

GEOGRAPHY OF THE VOICE

By Kathy Kennedy

kathyk@alcor.concordia.ca

"the only major channel of communication that actively vibrates inside the body...sound is felt in addition to being heard. It is...a way in which we possess others and are possessed by others." ¹

The voice is an extremely immediate mode of transmission, directly from one body to another. When we hear another voice we recognize instantly (albeit subconsciously) how the sound is being produced. We read a series of physical cues, or more succinctly, we "sense" them, receiving the information through the body even before the brain. Is this kind of recognition translated through the various modes of technological mediation that we are subjected to daily such as radio, telephones, or anything amplified through a microphone? Or has it become an insignificant social convention relegated to a past era, making us, as a society, sonically desensitized.

There are at least two significant trends in contemporary culture that address the issue of vocal transmission (immediate or mediated). One is that of disassociation from the body. The "cyborg" has been implanted into the vernacular. The theorists speak of the body as if it were an endangered species in need of preservation. Ethical questions in fields ranging from genetic engineering to synthetic reconstruction to cosmetic surgery revolve around the genus of the body. The concept of "manpower" as in manual or physical labour has become almost obsolete since industrial automation, and the testing of our physical tolerances and extremes has been limited to a secondary role in our society, that of leisure or sport. Gender has never been so ambiguous (transformational surgery evoked), and race and age are becoming less determining features of the individual.

The second trend is that of the fading of geographical or physical space in the contemporary psyche. A twelve year old spending hours each day netsurfing knows little of geographic restrictions. Nor does he or she sense any distinguishing qualities between one place or another. The experience of globetrotting takes place on a computer screen with sensory cues being restricted almost completely to the visual. We are all "virtually" inhabiting...cyberspace.

Sound, conversely, exists within physical space. There are very real parameters that define this space such as the distance and speed at which bigger, lower, and slower sound waves travel compared to smaller, faster, and higher ones, resonance factors and so on. The physical matter that blocks these waves or conducts them more easily (from metal walls to water) are other

isea95@er.uqam.ca T : (514) 990-0229



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aspects that continue to define sound within the laws of nature. There is, of course, the element of time that continually reminds us of its physical reality.

As a musician, my experience of sound has always been primarily physical. That is, before the emotional stirring caused by Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, the intellectual admiration for Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, there was the basic impact of sound on my body. I was aware very early on, as I'm sure we all were, of the effects of slow, soothing tones or the impact of heavy, driving beats on my body. The concept of absolute music, restricted solely to the intellectual, the "dark, silent recesses of the mind" has failed to entirely hold my interest.

There was also a telling of the shape and parameters of my environment through sound. To hear a clap of thunder rolling across the horizon was to be reminded of the full breadth of my surroundings. I was taught in music school that one never played one's instrument in a void, that one should be conscious of the reverberations against the walls, to play *with* the space, the room, the hall in which it was being heard. In fact, the room is part of the instrument and so is the listener and the performer. There is something about the practice of music making, or more generally, about the perception of sound that has served to link me to the physical surroundings of my environment, to make me more aware of my own body. As for singing, the idea of producing sound from my body out into the environment has always been the most direct form of expression I could imagine.

2.

My work with the voice has gone through a progression of stages from technical obsession (practicing to become a classical singer), to composing specifically vocal and choral music with electroacoustic elements. It lives now in a series of questions about the role of the voice in our society.

What is the voice? Surely it encompasses more than just the sound formed in the larynx. Doesn't everything have a voice? Isn't it simply the channel through which everything speaks? Do animals have voices? Do computers? "Voice" can also be a medium of expression, a vote or opinion. To be of one voice is to be in unanimous agreement, and to give voice to one's feelings is to give utterance to them. A friend recounts a Bedouin woman's statement "we have to fight for our voice every day or we will lose it." To understand more deeply the distinctions made in defining voice, one should read a more in-depth analysis that differentiates between voice, sound, and language.²

As in Aristotle, "the sound of a living thing" describes well what I have been listening to in the voice. It is less physical, more ephemeral than Barthes' *grain de la voix*. His rather complex description includes "the body in the voice that sings, the hand as it writes."³ His focus is on the very materiality of

language and the creation of significations having nothing to do with communication or expression. My preoccupation with voice is not necessarily that which impregnates the physical world with sound. It has always been "the channel" through which ideas or feelings are allowed to speak. An opera singer friend captured it recently by explaining that during singing she must remove herself from her voice in order to be an instrument or a channel through which the music passes.

