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Sounding Off

The Place of Voice in Ubiquitous Digital Media

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Networked communications accord the voice renewed spatial significance. How does the mobile phone influence the use and design of spaces? The conventions for modulating the voice in face-to-face exchanges are well established. But in the case of mobile communications the voice may be raised to abnormal levels. The raised voice overcomes ambient interference, and spatial distance. The voice is also the quintessential means of issuing a summons, a call, "come here," and hence invoking action at a distance, across space. Rousseau, one of the earliest theorists of communication, links voice and space in this way, as amplified in the case of children brought up in the countryside.

> Children scattered about the fields at a distance from their fathers, mothers and other children, gain practice in making themselves heard at a distance, and in adapting the loudness of the voice to the distance which separates them from those to whom they want to speak. (Rousseau, 1957 p.191). 191

Apart from the uncanny imagery of infants scattered across a sonic field, space and voice are linked through concepts of content. According to basic communication theory (Shannon, and Weaver, 1963), words uttered *contain* something: thoughts or meanings, which are packaged and dispatched through the airwaves to a recipient, who unpacks and translates them into thoughts again. By this understanding the voice is just one in an array of imperfect media: voice, text, images, and gestures. The medium is incidental. What counts are the meanings that are conveyed. The acuity of this "conduit metaphor" is now largely derided within media and culture studies. McLuhan asserted that the "medium is the message." Derrida characterizes language as pervaded by the endless referentiality of signifiers. For Derrida, one word refers to another, in infinite regress, and it is impossible to alight on anything as solid as a meaning (Derrida, 1976). Meaning is an artefact in a process of

connections between linguistic fundaments, as a trace left by a moving object, the white foam in the wake of a ship, or the decay of a long echo. The voice does not *contain* meanings, but scatters references.

The reduction of language to a consideration of brute utterance began with Saussure's characterization of language. A phoneme is the basic unit of a word as spoken, the smallest constituent of a syllable, for example the *bilabial plosives* (p sounds) in "pop." Saussure ascribes huge significance to the subtle differences in phonetic constitutions of words. Even more important than the phonemes is the differences they invoke.

> The sound of a word is not in itself important, but the phonetic contrasts which allow us to distinguish that word from any other. That is what carries the meaning. (Saussure, 1983 p.116)

For Saussure, the meaning of "pop" resides in its phonetic difference to the rather similar "top," and every other word with which we might compare it. Furthermore, every word (ie sign) stands within the context of a babble of other signs, against which it invokes differences.

> In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. (Saussure, 1983 p.118)

We do not need to delve further into structuralist and poststructuralist language. It is sufficient to note that Saussure grants us license to consider the voice without regard to what is actually being said, ie the meaning of the utterance. What matters about overhearing half-conversations in a railway carriage is not so much to do with who is in the office today, or what is being prepared for dinner, but the fact that we are hearing the voice at all. Voice is a worthy object of study in the concrete, it has characteristics and resonances independently of what the voice is saying, and many of these characteristics are spatial.

1. The Voice at Source

The source of the voice presents as a further spatial consideration. To ask "whose voice?" is to refer to its authority. For Rousseau, the Enlightenment thinker, the young citizen should "be governed by no authority but that of his own reason" (904).

It does not matter who speaks, but that their utterance resides in the realm of reason. According to Kahn, Eddison amplified the Enlightenment ideal by suggesting that the phonograph and its derivative technologies would disperse the authority of the voice to the masses. Having the vote is equated with having a voice.

In our post-Enlightenment era, where authority is under negotiation, current media practice puts the voice of authority off screen. Personalities certainly appear before us, but the voice of the newsreader, commentator, analyst, assumes its most potent authority when it is invisible and disembodied (Doane, 1985). The disinterested and detached voice of reason is substituted by the voice over, or voice off. The question of "whose voice?" is subservient to the spatial consideration of "whence the voice?" Is its source visible or invisible, on-screen or off, from above or below, ahead or behind, inside or out?

The treatment of the voice, devoid of meaningful content, origin, or authority, was explored from the early days of twentieth century music composition. For example, Russolo's 1913 Manifesto, the *Art of Noise,* included the voices of animals and humans (shouts, shrieks, moans, yells, howls, laughs, groans and sobs) in its typology of sounds for composition. The Futurist composers celebrated machine noises, the "nonsymbolic" and the "alogical" (Kirby, and Kirby, 1971), and the voice was part of the repertoire. The Dadaists too, such as Kurt Schwitters, explored the potential of the "spoken sonata," the repeated recitation of letters of the alphabet or syllables, at varying speed and volume, a babble that he would have been content to hear people deride as "meaningless." We will examine several vocal-spatial themes further.

