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Phononostalgia: a fictocritical investigation into discordant notions of 'voice' in speech and writing

Abstract
Phononostalgia is a hybrid of conceptual research and creative practices (creative writing and audio performances) that circles around an examination of different notions of 'voice' in speech and writing. Written from the perspective of an 'I' who is besotted with the voice, the piece stages a series of fruitless attempts to capture the 'I's' object of desire. In a fictocritical movement of reiteration the work recites (allusions to) songs, films, a play, an ancient myth and academic discourses and exposes 'phononostalgia', the sentimental longing for a notion of voice that is unaffected by poststructural interventions, as an intractable condition that is deeply engrained in traditional theories of speech and writing.
In a parallel move—initiated by the interference of two imaginary telephone operators—the sentimental reaffirmation of simplified perspectives is interrupted and deconstructive overtones are introduced. Using the example of the echoic structure of the paper and the citational practices that are used to weave its texture, 'voice' is presented as a mode of repeatability understood as Derridean 'iterability' that puts notions of self, identity, presence, authorship, originality, authenticity, meaning, message, truth, knowledge, communication and hierarchical binaries (e.g. speech-writing, nature-culture) under erasure.
Keywords: voice, listening, fictocriticism, deconstruction

Imagine, you could put yourself in my place

Imagine, you have been trained in the Health Sciences as a speech pathologist where voice is classified as a species of paralanguage, as a non-verbal aspect of communication and, on a finer scale, as a non-linguistic appearance of speech. Defined as the 'sound produced by the vibration of the vocal folds and modified by the resonators' (Nicolosi, Harryman & Kresheck 1996: 254) the voice's origin is positioned in and shaped by the throat and mouth of the speaker from where it emerges as an instance that 'reveals the inner self' (Colton, Casper & Hirano 1996: 2) and that 'indicates what we are, what we believe, and how we feel' (Sies 1987: 3). As a clinician you are deemed to be in possession of a normal and healthy voice and you are obsessed with the fantasy that you could improve the voices of others.

Due to a set of fantastic circumstances that open up possibilities for you that are not considered common practice in the Health Sciences you begin to read Derrida and start to relate to his deconstruction of communication as an intentional transport of meaning and to his critique of what he calls 'phonocentrism', a perspective that claims an 'absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (Derrida 1997: 12). You witness how these arguments turn your world as a voice scientist topsy-turvy.

As part of the deconstructive disorder that afflicts you through and through, you are not working in the Health Sciences any more but in the Humanities and you don't teach normal 'speech' but academic and creative 'writing'. However, much to your surprise, with this change in disciplinary affiliation and with this apparent change in subject matter the very notion of voice that you assumed had been deconstructed for good returns. This time it is sold as 'that elusive, ever-present stamp of 'self' on a text' (Mulvaney & Jolliffe 2005: 18), as 'the writer's particular and unmistakable signature on everything he writes' (Carver 1986: 22) and as 'some identifying tone or timbre that makes us conscious of the author's presence, that lets us hear the person behind the sentences' (Fulwiler 1990: 214). While it is regarded as an effect of language, the notion of 'narrative voice' as 'illusion of a speaker-effect' (Fludernik 2001: 623-624) continues to draw on the 'concept of the 'embodiedness' of the voice as an unproblematic given, indeed a given apparently immune to historical change and transformation' (Gibson 2001: 641).

You are confused and bewildered about the persistence of 'phononostalgia', this sentimental longing for a notion of voice as something that could be captured and known and that is controlled by the natural expression of speakers' selves and you set out to find out more about it.

You engage in what Smith and Dean call the 'reciprocal relationship between research and creative practice' (Smith & Dean 2009: 1) and embark upon processes that are interwoven in an 'iterative cyclic web of practice-led research and research-led practice' (19-28). You produce a piece of 'performative research' (6) that draws on various texts that seem suitable for your examination: songs (e.g. Presley, Brel, Grinderman), films (Almodóvar 2006a & 2006b, Henkel von Donnersmarck), an ancient myth (Ovid), a play (Cocteau), material from the 'freesound project' and academic discourses. You get involved in the movement of fictocriticism and 'make use of mimicry as strategic simulation and dissimulation, a performance of repetition in order, ultimately, to do something differently, to undo something, to make a difference' (Gibbs 2005: 9).

Each time you listen to *Phononostalgia* you rewrite your notions of voice, writing, speaking, listening, communication, art, research, deconstruction …

Oh voice, where art thou? click here

Oh, how I miss what I still often fantasise as 'my voice', this something I took for granted that seemed to emerge by itself and flow out of my mouth and trickle out of my fingers ('like soft tallow', as Kurt Schwitters once wrote). It's gone. Even worse: all indications are that it had never *been there*.

I reminisce about the illusion of having been able to write like I heard myself speaking sometimes, seemingly fluently, unaided by grammars and dictionaries, unambiguously. But, now, after Barthes, Butler, Derrida, Nancy and others, writing and speaking in a country where utterances in my first language tend to be answered, if at all, by quizzical looks, the words won't run any more, they stumble and halt and seem to question me rather than simply express what I still often refer to as 'my identity'. It seems as if 'my voice' has always already been slipping from my hands.

Maybe I have travelled too much and thereby lost touch with what some would call my inner core? Something must have happened to my skills and senses for I cannot 'hear/understand' voice any more. I cannot piece together identity from what I perceive. I can't relate to what people mean when they say: 'I love/hate this voice. It's so masculine/feminine, it's so familiar/foreign, it's so honest, it's so this person.'

Deconstruction notwithstanding, I feel a sentimental longing for ma petite voix, mon cri du cœur, my doodle-poodle. You are my heart and my soul. You mean the world to me. Don't leave me.