"A singer's voice sets up vibrations and resonances in the listener's body.... The listener's inner body is illuminated, opened up: a singer doesn't expose her throat, she exposes the listener's interior. Her voice enters me, makes me a "me," an interior, by virtue of the fact that I have been entered. The singer, through osmosis, passes through the self's porous membrane, and discredits the fiction that bodies are separate, bounded packages. The singer destroys the division between her body and our own, for her sound enters our system."⁴

3.

Recently, my voice was recorded as the principle ingredient for the musical composition accompanying a virtual reality project employing a multi-million dollar budget. Curiously, nothing was budgeted for the performer's fee or even the stock material of the human voice. The "grain" of the voice seems to be too ephemeral for the corporate world, a product so difficult to contain and identify that a market value can't be established.

In popular music, sampling has become standard practice. Taking a "bite" or a small quote of a person's voice and placing it in an unnatural context (i.e., repeated too quickly to be humanly possible) is now commonly accepted and holds no novelty to the listener. We are becoming accustomed to the automation of the human voice.

The digitized voices of telephone information systems such as directory assistance and multi-leveled menu systems seem to produce a chilling yet effective alienation on most callers. People tend to feel helpless in these structures, resentful of being fooled into thinking they have some flexibility or control by that cheap replica of a human on the other end. Since the telephone is a technological system charged with the task of mediating rather than producing messages, the operator's voice is nearly exclusively female. What is still dubbed as the "women's work" in the passive stance of transferring information is a remnant of a popular conception tagged by AT&T's slogan "The Voice with a Smile" from the 1930's through the 1950's.⁵

This once was a human voice, and now is not.. What is it that has been taken away? The soul? Then has it become the voice of a computer, as in that it speaks of the computer's logic and nothing else. It is a voice that can say only what it has been programmed to. It is, most cruelly, a voice that doesn't really hear. Where does the soul lie in the geography of the voice?

The telephone, at the same time, maintains a privileged relationship with voice. It is an important medium for transmitting exclusively audio. It is by virtue of this an instrument associated with intimacy, with direct communication. It is often used to transmit an emotional or psychological message—not a good medium for hard facts and precise details. It is the channel from one mind to another, and generally free of the distractions of either party's personal backdrop {scenery, environment}. This, in my mind, makes the voice a more powerful instrument as the sole transmitter of this information. The kind of information that is being conveyed must also be slightly different when directed at a focussed ear without eyes. Knowing that the receptors of ear and mind are tuned differently, are reading cues differently, a whole other language is set in motion. Maybe this is why we find the automated operator's voice so disturbing.

We have also learned a specialized style of vocal shorthand through answering machines. Many are often secretly happy to be engaged in a game of telephone tag because it can be so efficient and easy to respond to each other in a series of quick messages. Some kind of pressure is off when there is no real voice to have to respond to. The system of etiquette is already in place which dictates that it is exceptionally bad form to leave distressing news on someone's machine instead of live.

We have learned to rely heavily on the phone in this era of telecommunications, and have been taught (possibly by the phone company) to adapt it into our social morays. In the age of AIDS, people are increasingly reluctant to delve into physical contact and have become more reliant on other means. Perhaps this is what has led to the tremendous success of the telephone-based social scene. "Tele-personals" ads are perceived as a much more efficient, relatively safe way to find a mate than in nightclubs. The outmoded pleasure principle of raw physical attraction is considered by many to be foolhardy. The voice represents the last vestige of the body as a physical characteristic or reference to an individual's personality. People speak into the dark void of telephone party lines, looking for another interested, attractive voice to respond to. They rely heavily on their ability to communicate verbally to attract the other, listening for their sonic cues to detect interest.

4.

