Voices: an anthology — an introduction

The aim of this research is a *progressive* one. I collect voice samples and find categories and link them to so-to-say Barthesian *figures* for voices; gestures and poetic images that link and redirect to a symbolic, cultural and associative character of those sounds. Just think of a narrator's voice for a fairytale, a comedy or documentary movie. The melodic voice of a commercial's actor praising the product. What a sigh sounds like. Of fear, of pleasure, of pain.

I will arrange them to little collages to be able to listen to them in a contrasting manner. There will be an alphabetical order to be guided through this audible rhizoma and certain quotes embedding the *figures*. But first, let us get some information about how sound works.

You can listen to the sound of my voice because sound is a movement through different matters and their conditions — air, liquids, vibrations, electric signals.

„The outer ear consists of the ear canal and eardrum. Sound travels down the ear canal, striking the eardrum which causes it to move or vibrate./
The middle ear is a space behind the eardrum that contains three small bones called ossicles. This chain of tiny bones is connected to the eardrum at one end and to an opening to the inner ear at the other end. Vibrations from the eardrum cause the ossicles to vibrate which, in turn, creates movement of the fluid in the inner ear.
Movement of the fluid in the inner ear, or cochlea, causes changes in tiny structures called hair cells. This movement of the hair cells sends electric signals from the inner ear up the auditory nerve (also known as the hearing nerve) to the brain.

The brain then interprets these electrical signals as sound.“[1]

The human hearing system is quite sensitive and can distinguish precisely sounds, words and music. Mike Goldsmith explains in his *Very Short Introduction to Waves*[2] „We are also constantly checking our soundscapes for particular sound patterns, hence the *cocktail party effect*, in which the sounds of our own names emerge sharply from a hubbub of conversations which we are making no effort to follow.“[3]

But what does a voice look like? There are certain images you can think of, for example Edvard Munch’s Skrik, Scream, Schrei. Maybe you imagine this picture and what this person’s shrieking voice might sound like. A hole in the face, the surroundings kind of swirl around, trembling because of this scream. There is also another option, Mladen Dolar proposes. The surroundings are breathed in and soaked up by this wide mouth and make the voice fall silent. Additionally this humanoid figure, the humunculus presses the hands on the position where the ears could be, but there is not a sight of them. So it is a sound that cannot be heard or listened to, a deacusmatisation.[4]
A picture about the voice as a subject for listening is a quite legendary painting of a terrier-mix dog named *Nipper* leaning towards a gramophone, called *His Master’s Voice*. He looks like listening attentively to something. You can imagine *Nipper* being confused by hearing the beloved voice of the master without seeing him or as if the voice was emancipated from the rest of the body.[5] An early acousmatic situation with an animal. The painting became later a trademark in the recording industry but also the German title of a book by Mladen Dolar.

---

[1] How Hearing Works. URL: https://www.soundrelief.com/hearing-loss/how-hearing-works/

[2] the title is actually the other way around: Waves: A Very Short Introduction.

[3] Goldsmith, Mark: Waves: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press 2018, p. 46.

[4] compare Dolar, Mladen: His Master’s Voice, p. 94.

[5] comp. Dolar, His Master’s Voice, p. 91.

Mladen Dolar's English version of the book is called *A Voice and Nothing More* and begins with a quote from Plutarch's *Moralia: Sayings of Spartans*: „A man plucked a nightingale and, finding but little to eat, said: ‚You are just a voice and nothing more."[6]
On the one hand we know about nightingales and their dramatic songs at least since Shakespeare, who seemed obsessive with „this small, plain-looking bird"[7]; on the other hand the Spartan saying reminds us also of the affective power, a voice can have in its representative performance. As the nightingale, at last, is just a quite tiny bird of light bones and feathers. But actually we are not talking about birds here.

Mladen Dolar examines the phenomenon of the voice from a Freudian, Lacanian perspective, also following Derrida's definition from *Grammatologie* of the voice as embodiment (the same as the gaze) but also implementation of *objet a,* and the beginning of difference and bisection of identity.[8] It is the cut between body and language, not belonging to any of them.[9] It is the illusion of the subject getting aware of him/herself via listening to speaking to yourself, *s'entendre parler*. It is the outside of a body but also shows the inner self, so to say. Dolar examines the voice's character in psychoanalytical terms and poses it in an analogy to the position of *objet a*. The voice expresses, but also incarnates this *objet a*.
In the introduction Dolar looks at the inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen[10]. Von Kempelen is famous for the construction of a chess playing

---

[6] Dolar, Mladen: A Voice and nothing more. p. 3.

