







On the Body as the Stage of the Voice
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Obscure contours slowly reveal slender, slightly wrinkled hands accompanied by the sound of breathing. ssssssss, ssssssss, hands, ssssss, darkness, ssssss, the hands move upwards, sssssssssssssssssssssss. The hands rest softly on each other, holding an open secret that everyone can see and few can understand. The chest rises, the chest falls, the breath is cushioned by the hands. Breathe in, breathe out. sssssss- sss. Eins, zwei drei, vier... sieben, acht, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, you don't speak with your voice. The words are spoken in German by a female voice. A massage, like the sound of a mother patting a child's back. A woman's face appears suddenly. mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Neck, hands trembling at the speed of the vibrating rhythm. mmm- mmm.

Lalalala. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh- hhhh. Ohhhhh. Fingers lightly striking the face. The tongue flitting up and down like a constantly vibrating muscle. Tongue twister. Tongue training. Tongue liberation. A young woman's face appears, her eyes accented by eyeliner. The hand rests softly upon the stomach again. Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu, repeated while the woman places her hand against the girl's upper body. ahhhhhhhh. Clear the throat. Eeeeeeeeeeeeeee uttered at different pitches. Now the woman's hands move across the girl's neck and head. Then numbers again. "You don't speak with your own voice", the woman repeats and continues the exercise with iterations of vowels and consonants.

In Zdjelar's *Stimme* (2013) the camera captures what seems an enigmatic scene at first: an older woman is guiding a young woman by means of her body and her voice. The movement of the hands is enhanced by a strong sound of breathing. Dressed in black clothes, both figures emerge from blackness. The image is in focus, but leaves the viewer uncertain about what is taking place. What we are watching, in fact, is a voice

coach and her client during a session of voice modulation in Vienna. The coach is helping her client to free her voice of its socio-cultural constraints in an attempt to allow her to find her natural voice. She is guiding her client's voice through different locations of her body. The phonetic iterations are punctuated by the two bodies touching hands—as if the young woman's body were a musical instrument to be played or experimented with. Where is voice actually located? Katarina Zdjelar is interested in those moments when the voice is perceived as personal property, while at the same time it acts as a public agency. Her work interacts with the instances when the dialectical interactions between the socio-political and the personal stage and shape the voice through the materiality of the body: is it really me speaking when I speak? How does my upbringing speak through me when I speak? Who is entitled to speak?¹

The high-pitched voice is often associated negatively with female speech. Aristotle in his *Physiognomonics* is alleged to be one of the first to write that the high-pitched voice is associated with evil female dispositions because brave creatures like lions, bulls and the human male have deep voices.² It is no surprise that Margaret Thatcher took many voice classes in order to lower the tone of her speech. The voice coach in *Stimme*, however, leaves open the possibility of the search for a voice that goes beyond these categories. For me the female bodies in the film add a more complex layer to voice dialectics: the voices, the breathing, the gestures all recall communication which stands between the mother's womb and the fear of alienation. Through the camera's focus and movements, the practice of the two women is rendered as an intimate, primordially enigmatic exercise. While the voice of women, whether low or high-pitched, has mostly been seen as mediated by a male-dominated set of rules in language throughout history, it has also often been the focus of interest of many theoretical writings on alternative approaches to the genealogy of language. For example, Walter Benjamin in his *Metaphysics of Youth* (1913/14) places communication between female bodies in opposition to the articulated language of society and adult life. He writes: "How did Sappho and her women friends talk among themselves? How did women come to speak? For language extinguishes their soul... They bring their bodies close and caress one another. Their conversation has freed itself from the subject and from language."³ In Benjamin's perhaps romanticized lines, the female voice becomes 'the other' of language and linguistics. For him, the female voice is linked to a physical manifestation of what could surpass or undermine

1. See Virginie Bobin, "In the Fabric of the Voice: A Polyphonic Conversation. Interview with Bouchra Ouizguen, Blanca Calvo and Ion Munduate, Katarina Zdjelar, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan," in *Manifesta Journal*, #17 (2014), 17–27, here: 21.

2. For a more specific interpretation of Greek mythology and philosophy in relation to the female voice see Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Direction Books, 1995), 119–142.

3. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1915–1926*, 1, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael William Jennings, Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

4. Cathy Acker, "Against Ordinary Language, The Language of the Body," in *Bodies of Work* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 143–152.

the articulated subject dominant in society. From this perspective, the words of the coach in *Stimme*, "You don't speak with your own voice", take on a new dimension, a tacit acceptance about the relation between voice and articulated language. How can the client find her natural voice if it is always misplaced? The film leaves me with the possibility of a voice that might obliterate dominant concepts of rational meaning.