Radio is a voice unto itself...sound is transmitted from a small, private space (the sound studio) through the air waves, via super-audio waves actually, into a small box called a receiver, not unlike the human ear. Since the medium is exclusive to sound, visual cues are left to the imagination of the listener and the voice is all important. The radio drama or *hörspiel* has a distinct quality that often conveys what the visuals of the theatre can never reproduce. The format of the radio show can be easily interpreted through the dj host's style and intonation of speech. A louder, clearer voice implies a daily informational show while a softer, more breathy voice speaks

of emotional, personal issues. We tend to think of radio as having a live quality, that voices are passing through the airwaves and are gone again (although in reality most shows are recorded and catalogued). But this direct transmission that makes things seem more fleeting and spontaneous is curiously like normal un-mediated vocal production, i.e. *speech*.

I like the physicality of radio because of the reality of only being able to transmit a certain distance. It's reminiscent in that way, of an unamplified voice. It is a technology that has been far surpassed by other more efficient, powerful media. Yet many of its users remain faithful to it, even faced with the availability of user-friendly supertools. Pirate radio has long been associated with political subversion and community based information.

Margaretta Darcy created a feminist station undermining Ireland's anti-abortion laws, breaking strictly enforced broadcast regulations. It has been one of the most effective devices of revolution in developing countries everywhere.

In terms of subverting the contemporary notion of cyberspace and virtuality, radio is entrenched in the real and physical. It is a relatively low technology that adheres to fairly rudimentary principles of nature. The constraints of low-watt transmission: i.e. distance, obstacles, and weather variability are all things that make one aware of the inherent physicality of the medium.

There are radiofiles that chase after the natural transmissions of the planet that have existed long before we had developed the technology to hear them. With special very low frequency radio receivers, they seek out the atmospheric radio noises created with electromagnetic energy often caused by lightning. These are a range of clicks, pops, and eerie whistles that "natural radio" listeners record and exchange with other enthusiasts.

My own installation pieces called *sonic choreographies* with low-watt radio transmission address issues of territory and physical space. A soundtrack is broadcast onto the blasters of 100 choral singers. They sing the choral part to this piece, of which the transmitted soundtrack is their musical accompaniment. Moving throughout a large public space, they weave through various configurations, producing harmonies, echoes, and other sonic effects that can be heard differently from a multitude of vantage points. The radio serves as the indispensable unifying factor, linking singers and listeners across distances that would normally be unfeasible.

I think of the voice as an effective delineator of territory and that we can create and assert our own personal space with sound. An important part of what I've been trying to determine as "voice" is, within that emitting, a kind of simultaneous capacity for hearing as well. Establish listening skills is essential so that the voice is a whole entity with a yin and yang. As we are learning to project ourselves we must be sensitive to the

personal space or "sonic territory" of others. A self-defense teacher and I have developed a workshop with in vocal empowerment called W.E.N.C.H. (*Women's Empowerment Now...* and the C.H. varies according to the occasion). We combine some elements of traditional singing and vocal production with physical self-defense techniques. Participants are encouraged to use their voice as a tool to combat or ward off aggression. Many have had significant long term memory awakenings and discoveries that have been clearly evoked through the emitting and listening of their own voice.

To say that technology alienates us from the voice is too simplistic. Certain forms can actually help to keep us in touch with what is essential to the voice. How do we maintain the soul of the voice through its mediation by technology? How do we insure that it remains a channel through which the individual speaks? This is something that must be left to the discretion of the listener.

soul vs. technology
technology vs. body
body@soul

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Notes

¹ Jennifer Giles and John Shephers, "Theorizing Music's Affective Power," in Robert Witmer, ed., *Ethnomusicology in Canada* (Toronto:Institute for Canadian Music, 1990):19

² Frances Dyson, "The Geneology of the Radio Voice," in Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander, ed., *Radio Rethink, art, sound and transmission* (Banff, Canada: Walter Phillips Gallery)

³ Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

⁴ Wayne Koestenbaum, "The Queen's Throat," (New York, Random House, 1993)

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⁵ Lana Rakow, "Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life," (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992)