Hello? click here

Silence calling (a reiteration)

Voice in speakerphone
Hello? … Hello? … Who is it?

silence

Voice in speakerphone
You don't answer, fair enough. I like it. It hits the mark. Strange question: who is it? Necessary question, some would say and add: We need to know who is on the other side of the line in order to be able to communicate effectively. I disagree. For how could we who pick up the phone when it rings ever *know who the person is* to whom we are talking?

silence

Voice in speakerphone
The answer depends on your beliefs. Say, you're a voice scientist by profession and you believe in the scientific method. You call me, like you've just done, and you know that you'll get your sample. You don't need much; a fragment of a second is enough. 'Hello?' is fine. You don't need me to tell you my name. You take a recording. You analyse it. The fundamental frequency determines my sex. The formant frequencies reveal my mother tongue, my ethnicity and my socio-cultural background. The pitch variability tells all about my emotional state and my sexual orientation. The way I say 'Hello?' tells you who I am. I say 'Hello?' and you know who I am. You don't need to ask: 'Who is it?'
No, I say. That doesn't work. That would be too simple. Unduly simple. Let me give you some reasons.

1. A 'you' can never know an 'I'. If at all, your sex, mother tongue, ethnicity, socio-cultural background, emotional state and sexual orientation labels say more about you than about me.
2. An 'I' can never know itself. Knowing oneself can only ever be a work in progress.

3. There are no indications that the ways in which you think you know me and the ways in which I think I know myself will take forms that could overlap or be identical.

If you were a hardcore voice scientist by profession, a fanatic follower of the scientific method, you wouldn't be interested in this sort of argument and you'd immediately hang up. But I can still hear breath. I assume that you are still there, on the other side of the line? Or is it just the playback of a recording of someone breathing that I hear? Or a digitally synthesized breath? Or a breathing hallucination? Or my own breath?

silence

Voice in speakerphone
If you are there, are you listening?

silence

Voice in speakerphone (as if speaking to itself)
Human communication is one of the most obscure businesses I know … Silence in (telephone) conversation is a treasure trove for fiction production … Silence is a goose that lays golden eggs.

Echo click here

In *Hello?* an inquisitive first-person narrator asks an imaginary telecommunications company to establish a connection with the human voice. As distinct from the 'I's' nostalgic expectations that doggedly circle around the promises of scientific approaches to communication, where the voice is seen as something that can be located in the extra-discursively positioned body and that can be 'measured through auditory-perceptual, acoustic, and physiologic means' (Oates 2006: 24), the 'I' is informed that its request cannot be met because the telecommunications company subscribes to a discourse according to which 'there is no science … which exhausts the voice' (Barthes 1985: 279). Instead, all that is offered is an update of the caller's auditory production apparatus from a system that has been confined to notions of harmony and univocality to a system that can deal with the irregular vibrations of voice as an 'aisthetical event' (279, my translation) and as an 'atopical phenomenon' (Kolesch 2003: 275, my translation). Because the human voice cannot help but move 'between staging and perception' (275, my translation), so the argument goes, it 'resists systematic definition and classification and … eludes unambiguous localisation' (275, my translation).

In the next step—instead of being connected with the voice as a knowable entity—the listener is exposed to an encounter with a fragmentary reproduction of Ovid's version of the Echo myth. The myth tells the story of a fatal chain of events that Juno, Jupiter's wife, imposed on the nymph Echo as a punishment because Echo had distracted Juno with a display of garrulity while Jupiter engaged in extramarital affairs with other nymphs. The punishment consists in limiting Echo's ability to consciously initiate and control her utterances; all she can do is repeat what others say. This imposed repetitiveness leads at first to Echo's rejection by Narcissus and gradually to her isolation, physical decay and to her disappearance as a visibly present subject. At the end, the nymph Echo is

transformed into the acoustical phenomenon of the same name, into iterative vibrations of air molecules that can only come to sound as an after-effect of sonic productions that have been formed previously and elsewhere.

In a recent German anthology entitled *Voice: Approximating a Phenomenon* (Kolesch & Krämer 2006, my translation), Gehring reads the Echo myth as a case study that demonstrates the limits of that which 'defines the voice as voice' (Kolesch & Krämer 2006: 85, my translation). Based on a commitment to a traditional notion of voice as a species of communication she likens the nymph's voice production after the punishment to that of patients who are afflicted by 'echolalia', a medical condition that has been variously associated with disorders of mental development, schizophrenia, dementia or lesions of the left brain hemisphere (see Hadano, Nakamura & Hamanaka 1998: 67). While voice in those cases is still audible as a physical phenomenon, due to the compulsion to repeat, so Gehring, it is transformed into a 'foreign voice or un-voice' (Kolesch & Krämer 2006: 90, my translation) that constitutes a 'performative contradiction of the communicative function' (90, my translation) and that produces a 'parody of any speaking situation' (89, my translation). The echoic voice is not a voice any more because it is stripped of its message function and produces instead a 'parody of meaning' (93, my translation). Listeners of this 'pseudo-voice that … violates the saying in the speaking' (105, my translation) don't feel addressed because 'in what they hear there is no "other" who conveys something' (98, my translation). The echolalic speaker doesn't 'exist any more as the subject of their voice' (101, my translation), the 'trace of the self is erased' (104, my translation). As a consequence, the echoic voice lacks 'social extension' (106, my translation) and is incapable of arresting anybody's attention. The compulsion to repeat implements for Gehring a 'communicative death penalty' (101, my translation) that turns the speaker into an 'automaton' (95, my translation) that produces meaningless, distorted reverberations that cannot be distinguished any more from mere noise.