[7] British Library Blog „sound and vision" on „Shakespeare and the Nightingale", found in URL: https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2016/04/shakespeare-and-the-nightingale.html, october 16, 2020.

[8] compare: Dolar: His Master's Voice, p. 53 ff.

[9] comp. Dolar, His Master's Voice, p. 100.

[10] comp. Dolar, A Voice and nothing more, p. 6 f.

automaton, d*er Türke*, who won a chess match against Napoleon I. and which Von Kempelen made for Queen Maria Theresia, „of course“[11].
But he also created a speaking machine, which could form vocals and consonants and, in a very rudimentary way it also could so to say speak, in Latin, French and Italian — German was not so easy to program.[12]

The haunting aspect, the uncanniness about this machine, as Mladen Dolar describes it, is not the fact of speaking or thinking, but rather the sound of its voice, which appears creepily human.[13]

The artificial synthesis of human speech was just impossible until 1939 as the *Voder* (VoiceDemonstrator) was presented at the New York World's Fair. This speech synthesis system was developed by Homer Dudley, R. Riesz and S. S. A. Watkins for Bell Laboratory, also as a telephone communication system.[14]
The first computer to sing was the IBM 7094 in 1961[15], performing the song „Daisy Bell“ — also for Bell Labs and later adapted on screen by Stanley Kubrick. The superintelligent AI robot HAL 9000 sings this song to astronaut Dave while being shut down[16]. Ironically, the voice of HAL was performed by a human actor, Douglas Rain. Rain was a Canadian actor from theater and Stanley Kubrick chose him because of his smooth voice with a transatlantic dialect: “The voice is neither patronizing, nor is it intimidating, nor is it pompous, overly dramatic or actorish. Despite this, it is interesting.”[17]. He worked in television and film al lot as a narrator's

---

[11] Dolar, A Voice, p. 6.

[12] comp. Dolar, A Voice, p.8.

[13] comp. Dolar, A Voice, p. 8 ff.

[14] comp. Dolar, His Master's Voice, p. 10.

[15] comp. Norman, Jeremy: The IBM 7094 is the first computer to sing. URL: https://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?entryid=4445.

[16] watch or listen to from minute 3:28. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8N72t7aScY.

[17] „Hal wasn't always so eerily calm“ in NYT, April 1, 2018. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/movies/hal-2001-a-space-odyssey-voice-douglas-rain.html.

voice, which makes one maybe think that overcoming a voice is also not that easy.

And now we are completely inside of this anthology. As I said before, I started this research in order to find categories for different qualities of voices' sound. This operation came up, as I wanted to find the narrative and representational possibilities of voices without speech. And how culture acknowledges them and uses those traits.

One example: German beer company *Jever* produces a commercial which remains plotwise the same for twenty-five years. You see different sights and impressions about the German Northern Sea and rough landscapes. Additionally you listen to a deep, tenor, husky male voice asking suggestive questions about nature's condition: „Hättest du das Meer gemacht, hättest du es zahmer gemacht? / *If you had created the Sea would you have made it calmer?"*[18]
How do we analyze it? What does the voice sound like? First I will describe it with adjectives and try to find different links to topics, keywords that seem characteristic for those voice performances to create a sort of collection or anthology or archive. Also, I will try to find quotes that describe the sound of a voice to underline an impression.
But how to order them, give them an archival construction? To this aspect of collection: First I started to look up other archives dealing with sound to see in what kind of directions, but also which approaches were chosen to start an archive, which categories embedded the sounds and on which purpose was it made?

There are sound effect archives, „Geräuscharchive". Typical categories for archival recordings are:

[18] Jever TV-Sot 2015. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujuHDR1YwRI

- human body sounds, especially steps, e.g. the name of the *Geräuschemacher*, foley artist is in English also Walker or footstep artist
- animal voices and sounds
- atmospheres and background sounds
- weather, nature sounds
- transports and machines
- sound effects
- Historic recordings, e.g. speeches by politicians

One very iconic moment comes to my mind thinking about voice and calling it archive: the twin Voyager 1 and 2 missions that carried two golden records, launched to space in 1977 to represent planet Earth and humankind one day[19]. On the Golden Records you can listen to nature's sound but also to humans talking in 55 languages, greeting and blessing alien life. The sheer variety of languages, pronunciations and fluent or hesitating tones while speaking creates a nice pattern of sounds. As the sounds and greetings were curated by a committee chaired by Dr. Carl Sagan of Cornell University, who noted, „The spacecraft will be encountered and the record played only if there are advanced spacefaring civilizations in interstellar space. But the launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet."[20] As it is said on the NASA Voyager webpage that „it will be forty thousand years before they [meaning the records, satellites, commenting by author] make a close approach to any other planetary system"[21], this mission even seems hopeful. Also questioning in this context the representational power of those records regarding the timelines and frames in which they are launched, travelling and maybe listened to.