Communication between the women is set as a repetition of voice games played through different parts of the body. This is mirrored in the manner in which the camera keeps returning to parts of the body coming in and out of darkness. If this is a vocal game, playing it involves a choreography of minimal muscular responses. The American writer Cathy Acker once compared the practice of bodybuilding to a language game, which resonates with the one in *Stimme*.⁴ The body of the bodybuilder is one that is not normally associated with eloquent speech. Although one imagines the exercise of the bodybuilder to be much more hectic than the muscular exercises of the two women in *Stimme*, they are both based on very simple repetitions. "In the gym I repeat the same controlled gestures with the same weights, the same reps, the same breath patterns", writes Cathy Acker. For the bodybuilder's language is reduced to a minimal set of nouns and to numerical repetition. Acker sees it as one of the simplest language games; she calls it "the language of the body". This repetition of muscular training and minimal language remains on the threshold of generated syntax and introduces a different mode of communication where the voice is in very close relation to the physicality of the body. I have the same impression of the women's mysterious exercises in *Stimme*. Of course, on the one hand they are exercising their voices, training them for better syntax production in future performances, but as their iterations are filmed, their voices erase articulation. Although they might be trying to perfect future words and meaningful phrases, at the moment the camera captures them, they are also creating a language that is speechless and defies logical understanding. The women's breathing generates a 'psycho-geography' that is nearly void of verbalization. In her bodybuilding, Cathy Acker conceives of a meaning that becomes one with her breath and her body. Yet, as she is enclosed in her bodily labyrinth, she cannot help but ask: "Is my body a foreign land to me?" She can enter the labyrinth of the body only when she can forget and unlearn melodic verbal eloquence. While practicing bodybuilding, she becomes like a traveler who, while going to a new country and learning new words, must slowly forget her old language. In *Stimme*, a similar

5. This phrase is particularly relevant within female subjectivity, as females have hardly spoken with their own voice through the centuries, but a detailed history is beyond the scope of this article.



The waq waq tree from an Arabic miscellany compiled for the Mongol ruler of Baghdad, Sultan Ahmad, who ruled from 1382–1410. MS Bodl. Or. 133, fol.41b.

6. Although an art historical account of the waq waq tree still has to be written, medieval descriptions can be found in books about the medieval maps and cosmos, such as the one given in *Medieval Views of the Cosmos: Picturing the Universe in the Christian and Islamic Middle Ages*, ed. E. Edson and E. Savage-Smith, (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2004).

process of unlearning takes place. “You don’t speak with your own voice” is the only full phrase spoken by the older woman, and it is never repeated by the younger one.⁵ This non-repetition generates a chilling vibration. Does one ever speak with one’s own voice? What is the voice she hears as she speaks?

An old Persian legend often depicted in medieval manuscripts tells of a tree that grows in a faraway land and bears unusual fruit. Popular in Islamic manuscripts, this legend was illustrated in books of wonder. In the story this tree bears the strangest of fruits. In March as the sun starts to set later, little feet start to emerge from its branches. Some days later, the feet also have legs, and by the end of the month the fruits become full-grown human bodies, often depicted as female. They look beautiful and have graceful proportions, yet as they fall onto the ground, the only thing they can say is “waq waq”. However appealing they are, their bodies have no bones and possess no clear language, just pure voice. They will never be able to walk, as they will never be able to possess articulate words. They have no life, nor soul. Left on the ground, they quickly perish and their bare, boneless flesh starts to emit an appalling stench.⁶ Perhaps emitting pure sound or pure voice, they have fully unlearned the history of voice dominations. If the voice is dominated by socio-political contexts, and the women in *Stimme* are trying to ‘liberate’ their voices from such constraints, the voices of the waq waq tree girls represent abstracted ignorance and pure unarticulated sound.

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The howtosayto itiswhatis hemustwhomust worden schall
(James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*)

Like the women in *Stimme*, in *The Perfect Sound* (2009) the men are engaged in a similarly mysterious endeavor. A young and an older man face each other while making peculiar gestures with their hands. In this case the coach is helping his client to perfect an accent in English. The darkness of *Stimme* is rendered by grey tones in *The Perfect Sound*. The hands, which like in *Stimme* play an important role, are mainly in focus and directed to the face. They indicate something that is moving forwards, out, being liberated into space. As the men face each other, they engage in a vocal game that is directly related to words and syntax. On the one hand, the male voices repeat discrete sound units, but these units are clearly part of articulated words in a specific language (unlike *Stimme* where the sound units seem part of a primordial language), for example from monosyllables like *la la la*, or

ding dong, they speak words like *bread*, *that*, etc. Somehow melodious, their voices resemble polyphonic singing. The young man is trying to master his tongue. He must learn a new accent, that of English as spoken in his new home of Birmingham.

Accents constantly give away aspects of one’s life and social status. In order to survive in a new environment, it is better to learn to say things in the proper accent. It can sometimes be a risky business that puts more than one’s reputation in danger. In the New Testament for example, Peter is terrified when a maid recognizes his foreign accent and immediately challenges him and his Christian belief (“Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away”, Matthew 26:73). Similar slips of the tongue happen every day with different consequences. It is therefore not a surprise that the client wants to learn a new accent. While the young woman in *Stimme* is unlearning her socio-political context through her vocal exercises, the client in *The Perfect Sound* is in a way learning a whole new socio-political context by attempting to master a new accent. His efforts open up many questions regarding the role of voice in relation to self-identity. If someone perfects a new accent, does he or she unlearn the old one? How does a new accent change who someone is?