If we were to listen to the Echo myth with a deconstructive ear, we wouldn't hear it, like Gehring does, as a case study of the gradual decline of a patient who is afflicted by a peculiar voice disorder that leads to her communicative, social and physical death as a speaking subject, but as a performance of what would happen to the traditional notion of voice in speech and writing if one liberated it from the tight grip of the ideology of communication as an unproblematic transfer of meaning and identity.

Such a listening practice could for instance be inspired by Derrida's argument in his essay 'Signature Event Context' (1988) or by Butler's theory of performativity, in which notions and practices of repetition and citation take a central position and pathologizing perspectives on 'echolalia' are put under erasure. As Derrida argues:

> Every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, spoken or written … can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable … this citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called 'normal'. (Derrida 1988: 12, emphasis in original)

Similarly, when Butler theorizes (vocal) performativity as the 'power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (Butler

1993: x), she emphasizes that '[t]here is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability' (9). Instead of mobilizing the traditional understanding of voice production as either a natural expression of selfhood or a conscious and intentional doing, Butler reads it as a 'process of reiteration by which both 'subjects' and 'acts' come to appear at all' (9).

If thus, as Butler argues, 'all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat' (Butler 1999: 185), the binary opposition between 'normal' (=original and voluntary) and 'pathological' (=echolalic) vocal productions is displaced by an iterability that structures performativity in general and ruptures every and every body's utterances. From such a perspective it becomes possible to make meaning with and to hear agency in vocal performances that emphasize the citationality of all modes of 'communication', the very form of utterance that advocates of the pathologizing perspective to 'echolalia' associate with 'imbecility' (Hollingworth 1917: 214).

Take as an example the reproduction of the transcript of a conversation between a clinical psychologist and a five-year-old girl who was '[b]rought for mental examination because she did not behave as other children behave, and was stupid' (Hollingworth 1917: 214):

> Q. 'Are you a little girl or a little boy?'
> A. 'Are you a little girl or a little boy?'
> Q. 'What is this?'
> A. 'What is this?'
> Q. 'No, no, baby! You *answer* what I say.'
> A. 'No, no, baby! You answer what I say.' (Hollingworth 1917: 214)

For the examiner the child 'echoed automatically and immediately all the questions put to her, but showed no understanding of the question-response situation … [t]he questions were simply *repeated* instead of being *answered*' (Hollingworth 1917: 214, emphasis in original). The Butlerian listener, in contrast, might hear the child's answers as 'subversive repetition[s]' (Butler 1999: 185) that question the examiner's gender binary and realist approach as well as her attempt to establish the hierarchy of power that is characteristic of clinical encounters.

As a result of deconstructive interventions into traditional discourses of voice and voice disorders we find that we are all afflicted by an incurable condition. Echoingly we encounter each other, producing the roaring stutters of reverberations of reverberations, constituting 'a sort of machine which is productive in turn … offering things and itself to be read and to be rewritten' (Derrida 1988: 8). While this cacophony doesn't 'realize communication … [or] the communication of what is said' (Gehring 2006: 106, my translation) the desire for connection, understanding and consensus keeps us entangled in what Barthes calls 'the *shimmering* of signifiers' (1985: 258, emphasis in original), a movement of 'dispersion' (258), which is ceaselessly reproduced 'without ever arresting … [its] meaning' (258).

Don't leave me click here

Empty voices make the soundest noise

While there are growing indications that the notion of voice must be regarded as thoroughly riven, it is regularly presented in a perfectly noisefree manner almost as if it could be spoken about unanimously (for instance in books that offer instructions for 'freeing the natural voice' (Linklater & Slob 2006), a 'complete voice and speech workout' (Rodgers 2002), 'finding your authentic voice' (Metcalf & Tobin 2002), 'activat[ing] and listen[ing] to the extraordinary voice within' (Conner 2009), 'discovering the courage to free your true voice' (Herring 2010) or 'finding your creative writing voice' (Matson 1998)). But how are we to grasp the idea of a word that is meant to unite notions of 'sound', 'vehicle', 'faculty or power', 'organ', 'quality', 'utterance or expression', 'right or privilege', 'expressed opinion, judgement, will or wish', 'represent[ation]', 'word or number of words', 'capacity', 'agency or means' (OED *Online* 2010) and that is used interchangeably with 'stance', 'tone', 'style', 'persona', 'register', 'rhetorical power', 'ethos' (see Bowden 1995 and 2003), 'values' and 'beliefs' (Fulwiler 1990), or associated with 'control' or 'juice'—'a combination of "*magic potion, mother's milk, and electricity*"' (Hashimoto 1987: 70, emphasis in original)? Despite the make-believe straightforwardness of its usage with reference to speech and writing, let me suggest here that it doesn't seem appropriate any longer to consider voice as one word. Rather, it appears to be a 'vague metaphorical term' (Baldick 2008) that might better be reconstructed as a collection of homonyms.

Let me consider here only voice as a species of speech, and ask where and how it is made. Is it 'produced by the vocal organs of man or animals in their natural action' (OED *Online* 2010)? Are these vocal organs located in the speaker's throat and is the voice 'formed in or emitted from the human larynx in speaking, singing, or other utterance' (OED *Online* 2010)?

