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VOICE

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It. *voce*; Fr. *voix*; Germ. *Stimme*; Span. *voz*. In the twentieth century, the voice, as an abstract concept, has paradoxically become a central topic in philosophical debates after Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, based on what he calls phonocentrism. In two seminal books (Derrida 1974 and 2011), he deconstructed both Rousseau's and Husserl's claims to install the voice in a metaphysical place, where it resonates with plenitude (Rousseau) and truth (Husserl). Beyond the broad philosophical implications of this critique, the comment on Rousseau's *Essais Sur l'origin des Langues*, at the core of Derrida's *Grammatology*, constitutes an implicit caveat to any regressive opposition between oral and written, voice and language, hidden in the resurgent interest in orality and, in the years to come, in the claim to uncover the "original voice". Drawing on Rousseau's narrative about the loss of the originary energy in sung speech through articulation, Derrida observes that "[t]his fissure is not among others. It is *the* fissure: the necessity of interval, the harsh law of spacing. It could not endanger song except by being inscribed in it from its birth and in its essence. Spacing is not the accident of a song. Or rather, as accident and accessory, fall and supplement, it is also that without which, strictly speaking, the song would not have come into being. In the *Dictionary*, the interval is a part of the definition of song. It is, therefore, so to speak, an originary accessory and an essential accident. Like writing. Rousseau says it without wishing to say it" (Derrida 1974: 200).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The philosophical question about the voice and its relationship to language has been the object of Giorgio Agamben's long-term investigation culminating in his *Experimentum vocis* (Agamben 2018: 1-29). Drawing on the twofold articulation of language (according to the different terminologies, name and discourse, *langue* and *parole*, semiotic and semantic, sense and denotation), which traces back to Plato and Aristotle and has been further elaborated by linguistics and the philosophy of language, Agamben's scrutiny

focuses on the fact that an insurmountable opposition splits these two levels: no passage can be discerned from one to another. From Agamben's perspective, however, this fissure locates the voice as the place of this articulation and defines the investigation of its elusive nature as the most urgent philosophical task. The Aristotelian distinction between the voice of the animal and that of man dwells, likewise, in this same place. Commenting upon several Aristotelian passages about *phone*, he captures the process of anthropogenesis in the "splitting of the animal voice and the positioning of logos in the very place of phone". (Agamben 2018: 15). Language arises, therefore, from an "operation on the animal voice", an inscription of single elements, letters (*grammata*), in its undifferentiated continuum. According to Agamben's perspective, the origin of this event cannot be historically pinpointed. The process of anthropogenesis is still ongoing and it happens according to the figure of *exceptio*: "Just as the natural life of man is included in politics through its very exclusion in the form of bare life, so human language (which, after all, according to Aristotle, founds the political community [...] takes place through an exclusion-inclusion of the 'bare voice' [...] in the logos" (Agamben 2018: 19). The voice, far from claiming the primacy of absolute presence, discloses a paradoxical relation with absence. Its relationship with language is a negative one: "it gives rise to it, by disappearing" (Agamben 2018: 28). The subject is, therefore, the result and the witness of this contact without articulation. Agamben's reading of Aristotle is an explicit critique of Derrida's tenet about the intrinsic phonocentrism of Western metaphysics. Mladen Dolar (1996) advances precisely the same critique, however, from a different perspective. In his account, phonocentrism is a marginal theme, a detail in the history of metaphysics. There is a different multi-millennial metaphysical history of the voice, where the voice is considered to be dangerous, threatening meanwhile, the seductive and feminine opposite of the logos. A third sense of the voice complicates the polarity between voice and logos, that is, the voice of the Father, "the voice that inherently sticks to logos itself, the voice that commands and binds, the voice of God" (Dolar 1996: 25). If one compares these traditional interpretations of the voice, it becomes clear that it is impossible to grasp the voice as an object.

As the object of an impossible investigation, the voice was also the result of the challenge of phonology. Segmenting speech into phonemes, the smallest linguistic entities, resulted in a total reduction of the voice into language. The diagnosis of the linguistic undertaking as a point of no return in the speculation about the voice is, in turn, the catalyst for a new reflection, for Dolar, as for Derrida and Agamben. Unlike the last two, Dolar refers to the psychoanalytic reflection of the voice, particularly that of Lacan. This move turns out to be very fruitful in managing the voice's theoretical intractability after the linguistic turn. The remainder left by the phonological operation coincides with the Lacanian *objet petit (a)*, the object of (unattainable) desire, the leftover of symbolic castration. Dolar's investigation of the pre-linguistic and post-linguistic sounds pinpoints the two outer limits of the voice. The former points towards "the zero-point of signification, the incidence of meaning, itself not meaning anything, the point around which other – meaningful – voices can be ordered" (Dolar 2006). The post-linguistic voice, singing, which is in turn highly structured, claims to have a sort of "surplus meaning" which cannot be expressed in words. Therefore, aesthetics is always in danger of transforming the voice into a fetish object. In conclusion, like

an arrow, the voice shows the direction toward signification and, at the same time, discloses the wound inflicted by the assumption of the symbolic order, to which it owes its power of fascination. For Dolar, the object voice, which is not an immaterial entity and cannot be reduced to the materiality which sustains it, can be investigated in different practices, considering its inherent hybridity. However, aesthetics cannot properly address it – as stated above – because of the danger of its fetishization. His Lacanian conception of the body makes him an uncompromising critic of those trends which reintroduce the body in the theoretical reflection, once neglected and repressed by the philosophical tradition.