Mother tongues, father tongues, city tongues, or lovers’ and other tongues all influence the sense of who one is and how one speaks. Each of these tongues forms and prescribes a kind of possession of the self. This kind of possession can be detected only slowly, and it is implemented in everyday unassuming and continuous mastery of specific voices. In this sense the self is laid bare at an intersection where different tongues and/or possessions meet. Of course, not all tongues have the same influence and duration in the sense of who one is. The mother’s accent is more prolonged and has a greater influence than the accent of a specific place where someone lives for a short period of time.

Images such as a mouth full of words which one is not able to utter correctly or in time are perhaps even more present in a world that defines itself as global. When words are not properly spoken, the self is seen as incomplete, as a failing body. People learning a new language in a new country often encounter a different persona within themselves during the learning period. A common experience is that they often feel like children during the first learning phases, as they can express themselves using only simple words. But what happens as the accent is perfected? What kind of possession happens then? Is the client in *The Perfect Sound* trying to take possession of a new voice or is a new voice about to possess him?

I write ‘take possession of’ because in the case of acquiring an accent, it is not from within that one learns, but from the outside context and new, outside voices. Moreover unlearning one’s old voice also means slowly erasing one’s own history, erasing the voice of one’s mother or father from one’s speech, and is thus a form of dispossession. It is as if certain voices should be silenced in order to let new ones speak.

Within what Jacques Derrida described as a continuous “metaphysics of presence”, speech is conceived as a derivate of a presence.⁷ This critique is made evident by close readings of Plato’s rendering of the Socratic dialogues, and especially on his attacks on the Sophists. While for Plato speech (logos) is celebrated as a life form, or living organism, writing is mostly seen as a corpse, a dead body, or as sperm gone bad and infertile. The written letter can easily be learned and repeated endlessly. This mnemonic exercise is for Plato a sort of “maquillage of the dead”, as if corpses could act and live, putting powder on their faces to forget that they are dead. Speech on the other hand is seen to be alive, filled with breath and the essence of life, and hence cannot be learned just by reading, but only by experiencing life. The Platonic perspective on speech still holds a relevant position in our societies where a greater influx of people try to refine ‘right’ accents. For even if the client in *The Perfect Sound* writes eloquent English, he is seen as a proper citizen only after long experience of adopting the ‘right’ accent. For Plato, only speech can contain truth, and through speech one discovers one’s self, true identity, the ‘I’ that talks to itself and to others as a complete self. The training of speech is therefore essential to becoming one’s true self. As a consequence, care is needed in the use of one’s own speech. While training and rehearsing speech, one trains oneself in becoming (or rediscovering in the case of Plato) oneself. One shouldn’t talk senselessly; each word needs to be properly uttered in order to unleash its force and meaning. Speech, the best and most elementary of tools, is perhaps one of the earliest locations for technological improvements and carefully rehearsed experiments. Only through technical mastery can one learn to speak and have one’s voice matter and be respected. Only in this way will one’s body not become like the fruits of the waq waq tree. In a Platonic perspective, the rhythm of words should be a harmonious continuation of signification, ‘rightly’ articulated, as if “a perfect god were speaking from within”. From this angle, *The Perfect Sound* is a pivotal image of the techniques of speech in which the “god speaking from within” is replaced by the secular teacher of accents. It is interesting that most of the gestures of the coach and his

client point towards a burst outside of the body, emphasizing the ‘liveliness’ of speech, as something that needs to leave the body, as something that happens outside it. In a way, a new secularized version of ‘divine language’ is channeled through the body of the accent coach. He becomes the representative of a new deity that tries to take possession of the young man’s self. Through these techniques of speaking he will incorporate the new signs within his flesh, so that they become his own voice. But for now, different voices are in the process of possessing him as he tries to find new expressions of his identity.

In both *Stimme* and *The Perfect Sound*, the body is presented as the locus of choreography between language and the voice. While depicting exercises for the perfection of the voice and the self, both films move in different directions. Through close-ups of these exercises, the interaction of the voice and language with the flesh of men and women is laid bare. As the exercises unfold, it becomes evident that utterances of ‘I’ cannot become a substitute for the description of a body. During their technical training, the women in *Stimme* utter voices as if they had no subject. Their breath exceeds subjectivity. The seemingly unarticulated sounds, which form the basis of articulation, also open up to the unknown, to the estranged, to the subversive self as a nebulous mass of language, to what languishes on the tongue and might never be spoken. The choreography of the muscles of both women and men in Zdjelar’s work exceeds the script of the exercise and exposes self as a formal necessity floating on a viscerally wounded subjectivity without a subject.

7. See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