---

[19] URL: https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/whats-on-the-record/

[20] URL: https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/whats-on-the-record/

[21] URL: https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/whats-on-the-record/

This brought me to the question of creating an anthology rather than an archive, as I don't mind the aliens but want to underline that my approach comes from a personal perspective wich is reflected with literature.
On my research I found some examples for sound archives, the notion of „the past" or „forgotten" is somehow crucial. Looking at the tag „voice", the additional keywords to the sounds seem interesting. In the sound archive freesound.org you can find samples of „voice", which are often categorised in gender, in which style it is spoken or if it is „human" or something/-one else, e.g. „dinosaur", „alien".
So the voice really seems to be a medium to impersonate or present authentically a subject or theme, even on a little bit silly level.

In this anthology, I wanted to investigate wether the tone or sound of a voice is also an appropriate field for those self-representative operations. I collected samples and recordings of voices I found interesting in different terms. But the difficulty was to find categories or a way to index them, because — and I have to underline this, the anthology of *Voices* is not a reflection in technical, acoustic terms but in cultural and performative ones.
I discovered the strategy to allocate them in the Roland Barthes way[22], giving the matter a form and reflecting on it via the formalistic technique of a collection and giving interpretation from an overview perspective: adjusting, combining, layering and contextualizing it with quotes from texts.
I chose the objective order of the Latin alphabet and found terms equal to Barthes' understanding of figures.[23]
„Figures take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale). A figure is established if at

[22] I refer to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments.*

[23] Barthes, Roland: A Lover's Discourse: Fragments 1978, p. 3f.

least someone can say: *‚That's so true! I recognize that scene of language!'*"[24]

I decided to choose them in English and German language, as there are specifics I found more interesting in the other language than the other way around. Some letters have had more *figures*. Some didn't match with any. But I finally tried to choose at least one *figure*, for the start. Still, you can see on every page other *figures* I thought about, that — for now — work as tags. The voices are sampled from media, so I don't own them, I only listen to them with a non-profit reflective approach.

Some of the *figures* can be combined and refer to the same sample, but still I was interested in building a network of voices' impressions and effects. So e.g. the *figure* Acousmêtre can be combined with eerie, Telephone, Lautsprecher, Schrei, inner voice etc. so maybe we can see here, there's a lot of clusters, routings or rhizoma in between the figures.

During the research and the building up of this anthology I found difficulty in always finding a fitting sample to a certain *figure.* Many samples fit to a certain *figure* and sometimes I found the quote more universal than a sound. Still, this work is in progress, so I am sure it will enlarge and specify. So far, all samples are taken from videos from YouTube. They are enlisted on the page.

[24] Barthes, A Lover's Discourse, p. 4.

Sources:

Barthes, Roland: A Lover's Discourse: Fragments. Hill and Wang, 1978.

Dolar, Mladen: A Voice and nothing more. The MIT Press, 2006.

Dolar, Mladen: His Master's Voice. Eine Theorie der Stimme. suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main, 2007.

Goldsmith, Mark: Waves: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press 2018.

Internet:

How Hearing Works. URL: https://www.soundrelief.com/hearing-loss/how-hearing-works/

British Library Blog „sound and vision" on „Shakespeare and the Nightingale", found in URL: https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2016/04/shakespeare-and-the-nightingale.html, october 16, 2020.

Norman, Jeremy: The IBM 7094 is the first computer to sing. URL: https://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?entryid=4445.

Deactivation of HAL: URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8N72t7aScY.

„Hal wasn't always so eerily calm" in NYT, April 1, 2018. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/movies/hal-2001-a-space-odyssey-voice-douglas-rain.html.

Jever TV-Sot 2015. URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ujuHDR1YwRI

Voyager - What's on the Golden Record? URL: https://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/whats-on-the-record/

Further:

freesound.org