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**Book review**
## Investigating the threshold of VOICE

Neumark, N., Gibson, R., & van Leeuwen, T. (Eds.) (2010). *VOICE – Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media.* Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press

Reviewing this type of book appears at the same time to be both an easy and a challenging task. Easy in the sense that on many levels it presents itself as both well-written and well-structured; challenging in the sense that it wishes to capture the phenomenon of voice not only from a variety of angles, but also in very different styles. Like the study of sound in general, the study of voice appeals to a highly differentiated field of studies; thus, this publication contains contributions from fields of, for instance, art history, media studies, sound engineering, arts, popular culture and anthropology.

Despite this variety of both subjects and styles, it appears well-structured due both to a good and highly qualified introduction and to the intermezzos introducing each section, all of which are written by Norie Neumark.

The introduction takes its point of departure in a discussion of the current state of the voice on the theoretical agenda, as it seems to experience a kind of revival. Rhetorically Neumark asks if the voice has changed in this process of revitalisation. Her introduction in many ways tends to answer this question, bringing up a number of key questions and concerns that are debated throughout the book: Since Derrida's perspective of phonocentrism, the voice has been haunted by its tendency to stick to the imaginations of the representation of an authentic self. In continuation of this, the voice has had a tendency to appear theoretically suspicious. However, in recent theory, mainly during the past 10 years, this notion has been challenged by, for instance, Steven Connor, Mladen Dolar and Adriana Cavarero, who from different perspectives have vitalised the voice as a theoretical concept.

One of the main claims of this publication seems to be that the voice and its conditions experience severe changes, provoked both by the cultures of the digital and the network, where voice is both shaped by and helps shape digital culture. Because of the challenges posed by digital culture to traditional or historical imaginations, for instance the thought of embodiment, a new theoretical framework is needed.

Neumark's introduction suggests that this is done by captivating the voice through a number of ambivalences that convert or extend the notion of the relation between an embodied and a disembodied voice, understanding and unfolding the voice as something coloured by culture. Adriana Cavarero, in Neumark's quotation, notes that the voice must be understood in between subjectivity and intersubjectivity as well as between the sonorous and the signifying. Neumark continues this line of thought: 'We could hear voice as a hinge, holding the sonorous and signifying together and apart – preventing them from collapsing into a unity' (Neumark, 2010, p. xx).

The book is structured in four sections, each investigating the voice through a broad and interdisciplinary approach: 'Capturing VOICE', 'Performing VOICE', 'Reanimating VOICE' and 'At the Human Limits of VOICE'.

The first section deals with voice-capturing technologies, discussing for instance recording and distribution of the human voice, maintaining the position that each technology seems to bring its own materiality. This includes, for example, in Theo van Leeuwen's contribution, where the voice is investigated through a modal study of the 'Vox Humana', materiality and expressivity in church organs, compared to more contemporary representations of voices in a digital piano. Voice capturing is also discussed in Thomas Y. Levin's contribution on voice-mail in between writing and speech, and distributions of voice are debated alongside podcasting in Virginia Madsen and John Pott's contribution 'Voice-Cast: The Distribution of the Voice via Podcasting' as the function of voice in a private sound world, where it produces a physical and often erotic listening space. Following this, podcast can be considered a revival of orality and of the spirit of radio experiments and aesthetics from the 1950s. Theresa M. Senft's artistic essay 'Four Rooms' both paraphrases, thematises as well as criticises Alvin Lucifer's canonical artwork, and in his article 'The Crackle of the Wire' Martin Thomas discusses the impact on writing of the loss of oral aboriginal traditions and how new technologies can be used to revitalise endangered languages. Already in this first section, we witness the variety both concerning style – artistic and academic styles perform side by side – and aesthetic, semiotic and anthropological approaches.

The second section is concerned with performing voices, reopening some of the discussions presented in the introduction, namely the paradoxical or ambivalent connection between voice as speech and voice as sound and, in continuation of this, the question of the body's return to the voice, discussed by Brandon Labelle. Voice in contemporary arts articulates and theorises the place of voice in today's digital culture, conceiving the voice in a performative perspective as a kind of character (Neumark).