Being confronted with the issue of the notion of 'organ' feels like entering a maze that seems to offer only theoretical dead-ends. If understood as 'instruments', organs count as 'that which is used by an agent in or for the performance of an action' (OED *Online* 2010), which directs me to the complex question of agency in voice production (I can hear a faint polyphonic voice whispering in my ear: 'es giebt kein "Sein" hinter dem Thun, Wirken, Werden; "der Thäter" ist zum Thun bloss hinzugedichtet, — das Thun ist Alles' (Nietzsche 1887) ['there is no "being" behind doing, effecting, becoming; "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything'] (Nietzsche as quoted in Butler 1999: 33)). If I take the word to mean 'part of a … body that serves a particular physiological function' (OED *Online* 2010), I face the problematic of the physical (in its various senses as relating to medicine, matter, nature and the human body) of which Butler reminds me that it must be recast as 'the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects' (1993: 2). If I take the short cut I am directly guided to an understanding of organ as 'means of communication or expression of opinion', 'organ of speech' or 'voice' (OED *Online* 2010) and thus led back to where I began.

It is remarkable that the function of the voice organ—as the place where the voice as sound is produced—tends to be (lopsidedly) attributed to the part of the body that is occupied by the so-called voice box, while the indispensable contributions of the organs of hearing to the emergence of the sound are left unmentioned. (I wonder, too, how the larynx is meant to put the vocal folds to vibration without the assistance of the organs of breathing and how all of these organs are meant to operate without the involvement of the nervous system.)

Even if focusing on the question of the contribution of the so-called auditory system to the making of vocal sound, the issue of phonation remains. In order

to understand sound as an auditory sensation one must consider the workings of the outer ear, the middle ear, the inner ear and the central auditory system. However, even if we take into account the operations of what might be regarded as the key modules of the hearing process, we haven't even touched upon the problematics of processes of attention, perception, consciousness, recognition, identification, interpretation or understanding that tend to be smuggled into the notion of voice without mention or elaboration.

The issue of auditory production appears as a complex field when considering its varied theorization in different discourses and when taking into account the diversity of words in different languages that refer to this field as well as the plurality of connotations that might be associated with them. In the German language there is on the one hand the word 'hören' [to hear] that involves references both to the verb 'gehorchen' [to obey] and to the adjective 'hörig' [to be a slave to] and on the other hand there is the word 'lauschen', which has etymological connections with 'to listen'. While the former might evoke associations with the vocal politics during the Nazi dictatorship that systematically aimed at increasing the number of followers by medially constituting a community of shared hearing and resonance, [1] the latter is mostly used in a context where it is understood as eavesdropping or bugging, [2] which might call forth memories of the surveillance practices of East Germany's Secret police. [3]

In the French language it is the word 'entendre', which means both 'to hear' and 'to understand', that received a lot of attention by voice theorists. As Derrida argues in his critique of the phenomenological notion of voice: 'When I speak, it belongs to the phenomenological essence of this operation that I *hear myself* [je m'entende] *at the same time* that I speak' (Derrida 1973: 77, emphasis in original).

> [H]earing oneself speak [s'entendre parler] is experienced as an absolutely pure auto-affection, occurring in a self-proximity that would in fact be the absolute reduction of space in general … This auto-affection is no doubt the possibility for what is called subjectivity. (Derrida 1973: 79)

Also Nancy refers to the problematic of 'entendre' when he asks:

> [H]asn't philosophy superimposed upon listening, beforehand and of necessity, or else substituted for listening, something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*? Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears (and who hears everything), but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophise? (Nancy 2007: 1, emphasis in original)

According to Nancy, '"to hear" is to understand the sense' (6) whereas '[t]o be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning' (7):

> [W]e never *listen* to anything but the noncoded, what is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never *hear* … anything but the already coded, which we decode. (36, emphasis in original)

Nancy's theory of listening circles around notions of reference, referral and resonance. For him, listening means scrutinizing sound not merely as an acoustic phenomenon but 'as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance, and only in resonance' (7, emphasis in original): 'meaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which … they

refer to each other' (8). As he regards also what he calls 'a self' as 'nothing other than the mutual referral between a perceptible individuation and an intelligible identity' (8), Nancy argues that

> [t]o be listening will always … be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self … neither to a proper self (I), nor to the self of an other, but to the form or structure of self as such, that is to say, to the form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral … since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral. (Nancy 2007: 9)

When Nancy invites us therefore to listen 'to something other than sense in its signifying sense' (32) he invites us at the same time to become a 'resonant subject' (21), a subject who is 'always still yet to come' (21) and who is 'perhaps no subject at all, except as the place of resonance … by which a voice is modulated' (22).

Barthes distinguishes between hearing as a 'physiological phenomenon' (Barthes 1985: 245) that can be examined 'by recourse to acoustics and to the physiology of the ear' (245) and listening as a 'psychological act' (245), which he further analyses into three different kinds of auditory orientation: '*alert*' (245, emphasis in original) or 'listening to indices' (258), '*deciphering*' (245, emphasis in original) or 'listening to signs' (258) and 'modern listening' (258). The latter, so Barthes argues, 'does not aim at—or await—certain determined, classified signs … [but] seizes upon … a general 'signifying' no longer conceivable without the determination of the unconscious' (246).

Barthes understands 'listening as deciphering' or what Nancy calls 'hearing' in the sense of 'adopt[ing] an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the "underside" of meaning (what is experienced, postulated, intentionalized as hidden)' (Barthes 1985: 249). This listening appears as an 'intentional act of audition' (258), in which a subject seeks 'the advent of a signified, object of a recognition or of a deciphering' (259). His notion of 'modern listening', however, is understood as a

> playing over unknown spaces: … [it] includes in its field not only the unconscious in the topical sense of the term, but also … its lay forms: the implicit, the indirect, the supplementary, the delayed. (Barthes 1985: 258)

It is a listening that takes place in an intersubjective relationship, in which listening becomes active: 'it assumes the responsibility of taking its place in the interplay of desire' (258).

