

International Symposium
September 9th, 2017
Université Paris-Est Créteil

IMAGER (EA 3958)
Institut des Mondes Anglophone, Germanique et Roman
TIES & CAECE

MUSICAL AND TEXTUAL VARIATIONS ON VOICE
Call for papers

In his course on the Neutral at the Collège de France in 1977-1978, Roland Barthes explained that voice is “a false good subject, an object that resists: sparks off adjectives (soft, startling, white, neutral, etc., voice) but nothing more.”⁷ Voice is often understood in the paradigm of life and death: Plato’s *Phaedrus* notably opposes *viva voce* to writing, writing being on the side of death as immortality. Speaking *viva voce*, bringing a voice to life, isn’t this the primary mission of a poem, involving as it does a written and an oral dimension?

Is a poem written to be spoken or declared at all times, like Walt Whitman’s oral and even operatic poetry? Whitman’s poetics are indeed deeply related to performance, just as a play is written to be played on stage. Exploring typography and the visual dimension of poetry such as Susan Howe does or in a more systematic way E. E. Cummings, would, at first sight, seem to displace, to dispossess the voice. And yet, their poems are inhabited, are haunted by a voice. Could one qualify the latter as Heideggerian, oscillating between *Stimme* and *Stimmung*⁸, between interiorisation and projection into the world—how an individual harmonizes with the environment or finds him/herself out of tune with it? Is this what one might call an *acousmatic voice*? A voice to be heard beneath the words, beneath speech itself?

Is voice a chiasmus, a crux between the outside, alterity and oneself, one’s own musical body, what Danielle Cohen-Levinas referred to as “needing an incarnation other than itself”? For the musicologist, a “voice is the emanation of a repressed body. Such is the project of music in the Western civilization from the 17th century to the dawn of the 20th century.” According to Cohen-Levinas, it is endowed with the ability to turn the body away. One hears this diversion of the body in voices from the 18th century up to the beginning of the 20th century, or in a much more radical way, in Wagner’s project, for instance, where the body becomes indifferent, a mere corporal envelope. Bill Viola exemplified such a position in a staging by Peter Sellars using video installations featuring Tristan and Isolde’s celestial bodies. On the other hand, as Violaine Anger explains, as polysemic as the word *voice* may be, it remains the seat of unification: “if there is only one word [voice], that is because it marks the presence of a subject. Less an individual—which is a biologic notion— than a subject, however torn and unsure of its being and identity as it may be.” From the frantic voice of the lyric subject during the Romantic period to the collective voice drowned in the sea of modernity, in *Idée de la voix*, Claude Jamain sees and analyzes voice as having always been an entity to be sought and questioned.

The status of the voice in Biblical texts will also be of concern in the context of this symposium: in his essay “le Relais des Voix,” Eric Benoit reminds the reader that John the Baptist was “the one who was referred to as the Voice” (Mt 3:3, Mc 1:3, Lc 3:4), the Voice of the Word but not the Word itself⁹. In the same way, one could also evoke the figure of Moses: because of his

⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Neutral, Lecture Course at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*. Trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. 78.

⁸ Claude Jamain calls *Stimmung* «the mode of human existence – or rather, what the quite vague word ‘breathing’ refer to, since the latter can become singing, an indifferent sound or silence » in Claude Jamain, *Idée de la voix, études sur le lyrisme occidental*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes. 4. *Translation mine*.

⁹ Éric Benoit, « Le relais des voix : généalogie, phénoménologie, téléologie », *Études de culture française*, n° 8, Niigata (Japon): 2015, 1-18 (published again in a Japanese translation in *Studies in Humanities*, n°138, Niigata: March 2016, 3-26).

stammering, Moses could only speak through his brother Aaron. The ventriloquism at the heart of their fraternal relationship inspired the wonderful opera *Moses und Aron* by Schönberg who also explored the problem of how to present the unfathomable, that which cannot suffer representation, through the specificity of *Sprechgesang*. As André Neher develops it in *l'Essence du prophétisme*, prophets' voices are often wanting, or faulty, they keep vacillating, stammering as in the case of Moses, to the point of going mute in a voluntary refusal to speak: each and every prophet initially refused to lend their voice to the Word.

According to Jean-Michel Maulpoix,¹⁰ voice is “the seat of the [lyric subject] left empty, the seat that each of us longs to occupy: an exit out of oneself, such as it signifies and signals what is most proper to oneself, that however remains fleeting, elusive as soon as it is not written down. The lyric subject is the voice of the other, the one who speaks, it is the voice of all the others who speak inside of me, and the one I address to others.”

One also sees the alienation of the voice at work in the use of *voice-over* in films. One might think for instance of the French movie, *Roman d'un tricheur* (1936) by Sacha Guitry where the director's voice, however characteristic of him also assumes each and every part in the movie, from the initial credits to its very end. Applied to the entire movie, the technique of *voice-over* is the storyline of the narration giving the spectator the illusion that in the end they have actually seen actors, men and women speaking their own distinct voices, conveying a fallacious impression of what is a complex ventriloquism.

In addition, the narrative voice as one understands it in the expression a “discourse of fiction” does not differ that much from the lyric voice of a “discourse of diction” as Dominique Combe¹¹ refers to it. Neither of these voices, be they narrative or lyrical, seem to elude the referential illusion: what is there, or who is there behind these voices? Neither fiction nor diction provide a guarantee of reference. Voices always seem to oscillate within the interstitial space of an immediate void, between what Jacques Derrida called “an irreducible non presence” and a radical, immediate presence, also perceived as always evanescent because always caught up in a Derridian *différance*. Understood as a *trace* in the body, the voice may be construed as the sign of a fallacious correspondence between origin and projection.

In an interview given in 1973¹², Roland Barthes called it an “absent object.” One rarely listens to a voice *per se*, one listens to *what* it says: voice has the same status as language itself, which is an object that used to be grasped only through its content. With the notion of “text,” one has now learnt to read the *texture* of language. In the same fashion, the listener always needs to learn to better listen to the *texture* of voices, to its significance, as well as all its intrinsic features over and beyond meaning.

On the occasion of this international symposium, we will study the textuality of voices, the chiasmus between voice and scription. We will strive to listen to voices in their corporalities but also in their most abstract states. We will try to listen to all the voices haunting the stages of theater and opera houses as well as those at work and at the origin of discourses of fiction and diction. This symposium will ask how voices create meaning and how they overflow it, using a diachronic, translinguistic and transdisciplinary approach.

A project of publication online is under study for the papers given during the symposium.

Proposals in English or in French must be sent along with a title, a 300-word abstract and a short biography to the organizer Marie Olivier <marie.olivier@u-pec.fr> and to Sylvie Le Moël <sylvie.lemoel@u-pec.fr>

Deadline for all submissions: **March 30th, 2017**. Answers to proposals will be given on **April 15th, 2017**.

¹⁰ Jean-Michel Maulpoix, « La quatrième personne du singulier », *Figures du Sujet Lyrique*. Paris: PUF, 1996) 153. *Translation mine*.

¹¹ Dominique Combe, « La Référence dédoublée, le sujet lyrique entre fiction et autobiographie », *Ibid.*, 53. *Translation mine*.

¹² Roland Barthes, « Les Fantômes de l'Opéra », *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 17 décembre 1973. Propos recueillis par Hector Bianciotti. *Translation mine*.