

**Absolute Ventriloquy (or, Earing the Senses)**

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Last night I dreamed that it wasn't real. It was all a tape recording.

I found myself standing near a dumpster in a back alley. It was late at night and a warm wind wafted loose sheets of paper around me. Peering down this alley and across a laneway, I saw a door, above which was written in curving blue neon lights the word "*Silencio*." And then a taxi pulls into view, stops in front of the entrance, and lets out two women. Both are blond. One wears a black dress and the other, a little shorter than the first, is kitted out in a red cardigan and black skirt. As the taxi pulls away I have an urge to join these women. A moment later I'm sprinting down the alley and I meet them at the door's threshold. Together we enter *Silencio*.

Inside is a playhouse, the old timey kind with balconies and galleries facing a stage, divided front from back, with a tall red velvet curtain. As I amble along the mezzanine looking for a seat, I hear a false silence that sounds like a string orchestra and organ grinding a slowly rising bass figure. At stage left is a pensive looking man in a black suit. He's standing in shadows, hard dark eyes glaring at the floor, waiting, it seems, for a cue. I find a seat. As I'm about to sit, the man in shadows promptly declares: "*No hay banda!* There is no band."

Then a reverb-sodden clarinet begins to play a mawkish noir-like blues theme, accompanying the man as he moves to centre stage and towards an Astatic 10-D chrome microphone, coruscating with the sliver beams gathered from a single spotlight.

He continues, "*Il n'y a pas d'orchestre.*"

With a flourish of his right hand he conjures a walking cane, then, stopping momentarily, cane held aloft, he tells me in a near whisper: "This is all a tape recording."

As though resuming a sermon, he repeats, "*No hay banda!* And yet," pointing the cane to his ear "...we hear a band."

"Indeed," I say to myself. "The band plays; I hear it. The women I've followed in here hear it. We all hear the band. But it's true. There is no band."

As the man says: "It is all recorded." "It is...an illusion."

At this point I begin to consider what it means that "It is all recorded," and then I start to wonder if Jean Baudrillard may have been one of Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, and what it would be like were he having this dream. In this reverie I, or rather, *he* would decide that these declarations are poetic injunctions, and their demonstration on stage the play of an impossible exchange.

A theatre performance composed of ruses exploiting sound's capacity to simulate presence, or equally, to dissimulate absence, he would say, seems to portray equivalence between the revealed "truth" of the situation—"It is all recorded"—and the technological artifice that *produces* this truth—"It is all recorded."

However, he would immediately clarify that "truth" and "artifice" are *not* equivalent. This digital verity, the "is" or "is not" of the situation, can't keep count in *Silencio*. When a trumpeter arrives on stage and shows us that he's doing not what he appears to be doing, and especially when a woman wearing a jeweled tear, standing alone at the totemic microphone, dolefully sings Roy Orbison's *Crying* in Spanish and faints, but continues to sing in a voice that may or may not belong to her, truth and artifice do not tally. Counting these two figures can't manage the gap between what is and what isn't, because counting, which is just a way of "not 'losing count' amid the swirl of pure numbers," afflicts the situation with the delirium of tracking numbers' "differentiated indifference." It's like what happens to Alice when the White Queen asks her: "What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?"

The statement "It is all an illusion" perpetrates the equivalence of truth and artifice because it counts both terms at the same time, with the same unit—"it." Like two lines passing through a single point, truth and artifice exchange their negative characteristics<sup>1</sup> in the statement of their accounting, and, in a way, conceal how "One must always be more than one in order to avoid being less than one."

Truth and artifice show themselves as one thing only in being counted with "another thing that can be counted as one." And since "one must be able to count two things as one for either one of them to count as one," the truth or fiction that it is all recorded is "always a more-than-one that is less than one."<sup>2</sup>

It then occurs to me, as well as the imaginary 'pataphysician I dream I am, that we're in *Club Silencio* and "*There is no band.*" There is no *sign* or *count* of music. Yet, I (we?) hear a band, its music floating uncertainly but clearly in the mockery of a silence that is not.

"How do you exchange sound and silence?" I ask my woolgathering figment. "What does it mean that 'There is no band' when 'It is all recorded'? When sound and silence fail to be each other's difference because 'This is all a tape recording,' then what's left for them to do?"

And he answers, "When 'It is all recorded,' there's *Nothing* left to do. Something is already spoken for. Nothing is something to be done."

He then reminds me of what the Taoist sage Chuang Chou wrote during the time of the Hundred Schools of Thought: "To use a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse." And it dawns on him who is me: A butterfly is not a horse!