When considering poststructuralist interventions into traditional voice discourses the following becomes apparent: there is no self or information or meaning to be found in vocal vibrations. Without anything to carry, wanting solidity and substance, voices trail off in discordances beyond remedy. Understood as a structurally empty cacophony, the notion of phonation seems to me, however, as sound as a bell.

No access click here

As distinct from its positioning in human communication sciences, in handbooks of writing and in self-improvement literature, voice appears as 'a performative phenomenon *par excellence*' (Kolesch & Krämer 2006: 11, emphasis in original, my translation). It emerges as an ephemeral event that cannot be fixed rather than as a given anatomical structure, a standardizable behaviour, a teachable writing tool or a core aspect of impression management tactics.

As 'performance … for and in front of others' (Kolesch & Krämer 2006: 11, my translation), the voice comes to sound only if it is perceived. As a transitory product of necessarily divergent listening practices it eludes the fantasy of an 'unbroken semiotic, medial or instrumental subservience' (11, my translation). The voice is neither suited for scientific observation nor for ontological contemplation and doesn't function as a self-expression device. Rather, it appears as an unclassifiable movement 'of a ceaselessly unforeseen originality' (Barthes 2002: 34), as a contourless breeze that is always already slipping away from the grasp of the subject.

If someone came and asked me: 'What is the voice, what is my or your voice and how do they come to sound?' I might answer something like this: 'It appears that neither the 'objective' voice as a general, universal phenomenon, nor the 'subjective' voice as an instance of unisonance that belongs exclusively to one person, can be said to exist'. What Gibson writes on the notion of the narrative voice appears to apply to the whole field of phonation whether it is approached from a scientific, a literary, a political, a performance or a performative perspective: 'voice is a theoretical construction' (Gibson 1996: 146).

> The very assumption of a voice itself constitutes a mode of reading … like its final truth or essential meaning, the 'voice' in a … text disappears in the process of interpretation and reinterpretation. (Gibson 1996: 151)

Trailer click here

The verperting megafəʊn [ðə pə'vɜːtɪŋ 'mɛgəphone]: An audio guide

The title for this section of my paper is the preliminary result of a process of excluding other candidates that seemed to me less appropriate when considering what the following texts might offer to *Phononostalgia*'s readers and listeners. Had I chosen 'audio scripts' such a heading would have suggested that the following could provide what is impossible, namely a fixed and readerly version of the ephemeral, writerly productions of the audio pieces that are part of my paper. Had I chosen 'audio guides' this heading might have evoked associations with the conventional understanding of the word as an audible form of 'exhibition rhetoric … [that]—along with labels, catalogues, signage, and guided tours—support[s] the performative present of an exhibition experience' (Fisher 2004: 49), while what is provided is a collage of written texts in the traditional sense that might lead the reader away from what they experienced as they listened to the sound. What are then the advantages of the above construction that mixes the conventions of writing and speech and that seems to emphasize the destabilising effects that it names? [4]

The chosen title can be understood as a rhetorical device that reiterates some of *Phononostalgia*'s deconstructive interventions. Instead of reading the following

texts as attempts to capture or even correct the various sound productions listeners generated as they encountered the six audio pieces that are part of this paper, *The verperting megafəʊn* invites readers to 'prick up the philosophical ear' (Nancy 2007: 3) to what Derrida calls the 'graphematic' nature of every mode of utterance. It is the promotion of an understanding that not only writing but also voice and 'language in general (whether understood as communication, relation, expression, signification, constitution of meaning or thought, etc.)' (Derrida 1997: 7) has always already been positioned as 'signifier of the signifier' (7) or as non-natural, artificial or technical re-presentation or reiteration that 'carries within itself the trace of a perennial alterity' (Spivak in Derrida 1997: xxxix). As a consequence, the notion of voice is no longer understood as 'the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self' (Derrida 1997: 20), or as an 'experience of the effacement of the signifier' (20) because '[t]here is not a single signified that escapes … the [very] play of signifying references' (7) that constitutes the graphematic in Derrida's sense. Given the persistent popularity of phononostalgic discourses, so I would argue, it appears still necessary to emphasize that

> speech too—grafted within an empirical context, within the structure of speaker-listener, within the general context of the language, and the possibility of the absence of the speaker-listener … —is structured as writing, that in this general sense, there is 'writing in speech'. (Spivak in Derrida 1997: lxx)

The verperting megafəʊn as a collage of writings in the traditional sense and [ðə pə'və:tɪŋ 'mɛgəphone] as a candidate for a name that could displace the term 'voice' can thus be understood as attempts to call attention once more to what Derrida has argued decades ago.

Complex movements of irregularity and incoherence structure the relationship between the recordings that are part of *Phononostalgia* and the texts that constitute *The verperting megafəʊn*. If one compares the sound that one hears with the text that is provided below, it becomes obvious that the relationship between the audible and the readable is structured by divergency. Put in general terms: what can be heard is not the same as what can be read, and not all that can be heard can also be read and vice versa. More specifically, as the realm of the sonorous exceeds what we call speech, I often lacked symbols for what I recorded or mixed together. As a way of pointing at this necessary shortcoming I used the hash '#' (a symbol also used as medical shorthand for 'fracture') as a replacement character for those passages of the sound track that didn't lend themselves to being written in the empirical sense of the word ('which denotes an intelligible system of notations on a material substance') (Spivak in Derrida 1997: xxxix).

The use of text-to-speech computer voices produced another variation of discrepancies between the audible and the readable: as my computer offers only US-English text-to-speech voices, wherever they appear in a piece a certain choice of American English accents prevails, which inserts a 'spacing' (Derrida's term for a process of separation from all forms of present reference) between what is often inaccurately simplified as my 'German identity' and the fictive construction of 'my voice'.