2. The immediacy of voice

For some traditions, the voice gives poor and faltering expression to inner thoughts, that are best communicated in proper, written and logical form. For the early Wittgenstein, the quintessential expression is "the fact," or the logical proposition: "The world is the totality of facts" (Wittgenstein, 1922 p.31). We only really grasp meanings when we can convert thoughts to unambiguous statements, amenable to logical manipulation. There are few adherents to this view now. In fact the reverse usually has greater support. Things written down are fixed, fossilized and impoverished. Thought is too dynamic, rich, and contingent to set into words as print. Contrary to the manipulation of facts, we have conversation, which keeps thought alive. The essence of thought is best captured by question and answer,

dialogue, exchange and argument, which are spoken, not written. This prejudice in favour of the spoken word over written words is well expressed in Rousseau's account of child development, which accords diminishing importance to the various means of communication: babbling, gesturing, talking, singing, writing. The language of infants is "inarticulate, but it is accentuated, sonorous, intelligible" (155). "When we speak, we are expressing our own thoughts; when we sing we are scarcely expressing anything but the thoughts of others (499)." Furthermore, writing pertains to the sense of sight, which is deceptive: "its work is too hasty and on too large a scale to be corrected" (464) by the other senses. "In the voice we have an organ answering to hearing; we have no such organ answering to sight, and we do not repeat colours as we repeat sounds" (464).

Such argument in favour of the voice over text are given further force through McLuhan's characterization of the cultural revolution brought about by print technology. With the invention of writing and print, the organ of sound (the ear) gave way to that of sight (the eye). Prior to this moment our primitive condition was characterized by the incessant babble of voices. This was a condition of immediacy, engagement, a unity with environment, devoid of the discriminations brought about by the later ascendancy of the eye. In this sense the voice has primacy over text as authentic, connected, whole, primal. The priority given to voice is a **spatial** matter. By this reading the voice is closer, and text is distant. The voice is also closer to thought, the functions of our bodies, and breath.

Dadaist, Tristan Tzara posited the mouth as the organ of thought (Kahn, 2001 p.290). For Kahn, this puts the mouth in the place of speaking "unhygienically for the rest of the body" (292). Voice is visceral. Biological evidence supports this primacy of voice in obvious ways, even over other sounds. We are sensitive to vocal frequencies above others. The range of the voice can be mapped on to the range where our hearing is most sensitive.

3. The ecstatic voice

That which is closest seems often to transport us to the most distant. The voice is deployed in the attempt to release mind from body, as if there is a part of us constrained by the flesh. This Neoplatonic ecstasies is manifested in the common practices of humming and chanting, as a means to transcendence. The ephemeral, atmospheric compositions of Pauline Oliveros fall within this category, invoking a kind of "deep listening," which creates "a disorienting and hypnotic blend of space

and sound."[1]

Vovolis draws attention to the transcendent role of the voice in Greek theatre, where performers would wear masks that covered the whole head, with only small apertures for the eyes and mouth. This device amplified the voice, but also occluded the usual means of visual expression, and focused attention on the voice.

> With the mask on, the only alternative left is to listen to the voice and breath of the others and in this way to develop little by little a common rhythm, a common breath, usually based on the breath of the text (Vovolis, 2003 p.77).

In turn, the organization of the amphitheatre, with its concentric and regularly ascending platforms "raises the voice." This not only lifts the head of the speaker, and the volume and clarity of the voice, but lifts the voice to its rightful and transcendent position: the home of the voice in the transcendent sphere. According to some commentators electronic media and virtual reality enable us to transcend this mortal coil, but the voice is already implicated in this.

The tradition is not without warning against the quest for transcendence. The warning is delivered through the agency of voice. The Sirens' high clear voices were to lure sailors to the island from which they would depart as wiser men, only to dash their ship on the rocks (Homer, 1980 p.147). Jehovah imposed a confusion of languages on the primal one-nation that sought to build a tower with its top in the heavens. The uncompleted tower of Babel was a witness to the fact that now "they may not understand one another's speech." (Genesis 11:7). The quest for transcendent unity results in fragmentation, characterized as a confusion of voices.

Kahn portrays the earliest electronic technologies as attempts to deal with transcendence. Eddison, as the founder of the phonograph, thought that his device "could keep the voices of the dead alive" (214), to invoke the "inaudible ranks of the deceased" (214). Subsequent speculations about the technology were fueled by Neoplatonism in Theosophic guise, as commentators thought of the promotion of "organic meaning," and "hearing the future" (219). This tradition of burdening communications technologies with extravagant claims towards utopian conditions is continued in the rhetoric of virtual reality and cyberspace (Coyne, 1999).