In her central and important contribution 'Doing Things with Voices', Neumark discusses the status of voice and its relation to authenticity, asking if it is still

haunted by the imaginations of the authentic self. Introducing the performativity of 'authenticity', Neumark argues that since the voice works performatively, this is not necessarily the case. Building on Adriana Cavarero she claims that as the voice can perform performatively, its effect of intimacy occurs through vocal qualities and vocal performance (p. 96). 'We can hear an embodiment that the voice brings forth in the making – rather than expressing a preexisting, essential body' (p. 114).

In 'Raw Orality: Sound Poetry and Live Bodies', which constitutes one of the publication's most important and substantial contributions, Brandon Labelle continues the considerations of the relation between body and voice through the perspective of sound poetry. Labelle discusses sound poetry from a historical perspective, from the 1920s and onwards, and observes how shifts in technology create configurations of embodiment. In continuation of this he discusses how voicing comes to incarnate a sense of self in different settings. Sound poetry in Labelle's view can both be regarded as an appropriation of scientific and technological developments and as a primitive recuperation of primal, original voicing. This paradox of sound poetry is linked to voice between communication and vocality – viewed as a both paradoxical and productive gap. Sound poetry, in Labelle's perspective, thus investigates how language works alongside language, as an attempt to dislocate the same – and hereby produces a tension between linguistic and sonorous meanings.

Amanda Stewart in her contribution 'Vocal Textures', in an artistic and autobiographical style, discusses properties of different oral, written and electronic forms of language through the shift from analogue to digital in terms of constituting and distributing a possible subjectivity. This possibility and the desirable aspect of an artistic voice are also thematised through a more clear-cut artistic discourse in Mark America's prose poem 'Professor VJ's Big Blog Mashup'.

The third section 'Reanimating VOICE' concentrates on how the voice is distributed and discussed in mainstream media, such as recorded music, films and computer games. Ross Gibson, from the point of view of Jamaican music, analyses shifts in representation of the human voice in digital music during the past 30 years and its use of remixing before digitalisation, practicing digital culture before the technology was available. Isabelle Arvers investigates the role and power of voice in 'machinima', a technique for making films inside the virtual reality environments of computer games. Helen Macallan and Andrew Plain, from a design position and a scholarly position, respectively, analyse how 'voco-centrism' (Chion) has set up a hierarchy in the ways in which we both produce and perceive filmic voices, which can historically be registered for instance by the use of centre speakers. Thus, it is only recently that it has become more common to investigate the use of surround speakers in reproducing filmic voices. The two last chapters of this section deal with sound and voice in video games from different perspectives. Mark Ward

focuses on the emerging voice technologies and their affordances of participatory aesthetics, and Axel Stockburger concentrates on the position of the voice in digital games, discussing the differentiation between voice as sound and voice as speech, a fluid boundary, returning to the ambivalent status of voice, one of the main figures in the book as a whole.

The last section of the book has a tentative, philosophical character and is dedicated to the limits of the human voice, opened by a beautiful and seductive meditation on the phenomenon of 'humming' by Michael Tassig, moving in and out of understandable language and facilitating the bodily unconscious. Using, for instance, Milne's Winnie the Pooh as an implementing figure, the essay revolves around humming as central to language, 'a base state of the voice that is neither conscious nor unconscious, neither singing nor saying, but rather the sound where the moving mind meets the moving body' (p. 312). Nermin Saybasili investigates migrant, disembodied voices, drawing upon Derrida's notion of 'hauntology', as opposed to 'ontology', in her thorough analyses of three contemporary video artworks. The two last contributions by Giselle Beiguelman and Philip Brody, respectively, deal with the man-machine relationship or the non-human or posthuman aspects of voice. Beiguelman debates the threat of the mechanical voice and changes in practice concerning the humanising of the computer voice. From the perspective of a 'posthuman' voice, Brody breaks definitively with the discursive understanding of the voice as attached to the bodily and possibly authentic self, a notion that by all means is challenged from the perspective of digital culture, which this publication demonstrates in both a complex and challenging, but also inspiring way.

The overall perspective of this publication seems to be the threshold, which accommodates academic, stylistic and sensible diversities. The voice is thus reanimated through a series of thresholds – in between the subject and the world, discussing the very possibility of subjectivity, between the conscious and the unconscious, and between language/meaning and sound. This ambivalent character is in a sense reproduced both as a thematic and as a stylistic strategy throughout the book, and it is my overall opinion that this seems to suit the ambivalent phenomenon of VOICE.