By pointing out that I quoted exuberantly from various discourses and sources as I produced the audio pieces that are included in *Phononostalgia* I further highlight the pieces' atopical origins and let the works I cite stage their own performances. Seducing the listeners' attention elsewhere (for instance, on memories of the occasions when they watched a film, heard a song, or read a

poem, play or myth) or to let that attention drift, the interplay between the different allusions in the text points beyond what emerges from the computer screen or the membranes of the loudspeakers.

By admitting that I manipulated my recordings digitally and that I edited the sound files over and over again I accentuate the pieces' inextricability with artificiality. The text-to-speech computer voices in turn not only further complicate the question of authorship and mode of text production in *Phononostalgia* but also weave their own readings of *The verperting megafəʊn* into the air. In cases in which the written text includes words that aren't part of the computer's dictionary the voices turn them into phonetic and semantic productions with which they are more familiar. When, for instance, in *Hello?* 'La voix humaine' is transformed to 'le voice humane' a hybrid of two languages is produced that not only changes the grammatical gender of 'voix' to the (universal) masculine but also suggests an identity of notions of 'voix' and 'voice' and 'human' and 'humane' in a manner that appears both prescriptive and irrevocable.

The incorporation of material from the 'freesound project', a collaborative database of Creative Commons licenced sounds, resulted in a different interaction between written words and sound that transformed the paper in an unpredictable manner. One of the features of this web page is a search engine that scans the database for sounds that are described or tagged by the words one enters. Apart from being provided with various downloadable sound clips as a result of the search, each sound file is described by a name and several tags that are in turn linked with the database and related to other tags, producing an illimitable network of word-sound associations. Entering 'nostalgia' into the search field took me on a ghostly journey into the past via a homage to Judy Garland, a field recording of the productions of a Berlin organ grinder, to the halting melody produced by a musical box. While these sounds, in contrast to the dictionary definition of nostalgia, didn't evoke memories of periods of the past in my own lifetime, they nevertheless brought tears to my eyes. Why this happened and what it might mean we can only guess.

Oh voice, where art thou? [5]

> When this body breathes through you,
> its heart starts burning,
> making its ears hear a throbbing,
> that, as its brain alleges, comes from you.
>
> Where are you, my darling?
> You are, aren't you?
> Your throbbing tells me,
> You were?
>
> Everybody tells this story,
> that … we … have … been … one … always … already,
> so, if this is so, anyway,
> Let us make ours a life of love.
>
> Won't you please echo to me,
> with all your chords, your nerves, your bones, dear,
> and be my voice,
> be mine,
> for good.

Hello?

#[6]

In the course of my examination of how to write a phenomenon, which has been understood on the one hand as 'the instance that is closest to the inner world of the person … to the truthfulness of the soul' and on the other hand—if it is perceived as getting out of control—as that which has been associated with 'craziness, hysteria, exaltation … otherness' [7], I decided just to give it a call. Because I sensed the phenomenon's somewhat divine-demonic aura, I assumed that I might need the assistance of a mediator in order to proceed with my plan.

#[8] #[9] #[10]

Welcome to automatic telephone call routing international. We have received your request and would like to advise you of the following.

If you want a connection with the human voice, press: stop.

If you want to find out more about the true nature of the human voice, press: stop.

If you want to expose yourself to the inextricable and ephemeral productions of the perverting megaphone formerly known as 'voice': turn the volume up.

By the way, my name is 'Princess':
When I grow up I am going to be a 'science challenger'.

I will now forward your request to Bruce, our sound engineer, who will help you to update what you consider as your 'voice' production system to a postmodern 'noise' production system.

Hello, I am Bruce: I sure like being inside this fancy computer. Learn here how to hear the voice performance as noise performance.

At first you have to change the settings of your voice production system.

Step 1: turn the volume up.
Step 2a: turn the frequency down (for low-frequency noise).
Step 2b: turn the frequency up (for high-frequency noise).
Step 3: confirm.

Your voice production system has now been transformed to a noise production system. I will now put you through.

######## [11]

#[12]#[13]

Hallo! Hallo?
        Hello! Hello?

Hallo, bist Du's?
>Hello, is that you?

Ja, du bist's.
>Yeah, it's you.

Wo bist Du, mein Liebling?
>Where are you, my darling?

Du bist doch?
>You are, aren't you?

Was du von Dir gibst macht mich glauben, dass Du wärest…
>Your noises tell me you were?

[14, 15]
This is the indeterminable 'I', calling for 'La voix humaine', if you are not this person please hang up now and disconnect. If you are, please continue to listen to this message. There will now be a slight pause. By continuing to listen to this message you verify that you are 'La voix humaine'.
We are calling on behalf of 'Phononostalgia & Co' regarding an important business matter. Please call us. Please call us. Please call us.

Die Grenze zwischen Hier und Dort, zwischen Anwesenheit und Abwesenheit, zwischen Sagen und Zeigen wird von der Stimme
gezogen und zugleich überschritten. Damit ist die Stimme nicht einfach etwas, das Sprecher und Hörer verbindet, sondern sie verkörpert in ihrer szenischen Qualität zwischen Aufführung und Wahrnehmung diese
Relation selbst.

>The line between here and there, between presence and absence, between telling and showing is drawn and exceeded by the voice.
>This makes the voice not simply something that connects speaker
>and listener, but the voice itself embodies this relation due to its performative quality that moves between staging and perception. [16]

Was in diesen … wechselseitig verschränkten Prozessen performiert wird … ist eine spezifische … Form der Begegnung, der Nähe (oder auch Distanz…) … Die Begegnung einer Stimmer, die Begegnung in der Stimme lässt sich nicht auf Verständigung oder Konsens zurückführen.