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1 http://www.epitonic.com/artists/paulineoliverosstuartdempsterandpanaiotis.html

4. Struck dumb

Vast, spectacular and uncanny spaces can take our breath away, rendering us speechless. The Enlightenment tradition also has a place for silence. We are not only exhorted to speak, but to remain silent. Rousseau advocated that due to the primitive formation of his (sic) thoughts, the small infant should be discouraged from saying too much too soon.

> Let the child's vocabulary, therefore, be limited. It is very undesirable that he should have more words than ideas, that he should be able to say more than he thinks (201).

This is different than saying children should be seen and not heard. As an advocate of the primacy of logical thought and words, Wittgenstein also advocated silence: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent" (189). In the face of the speculative, inconclusive, and alogical, one should not only write nothing, but say nothing. This is an attempt to silence those who would appeal to a philosophy of transcendence. In light of the untenability of the positivist creed, silence is also a response to just about anything of interest. It is in the silences and gaps that intrigue and curiosity reside, an expanded variation of Saussure's characterization of the residency of meaning within phonetic *difference*.

Silence is also a response in the face of the indescribably beautiful, horrific, glorious or profound: that which we commonly describe as unspeakable, or ineffable. The sublime is that which escapes our capacity to imagine or describe: the extent of the constellations, the size of an atom, pure transcendence, complete silence, the big bang, ceasing to be, the terrors of nature. For Kant, the response to the beautiful in nature is calm contemplation, but in consideration of the sublime, one is "moved."

> This movement (especially in its inception) may be compared to a vibration, ie, to a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object (Kant, and Guyer, 2000 p.141).

Our imagination, our capacity to represent or describe, and our words, fail us in the face of the sublime: "What is excessive for the imagination … is as it were an abyss" (141). This space, silence, gap is not nothing, but a vibration, oscillation, arguably

the *ma, No-Mind* of Japanese philosophy and architecture, as elucidated by Snodgrass (Snodgrass, 2001). The concept of vibration, which belongs to sound, readily comes to our aid in giving an account of the gap.

Twentieth century musical composition makes much of silences: John Cage's *Four Minutes and Thirty Three Seconds*, in which the orchestra does nothing for the duration of the piece, or Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, which opens up a moment in time, extending an event of one minute duration to half an hour. Matt Rogalsky's *Two Minutes Fifty Seconds Silence*, captures the silences between the words in a speech by President Bush, prosaically described as "a reduction of address to the world by President George W. Bush 8 pm EST, Monday March 17 2003" (mrogalsky.web.wesleyan.edu). The resultant drone, intakes of breath, exhalations are likened to the sounds of the drums of war.

5. Voices out of turn

For Rousseau, "Fools make all the noise" (1364). The voice breaks the silence, offends, cries out in protest, and rants. The voice is commonly associated with indiscretion, or at least it transgresses easily. The voice offers spontaneous protest. Diogenes, the beggar philosopher of the street, never wrote anything down, and presented his philosophy as if mad. He aligned himself with the dogs in barking at people who give him nothing, and he would bite hypocrites (Diogenes, 1853 p.239). The transgressive voice, the voice out of turn, is at the margins, the space around the edge. It is in the company of street vendors, hustlers and noisy protestors. The voice's natural excesses implicate the inglorious perpetuation of rumour and hearsay. Eddison saw the phonograph as "a good machine for the rumour-like circulation of voices" (Kahn, 2001 p.215). Without doubt, the Internet gives people voice in an unregulated and maliferous manner. In this the contemporary, ubiquitous hypertext of the World-Wide Web imitates voice. This is a spatial matter. The voice crosses thresholds, is difficult to contain. It speaks **out**.

Conclusion

The significance of voice resides not only in what it says, but simply the fact of its being voice. Voice is a spatial entity, and the pursuit of its spatial characteristics can inform contemporary digital media design. We have presented a series of transformations on the voice. We have translated a concern with the authority of the

voice to an issue of its source, as either on or off screen, in view or out of view, a concept of authority that emerges with the invention of screen-based presentations, film, television, computer screens, and now the disembodied voices of public address systems, elevators, and waiting rooms. The voice assumes authority by virtue of being off-camera. The voice is thought to be close in any case: closer to thought, a position in opposition to text. The voice also transcends. It moves us into spatial realms beyond the immediate. Voice implicates the opposite of sound, the sound of silence, a response to the unspeakable vastness of sublime space. The voice also occupies the position of the invader. No respecter of boundaries, the voice passes into territory in which it does not belong. Such is the transgressive character of the voice. We can learn a lot about how to deal with space by examining the voices of dissent.

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