The possible danger of “extolling the voice as an extension of the body” (*Afterword* to Feldman and Zeitlin 2019: 347) can only partially be individuated in the complex and ambiguous definition of the “grain of the voice” as proposed by Roland Barthes. This critique resonates with Barthes’s passionate description of the bodily grounding of the voice “something which is directly the singer’s body, brought by one and the same movement to your ear from the depths of the body’s cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilage, and from the depth of the Slavonic language, as if a single skin lined the performer’s inner flesh and the music he sings” (Barthes 1991: 270). This and similar Barthesian passages mark the entrance of the sonorous voice, produced by “a throat of flesh” in the theoretical discussion of the voice. Nevertheless, this bodily account of the voice is intertwined with two psychoanalytic reference points: the distinction between *pheno-* and *geno-*song (borrowed and adapted from Julia Kristeva) and the Lacanian object *a*. The *geno-*song is the “space in which the significations germinate ‘from within the language and its very materiality’; this a signifying function alien to communicate, to representation (of feelings), to expression; it is that culmination (or depth) of production where melody actually works on language – not what it says but the voluptuous pleasure of its signifier-sounds, of its letters: explores how language works and identifies itself with that labor. *Geno-*song, is in a very simple word which must be taken very seriously: the *diction* of language” (Barthes 1991: 271). For Barthes, as for Dolar, it is impossible to tackle the voice in a specific scientific field because of it being a leftover, a supplement, a lapsus, the object (*a*). He vindicates, however, an erotic relationship (verging on fetishism?) with the voice as an object *a*, claiming that there is no neutral voice, and if that neutrality could occur, it would be terrifying “as if we were to discover a frozen world, one in which desire was dead” (Barthes 1991: 280).

Adriana Cavarero, in turn, developed a philosophy of the voice grounded in the singularity and unrepeatability of voices. In comparison with Derrida’s speculation on the *phone*, Cavarero develops an opposite point. She identifies, at the core of Western thought, a process of devocalization of logos, grounded in the Aristotelian definition of logos as *phone semantike*: “Despite the grammar”, as Cavarero explains, “the fundamental role falls to the semantic [...] founded on the priority of the order of signifieds with respect to the signifiers. To the voice, therefore, goes the service role — it makes signified audible, it provides an acoustic robe for the mental work of the concept” (Cavarero 2005: 35). Drawing on feminist thinkers, notably Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, Cavarero develops a polarity between the vocalic, i.e. the sonorous dimension of the voice, grounded in the libidinal body and related to the material sphere, and the semantic, i.e. the signifying power of language. The exclusion of women from the realm of thought and reason is inscribed, therefore, in the complex dynamics of these two poles: “The binary

economy of the patriarchal symbolic order would be, in this sense, rather simple: on the one hand, the body and the voice, and on the other, the mind and speech. However, the framework is anything but simple, for speech, *phone semantike*, cannot help but reduplicate within itself the dichotomy that splits it into vocalic and semantic. Through the corporeality of the voice, the feminine is thus reinsinuated again in the register of masculine speech. In other words, speech— whether understood as signifying voice or as vocalized signified—is sexually ambiguous, from the perspective of the patriarchal ideology. Although the semantic guarantees to speech a rationality that is privileged by man, the vocal keeps speech rooted in the body, which is assigned to woman. The devocalization of logos aims to eliminate this very ambiguity by leaving the feminine figures to embody what remains—namely, the voice” (Cavarero 2005: 207).

Cavarero’s investigation addresses the role of voice in opera and poetry and several cultural topoi in the Bible and the myths of ancient Greece. Her main goal, however, is to envision “a politics of voices” rooted in the singularity of who is speaking, in her/his “vocalic uniqueness”, instead of on the universal disembodied individual that relies on the communicative rationality of language (Cavarero 2005: 210).

Alongside the multifaceted discussion outlined above, the voice has been at the core of countless investigations in many intersecting fields: anthropology, ethnomusicology and musicology, poetry, theatre, opera, cinema, performance, and recently the newly established discipline of voice studies. Calling upon a new vocal turn seems to be appropriated (Feldman, Zeitlin 2019: 3). This challenging and sometimes confusing debate coalesces troubling contemporary issues, such as gender, race, and the impact of technology on one of the most human forms of expression and communication. The vicissitudes of vocal experimentation in the 20th and 21st centuries attest to the deep intertwining of the philosophy of the voice with the theory of its practice.

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