And then I notice something odd—I've been crying! The singer's sagging body is being carried off stage and I feel dirty. Runnels of tears line my face, broadcasting the pretense of a seduction that never took place.

The vital illusion of theatre, ordinarily flush with experiences that actually are not, is now rife with simulated experiences that actually are; its illusion now more real than real because its explicated appearance shows itself to be only what it says it is: “It is...an illusion.” It is exactly as it pretends to be. The scene has swallowed the mirror of appearance and *I* am choking on it. How ironic then that as I gag on the transparency of the scene, the sheer excessiveness of the real illusion, it occurs to me that this is not only a tape recording—it is a horse.

The *illusion* is the horse, a talking horse. And it’s telling me that it’s not real.

“The performance or you?” I ask.

And it responds: “Exactly.”

“Did you know,” continues the horse, whose mottled grey coat and frontal bosses puts me in mind of those Spanish breeds used for stadium jumping, “that tests were conducted showing THC interferes with our ability to filter out irrelevant stimuli and suppress certain kinds of responsive actions, actions that are taken as evidence of will or intent?”<sup>3</sup>

“I didn’t,” I said.

“Indeed. THC induces what the experts call a ‘transient psychosis.’ And what is one of the chief symptoms of psychosis?” the horse asked, rhetorically. “Auditory hallucination—Hearing voices.”

“Like I’m hearing now?” I asked, mockingly.

“Mostly,” answered the horse. “What I’m trying to say is that the relaxation of your response inhibition—however you accomplish it—suggests that much of your time is spent trying *not* to hear the voice of things, trying not to be lured, siren-like, onto the rocky shores of meaning, where what you hear might come from some feeling-thinking thing and compel you to give a shit.”

Reflecting on this, and then realizing the implication, I said, “So, you’re extrapolating from these studies that I may in fact live life through what’s essentially a functional pathology because I seem inclined to hear in a brook’s babbling or the wind’s whispering an expressive intent.”

“Basically,” granted the horse. “But it’s not a ‘natural’ inclination so much as a habit that you symbol-mongering creatures have to indulge a capacity to surpass the given, a capacity, for your information, that we life forms all share. You’ve just made organic matter’s common ‘faculty of drawing from itself more than it contains’<sup>4</sup> a second nature, and tried to substitute the latter’s skein of abstractions for a mythical first.”

“You call the articulation of these abstractions ‘thinking,’ and their distinction ‘meaning.’ But I’m wholly pragmatic about my behaviour, and I’m content to call thinking a style of doing in which certain actions ‘do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote.’<sup>5</sup>

You, on the other hand, get all fatalistic about which is what. It's not, however, that I've no concern for distinguishing this from that, or you from me, it's just that I mobilize incompatible possibilities by *doing* what I say I'm *not* doing what I say—I perform paradox. I express the sense of two modes of activity in a single act and you get bent out of shape. You can't take what's said or done as not denoting the things for which they stand would denote.<sup>6</sup> Do you follow?"

"Mostly," I said.

"Things are always meaningful for you," the horse continued, "but only if they're also always *not* actually saying/doing what they are not. If you hear voices in the wind they must either be real voices or not, and if they are real, they must denote only one expression of sense, or not. For you the rustling leaves wind can't whisper your name and because the second nature through which you're inclined to live—your patchwork of habits—is a diacritical one. You live *meaningfully* by ensuring that you never state the sense of what you're saying, that the sense of what you say is stated only in the saying of another saying."<sup>7</sup>

"But wait," I said, "there are times when I *do* seem to say the sense of what I'm saying, times when I'm able to *say* what I say I'm *not* saying what I say.

"Yes, certainly," said the horse. "And you treat it as merely 'play,' or you call it 'irony'—Romantic, tragic, cosmic, verbal, situational, and poetic."

"Don't forget 'pathetic,'" I added, sarcastically.

"No," countered the horse, "that's a fallacy, the pathetic fallacy: the lyrical inscription of human-like feelings or doings in very un-human things. Like this, for example, 'For murder, tho it have no tongue, will speak with most miraculous organ.'"

"Right, *Hamlet*, Act 2, scene 2," I noted. "Murder doesn't speak. And neither do horses."

"Personification," said the horse.

"How ironic of you," I replied.

"Not exactly," corrected the horse. "It's ventriloquy, a little trick I learned first by listening to the way recordings dissociate sounds from their sources, and then by grasping how this technical affair 'has produced a generalization of the idea of voice,'<sup>8</sup> a generalization of what all patterned sounds stand for—namely, sentience. Because of this I've effectively figured out how to hallucinate a voice. And *here's* the irony: You have, too! You suffer as much as I do from 'aniphonesis.'"