>What is performed in those reciprocally entangled processes … is a specific … form of encounter, of closeness (or distance …) … The encounter …of a voice, the encounter in the voice cannot be attributed to mutual understanding or consensus.
>[17]

Echo

Reiteration

[18]

ecquis adest?

                                                    adest

veni!

                                                    veni!

quid me fugis?

                                                  quid me fugis?

huc coeamus

                                                  coeamus [19]

Won't you please echo to me,
with all your chords, your nerves, your bones, dear?
Everybody tells this story,
that … we … have been … one … always … already …

No! Away with these encircling hands! May I die before
what's mine is yours!
what's mine is yours! [20]

R–E–I–T–E–R–A–T–I–O–N

Is the echo a matter of the idiosyncratic case of a voice that is
forced to repeat—a voice that potentially cannot any more truly
be called voice? [21]

Or must it rather be regarded as the prototype of phonation in
that it exposes us to the double possibility of processes of
constitution and *transformation?*

Die Stimme vermittelt, interagiert zwischen Instanzen, die
zusammenkommen wollen, aber nicht zusammenkommen
können – eine Situation, die die Stimme im Idealfall gerade
nicht behebt, sondern weitertreibt.

> The voice arbitrates, interacts between instances
> that want to come together but that cannot come
> together—this is a situation that ideally doesn't
> remove the voice but rather perpetuates it: [22]

Scorned, Echo wanders in the woods and hides her face in
shame among the leaves, and from that time on lives in lonely
caves. But still her love endures, increased by the sadness of
rejection. Her sleepless thoughts waste her sad form, and her
body's strength vanishes into the air. Only her bones and the
sound of her voice are left. Her voice remains, her bones, they
say were changed to shapes of stone. She hides in the woods no
longer to be seen on the hills but to be heard by everyone. It is
sound that lives in her. [23]

sonus est, qui vivit in illa

sonus est, qui vivit. [24]

Don't leave me

[25]

Don't leave me.

Everybody knows that it is impossible to hold on to the voice.

Why?

Because nobody knows where or what it is,
each time you try to grasp it,
it slips out of your lips, sight, mind, ears, microphones,
softwares, pens.
How could we hold something we cannot locate or materialize?

Don't leave me.

Ne me quitte pas.

[26]

Don't leave me.
I offer you objectivity, reliability and validity and the most
recent normative ranges.
I will be true to your gender, your age, your sexuality, your
profession, your origin and your identity.
I will let you express yourself and will ensure soundproof
conditions.
I will give you a kingdom
where Truth will be king
where Truth will be the law
and where you will be queen.

Don't leave me.

[27]

I will invent for you words that don't make sense
so that you will understand.

[28]

Don't leave me.

I won't command any more.
I won't dictate any more.
I will sit down here in silence
in order to listen to you.

Let me become
the echo of your voices and noises
the echo of your echo
your reverberation
your resonance frequency.
Don't leave me.

Don't leave me.

I will always already have left you.

No access [29]

A *lamento* of appearances that want to come together but that cannot come together

[30]
[31]
[32] I studied sciences and acoustics,
I recorded, I measured, I calculated,
but I couldn't reach what I was looking for,
it was barred.

[33]
[34]
[35]
[36] I saw an analyst, I took some pills,
I meditated, I exercised, I changed my name and had surgery,
but I couldn't reach what I was longing for,
it was barred.

[37]
[38]
[39], [40] I read Derrida, Butler, Kirby and Nancy,
I wrote, I spoke, I sang in various languages and understood that
I could never reach what I was longing for,
because it had always-already been a fantasy.

[41], [42]

Trailer

[43]

Your voice production system has now been transformed to a noise production system.

By the way, my name is Princess.
Hello, I am Bruce.
My name is DJ Parasite. I am a man of taste and spite. [44]
May I have the next dance?

(phone ringing)

Get the scissors, sisters, and cut the line!

[45]
You have reached Telstra home messages, 101 service. The person you are calling is not available. At the tone record your message. To end just hang up or press hash to change your call back details.

Hallo? Hallo?

#[46] #[47]

You miss your lover, don't you? SHe is gone, gone with the artmob, disappeared between the ears.
When? On February 14, 1998, at 12 pm, to be precise. I

retrieved that information on April 30, 2008, when I was
looking for what remained of the human voice in the web.
Surprise, surprise, there was nobody home. I shouted 'hello?'
and 'Hallo!' till my vocal folds swell up to two balloons.

#
Hi there. You got one new message. Message received today at
12.27pm:
#[48]

To return the call, press zero. To listen to the message again,
press one. To safe, press two. To delete, press three.

Acoustical properties of vibrations of air molecules might have
been measured by those clever-clever scientists, but that
doesn't turn the voice into something real.

State any other matters you wish to add.

Noise, nothing but noise, desperation, spite and lust is filling
the air where there used to be sound and harmony and tender
princesses.
I suspect it is the law of desire that turns princesses into brutes
and brutes into brutes dressed up as princesses.
What used to be transmitted is now transformed into
unrecognisable liminalities.
Taste is wiretapped by parasites that juggle dance, trance,
chance and romance.
By the way, I would give my life for the voice of 'aka': what a
fundamental frequency, what formants, they make my hair cells
jitter and shimmer!

Even though I am growing up and becoming a science
challenger I still admire the poetic possibilities of acoustical
engineering. It *is* an art, to produce voice as noise with poise,
isn't it?

State any other matters you wish to add.

