefinitely.

11. The debate about the voice comes down to the question of fetishism.

Witnesses, like collectors, must be fetishists. They must find in peripheral details the central items of interest. Derrida's critique of phonocentrism, in its austerity and disgust with fetishism, is remarkably similar to an earlier theorist of writing, Theodor W. Adorno, who directly complained about "Stimmenfetischismus". He laments that in culinary music *Sinn* and *Geist* switch places. His whole argument is exceedingly strenuous. He offers the perfect iconoclastic critique of the voice: it becomes valued for its own sake. The sensuousness of a particular voice, its "grain" as Barthes would say, is for Adorno not something to be admired as such; in general he is a foe of timbre and of color, deemed by him mere culinary effects. He wants the writing to break through, just as does Derrida.²¹ I agree with the critique in mind but not practice. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. I still yield before a beautiful voice. In western metaphysics the voice may be falsely attributed presence and wholeness; Derrida's critique is well taken, especially as a critique of Husserl; but, since voice is always anchored to acoustics and anatomy,

to the particular passages of bone and muscle in particular bodies, and hence to the short lifespan of mortal individuals, it will still always expose the inner outer touch of the other, if not as fullness, as fragment, if not as perfection, as reaching. The voice, especially the sung voice, discloses not a metaphysics of presence but an erotics of presence. In the end I say, two cheers for fetishism.

¹ See Havelock, Eric: *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, New Haven 1986, and Rose, Tricia: *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Hanover 1994.

² Keats, John: “Ode to A Nightingale”, in: Vendler, Helen: *The Odes of John Keats*, Cambridge/London 1983, p. 74–76.

³ Babbage, Charles: *The Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment*, p. 35, in: *The Works of Charles Babbage*, ed. by Martin Campbell-Kelly, London 1989.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸ Connor, Steven: *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford 2001, p. 3–43.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ White, Michael/Gribben, John: *Stephen Hawking: A Life in Science*, London 1998, p. 266–268.

¹¹ Keats, John: “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, in: Vendler, p. 114–115.

¹² Ellis, John: *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, London 2000.

¹³ Spinoza, Benedictus de: *Opere*, Vol. 1, Heidelberg 1925, p. 287.

¹⁴ Herder, Johann Gottfried: *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, München/Wien o. J., p. 15.

¹⁵ Novalis quoted in: *Romantik I*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, Stuttgart 1974, p. 64.

¹⁶ Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph: *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände*, Frankfurt a.M. 1975, p. 58.

¹⁷ See also Brandon LaBelle’s contribution on “pillowtalk” in this volume.

¹⁸ See Scannell, Paddy: *Radio, Television, and Modern Life*, Oxford 1996, chapter 3, and McCracken, Allison: "'God's Gift to Us Girls': Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928-1933", in: *American Music* 17 (Winter 1999).

¹⁹ Poizat, Michel: *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, Ithaca 1992.

²⁰ Peters, John Durham: "Witnessing", in: *Media, Culture and Society* 23.6 (2001), p. 707–724.

²¹ Adorno, Theodor W.: *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt a.M. 2001, p. 15.