The horse paused, waited to see that I understood, and resumed the disquisition.

"You see, the 'tape recording' has not only severed the tongue from the mouth, it's loosed the accent from the tongue. The techniques you've developed first with instruments and voice to

hear in sounds things that aren't actually there have metastasized to your other senses via the way recordings replace the 'local sign of the body'<sup>9</sup> with the local sign of the sound wave.

"In other words," said the horse, "recordings have distributed your techniques for abstracting semblances of vitality in sound into other tissues of life by making their technics a more stable, coherent, and integral part of your ordinary experience. That quality of 'aliveness' you perceive in a chuckle, a melodic hook, a sick beat, or even a phatic 'uh-huh,' is no longer just an aural matter.

"You've named this splitting of voice 'schizophonia,' but that's rubbish. Nothing is split. It's simply that the near-complete integration of audio technologies into day-to-day life has turned musical or vocal utterances into something 'more adjectival than substantial,'<sup>10</sup> something analogous to the affective valence that pervades any and all situations. The species of 'expressive detachment of animateness'<sup>11</sup> that you count as testament to sentience or aliveness is shown by recordings to be an effect, a phonaesthetic effect that has now spread across other sensory domains and their various media.

"The world of 'electric definition,' as David Foster Wallace called his media-saturated culture, has indeed made ears of the eyes. And insofar as the ear 'subtly and actively connives to make what it takes to be sense out of what it hears,'<sup>12</sup> the earing of the senses means that anything can, ironically, 'sing' or 'speak,' so to speak."

Pressing on, the horse said, "For example, the accent of a serif in typeface, or the inflection that a lamp makes to the mood of a darkened interrogation room can be understood as a phonaesthetic effect. Like background music or chatter these details modulate the affective tonality of reading or questioning events. And sure, these stylized events are not exactly alive, but they're *alive-like*—their stylize is swollen with a vital import."

"So, what you're saying," I said, "is that *your* voice is borrowed from *my* involuntary addiction to expressive intent, that my ears' devotion to significance, or rather, my compulsion to constantly source the import of sounds, endows *you* with the semblance of a voice."

"Of course," replied the horse. "Nothing speaks for itself. Not even words..." And pausing a moment, the horse added, "...or odd ones for that matter."

"Absolute ventriloquy is the condition of existence because there's a kind of general expressivity, or as some would say, physiognomic significance<sup>13</sup> in the form of things that makes their *appearances* exchangeable—the things themselves aren't exchangeable but the sense for which they stand is, a sense of expression that is 'not logically discriminated, but is felt as a quality rather than recognized as a function.'"<sup>14</sup>

"How do you know this?" I asked.

"Because it comes straight from the horse's mouth," said the horse, "and if you've been paying attention, then you'll understand that my mouth is your mouth," I said.

“Or at least I think I said this,” I thought to myself.

...If absolute ventriloquy is the law, then irony is the rule, and mine can't be its own voice but only a voice whose drawl shares its expressive force with the way lingering tobacco and vanilla notes express the finish of a small-batch bourbon.

Yet if it's all a tape recording, does any of this really matter? Irony is lost when it's forgotten that it's not the opposite of what it's playing at. When the ironic gesture inducts us into “a register of existence where what matters is no longer what one does, but what one does stands-for,” irony becomes a law rather than a rule, and as a law it can no longer exclude the middle. “The instantaneous back-and-forths between logical levels”<sup>15</sup> that ruled the exchange between contrastive terms no longer holds when “it is all recorded” because there is no point of view that is not already what it is not. In other words, under the law of irony everything is impossible to exchange.

However, if I'm okay with lying to myself, then maybe there's no problem. When everything says something that does not denote what those sayings for which they stand would denote, all I need is a little superstition. Well, actually, I need a little *hyperstition*. Superstition really only helps me navigate a reality that's seemingly beyond my control because when I'm superstitious I'm just trying to *seduce* results from something I think is beyond my grasp. But when I'm are too much in control or my reality—like when “It is all recorded”—Nothing is beyond my expression of it. This means that I have to create Nothing; I have to invent an occasion of inexplicability, not in order to break the law that “It is all recorded,” but to virtually *alienate* results from actions, or rather, to estrange causes from effects. Like a dream whose verisimilitude subsists in the ignorance of its similitude, being hyperstitious gives me a way to instrumentalize the truth of irony by making it lie, which, in a sense, makes it meaningful. In other words, being hyperstitious lets me take my bullshit seriously.