Oh, yes, there are many more matters I would wish to add,
—desafinado, desafinada, in off-key, the tonality that suits
every thing and every body)—…
but what used to be called 'the show with the voice' [49] has
come to an end and something else should have the next
dance…

Don't leave me this way…

Ne me quitte pas …   Don't leave me…

Bitte geh nicht fort,   Please don't go away
was ich auch getan,   whatever I did
was ich auch gesagt,   whatever I said
glaube nicht ein Wort…   don't believe a word…

lass mich nicht allein   don't leave me
wenn du mich verlässt   if you abandon me
stürzt der Himmel ein…   the sky will come
tumbling down

… auf Wiederhören? …   … talk to you soon? …

Notes

1. See for instance Epping-Jäger (2003, 2004, 2006). return to text

2. 'Lauschangriff' is the word for bugging operation, which could be literally translated as 'listening attack'. return to text

3. See for instance Henkel von Donnersmarcks' film *Das Leben der anderen* [*The lives of others*](2007). return to text

4. The use of the strikethrough effect in the heading indicates a practice that Spivak, following Derrida, calls writing 'under erasure' (in Derrida 1997, xiv): 'This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible) (xiv)'. return to text

5. See 'Surrender', performed by Elvis Presley return to text

6. Vinchezbass, *hello.mp3*, MP3, uploaded 13 January 2006, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

7. See Lagaay, A 2004, 'Züge und Entzüge der Stimme in der Philosophie', in S Krämer(ed), *Performativität und Medialität*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München, 294, my translation return to text

8. HerbertBoland, *BakelitePhoneDialing_.wav*, WAV, uploaded 26 January 2007, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

9. schluppipuppi, *Modem_gesamt.wav*, WAV, uploaded 28 September 2005, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

10. BoilingSand, *dialup login dec 2001 24 bit.wav*, WAV, uploaded 12 March 2008, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

11. Charliefarley, *phoneial.wav*, WAV, uploaded 09 August 2007, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

12. Joedeshon, *modem_sounds.wav*, WAV, uploaded 20 September 2009, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

13. suonho, *hijacked_iLLCommunications_suonho.wav*, WAV, uploaded 11 July 2005, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

14. gadzooks, *unobtainable.wav*, WAV, uploaded 10 March 2007, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

15. Corsica_S, *answering machine 05.flac*, FLAC, uploaded 09 June 2010, accessed 17 December 2010, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

16. See Kolesch 2003, 275, original and my translation return to text

17. See Kolesch 2003, 279, original and my translation return to text

18. reinsamba, *Nightingale song 3.wav*, WAV, uploaded 19 March 2006, accessed 29 December 2010, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

19. See Ovidius Naso, P 8AD, *Metamorphoses*: *liber tertius* return to text

20. See Kline, AS (trans) 2000, *Ovid—the metamorphoses*, accessed 05 May 2008, http://www.tkline.freeserve.co.uk/Ovhome.htm return to text

21. See Gehring 2006, 85, my translation return to text

22. See Kolesch 2003, 280, original and my translation return to text

23. Kline, *Ovid—The metamorphoses* return to text

24. Ovidius Naso, *Metamorphoses* return to text

25. Based on: Brel, J 1959, 'Ne me quitte pas' return to text

26. genghis attenborough, *Garland Electric.wav*, WAV, uploaded 11 March 2007, accessed 29 December 2010, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

27. ashassin, *take_musiquette2.wav*, WAV, uploaded 20 November 2006, accessed 29 December 2010, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

28. gottlieb, *grinder3.MP3*, MP3, uploaded 27 October 2008, accessed 29 December 2010, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

29. See: Grinderman 2007, 'No pussy blues' return to text

30. Voktebef, *Noisebeat 100.012bpm.wav*, WAV, uploaded 18 August 2007, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

31. Based on: Davis, J, Ramirez, R & J Sherman 1942, *Lover man (oh, where can you be)*, song return to text

32. Voktebef, *Quicktime Alternative Recharged.wav*, WAV, uploaded 17 August 2007, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

33. ERH, *Scream 43 b.wav*, WAV, uploaded 16 February 2007, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

34. Voktebef, *Noisebeat 100.012bpm.wav* return to text

35. Davis, Ramirez & Sherman, *Lover Man* return to text

36. Voktebef, *Voktebef-Noisettes1-08.15.79.wav*, WAV, uploaded 16 January 2007, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

37. ERH, *Scream 60 b.wav*, WAV, uploaded 16 February 2007, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

38. Voktebef, *Noisebeat 100.012bpm.wav* return to text

39. Davis, Ramirez & Sherman, *Lover Man* return to text

40. arvid, *Howling_cracklebox.wav*, WAV, uploaded 26 June 2006, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

41. Sea Fury, *Monster.wav*, WAV, uploaded 21 February 2008, accessed 19 October 2008, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

42. Davis, Ramirez & Sherman, *Lover Man* return to text

43. Walter_Odington, *type writer.aif*, AIF, uploaded 02 May 2006, accessed 16 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

44. See Scheidt, D D J S 2007, DJ Parasite: an [au]/[o]-tophonographic sound track, *Liminalities* 3.3, accessed 21 December 2009, http://liminalities.net/3-3/DJParasite.htm return to text

45. gadzooks, *unobtainable.wav* return to text

46. guitarguy1985, *carterattack.mp3*, MP3, uploaded 24 July 2008, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

47. Joedeshon, *modem_sounds.wav*, WAV, uploaded 20 September 2009, accessed 10 December 2009, http://freesound.iua.upf.edu return to text

48. gadzooks, *unobtainable.wav* return to text

49. See Scheidt, DDJS 2008, 'The show with the voice: an [au]/-[o]-tophonographic parody' [34 paragraphs], *Forum qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: qualitative social research 9*.2, Art. 27, accessed 21 December 2009, http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0802279 return to text

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