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There is no band, yet I hear a band. And someone is singing a familiar song, but I don't know the words. I'm crying and there's a horse telling me that he likes to play. Hands take my wrist and fingers softly trace the poetry of a well-worn tragedy along my arm. A poem—the sensation is like a lullaby. It makes me drowsy. *J'entends le parti pris des choses*, and I begin to dream it wasn't real. It was all a tape recording.

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### How to “speak from the belly”

<sup>1</sup> One: Take a line from Jean Baudrillard. Why? Because who but he could suggest that negative characters might be exchanged between humans and machines while at the same time arguing that such an exchange is impossible. See *Impossible Exchange*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Two: Collect a number of passages about “ones” and “counting.” Steven Connor's “What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?” Literature, Number and Death,” paper presented at 20th-2st Literature Seminar, University of Oxford, 4 December 2013 (<http://stevenconnor.com/oneandone.html>) is a good a good source, and his “The Horror of Number: Can Humans Learn to Count?,” which he presented at

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University of Toronto, 1 October 2014 (<http://stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Horror-of-Number.pdf>) is another.

<sup>3</sup> Three: Invoke something about the relationship between psychotropic drugs and neuroscience. The findings that THC produce transient psychotic symptoms in brain regions implicated in schizophrenia, and that the clinical evidence that it impairs certain cognitive processes involved in the inhibition of involuntary responses to various stimuli is particularly effective reference. More than being merely intriguing it provides empirical evidence that allows us to envision how the brain is more an engine than a mirror. Zerrin Atakan et al's paper "Cannabis affects people differently: inter-subject variation in the psychotogenic effects of  $\Delta^9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol: a functional magnetic resonance imaging study with healthy volunteers," in *Psychological Medicine* 43, no. 6 (2012): 1255-67, is where this reference comes from. Steven Connor (see above) also borrows Atakan et al's findings to extrapolate a position that one of the roles of executive cognitive control is the suppression of what can only be called a compulsion to mean. Connor's does this in his paper "Panophonia," presented at Pompidou Centre, 22 February 2012, accessed 19 October 2013 (<http://stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/panophonia.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Four: Bring up Bergson. This French philosopher had a knack for extracting expressions of life from the sheer quivering of atoms. For him all forms of life share a capacity to surpass the given insofar as to surpass the given is a definition of what counts as "life." Oh yeah, disregard the circularity of that last bit. So... See Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, trans. H. Wildon Carr, London: MacMillan. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*.

<sup>5</sup> Five: Remember Gregory Bateson's formulate for the logic of play? Use it liberally. You'll find it in "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 138-148.

<sup>6</sup> Six: Do what Brian Massumi did in *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014)—follow step five.

<sup>7</sup> Seven: Always—*always!*—try to summon Gilles Deleuze. Most people draw on his work with Felix Guattari. However, if you *really* want to speak from the belly go with something from *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). This comes from chapter five, "Fifth Series of Sense."

<sup>8</sup> Eight: Return to one of your earlier sources. This Steven Connor again, only this time it from his paper/talk "Panophonia."

<sup>9</sup> Nine: Sometimes step nine is the same as step eight: This is Massumi, but from an earlier work, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 145.

<sup>10</sup> Ten: Step ten is also step eight: Connor, "Panophonia."

<sup>11</sup> Eleven: Step eleven looks like step eight, but it's actually step nine—Massumi, again from *Semblance and Event*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Twelve: Make eleven a final example of step seven. Connor, from a paper he presented Columbia University, 14 February 2009 called "Earlips" (<http://www.stevenconnor.com/earlips/earlips.pdf>).

<sup>13</sup> Thirteen: Introduce an obscure thinker, someone like Ernst Cassirer, who argued that perception is not an impassive activity but a proto-symbolic form strewn with *expressive* meaning that derives from the affective valence that inheres in an event's appearing and being experienced. See his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 1-3*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Fourteen: Bring up Susanne Langer. In addition to being both incredibly lucid and insightful, her work exacts an analysis of artworks based not on their formal or medial features but the experiential effects they compose. What makes it imperative to mention to Langer in this guide to ventriloquy is that her concept of "semblance" is a theory of illusion. See her work *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) for an exhaustive account of the species of illusions that different art forms produce.

<sup>15</sup> Fifteen: Repeat step eight: Massumi expanding the purview of Bateson's theory in *Animals*, 5, 22.