

Between Sound and Silence: Voice in the History of Psychoanalysis

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But is it not the truth of the voice to be hallucinated?
(Barthes, 1977, p.184)

The human voice plays a crucial role within the realm of psychoanalysis on a multitude of different levels: there is, for a start, the voice of the Other that imposes itself upon the subject; and the experience of auditory hallucination, of “hearing voices” which sound as if they come from outside the subject even though they are supposedly but within. Then there is the so-called “voice of consciousness”, telling us what to do (superego); and the hypnotic voice – the original voice of the therapist – that demands submission by repeating a formula that loses all meaning by being repeated (Dolar, 1996, p.14). Yet another dimension is the problem of the mother’s voice, in its ambiguity as both nest and cage (Silverman, 1988, p.72); or the symptom of aphonia, the loss of control over one’s own voice. Indeed, within the realm of psychoanalysis, the voice appears in so many different, interconnected guises and disguises that there would be ample material to fill a shelf of books on this complex theme alone! A mere essay cannot possibly fill this gap. So instead, what I propose here is to trace just a few of the steps that a fuller reconstruction of the place of voice in the history of psychoanalysis could take. In so doing, I hope to draw attention to a general movement that can be observed with regard to the figure of voice within that history. It is a movement from a “positive” account of voice in terms of presence and sound, to a more complex and “negative” understanding of voice in terms of absence and silence. Reflection upon this movement ultimately leads to certain questions and hypotheses that reach beyond the boundaries of psychoanalysis, towards a *philosophy of voice*.

Voice at the Birth of Psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud)

Although in the actual writings of Sigmund Freud explicit references to voice are but few and far between, it is evident that Freud was in fact a uniquely attentive listener to voices and that voice played a central role at the scene of the birth of psychoanalysis, that is, at the time of Freud's collaboration with Josef Breuer on the treatment of hysterical patients (Freud, 1990).¹ Voice is and always has been relevant to psychoanalysis not only in the rather banal sense that psychoanalysis first emerged as a "talking cure", as a practice, that is, that relies heavily on the spoken word; but more profoundly insofar as the voice, and in particular certain disturbances of the voice, from stammering and tongue-clicking, to unintelligible clackings, splutterings and groaning, or to the phenomenon of aphonia or total speech loss, came to be seen by Freud as manifestations of unconscious conflicts and tensions which it was the purpose of psychoanalysis to release. At the origin of psychoanalytic practice the voice appears therefore both as a material support for the *symptom* of, and as a *gateway* to, the unconscious.

Behind this notion of the voice as symptom and gateway lies the Freudian assumption that what constitutes a person is not something mysterious as such, but rather something that can, at least in principle, be fully revealed and known. In the context of the (Freudian) psychoanalytical situation, insofar as the patient's voice provides clues (primarily for the analyst) to revealing tensions or blockages in the unconscious drives that make up that person, the voice may be conceived as a kind of *positive index*, in other words as something that corresponds to that which is expressed in it. The figure of the voice that emerges from this situation is thus not only "positive" in the sense that it is a real, perceivable (acoustic) phenomenon, it is also "positivistic" in that it is thought to reveal the hidden substance of subjectivity, the signified, or something like the "truth" of the person to whom it belongs.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, that is, during the infancy of psychoanalysis, a still largely humanist concept of identity and subjectivity, understood as something ideally stable and knowable, prevailed. This concept had yet to be destabilized and disrupted as it would be in the wake of (post-)structuralist theories in the 1960s. But before considering some of the effects of this destabilization upon the figure of voice, let us pause for a moment to ponder upon another

¹ For a detailed account of Freud's relationship to sound and listening, see Lecourt (1992).

aspect of central importance to psychoanalysis, be it Freudian or other – an aspect, moreover, that it is surely of fundamental relevance to any reflection upon, or experience of, voice – the notion and practice of *listening*.

On Listening with the “Third Ear” (Theodor Reik)

All perception is at bottom listening
(Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 162)

If it was perhaps a certain experience of, or attentiveness to, voice that originally gave rise to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious and to his development of the practice of psychoanalysis, then a particular kind of listening – and of hearing – must also have had an essential part to play in this scenario. What manner or mode of listening is most appropriate to the analytic situation? Freud was aware that in order for the analyst to be able to spend several hours a day listening to various patients talk, it would be impossible for that person to be constantly consciously attentive to what each patient was saying. It was simply too much to take in. Moreover, Freud warned of the danger that the analyst, perhaps in listening too attentively to what the patient says, might project unjustified meaning onto certain aspects of the narrative thus letting conscious or unconscious intentions of his own interfere with the interpretation. Instead, Freud described the model of listening that the analyst should favour to be a kind of “floating attention” (*Freischwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, Freud 1940-1952, vol. 7, p.377). Borrowing a Nietzschean metaphor, Theodor Reik, a pupil of Freud’s, developed this further into the idea of listening “with the third ear” (Reik, 1956). The purpose of this listening is to focus not on what is said and certainly to avoid understanding or thinking about what is heard, but instead to aim to be a kind of open receptacle for the small signs or seeming irrelevances in the patient’s narrative which might quietly suggest another story behind the main narrative, the hidden story arising from the seat of the unconscious. Listening “with the third ear” means focusing less on what is being said than on the movement and modulations of the voice as it speaks, for:

It is not the words spoken by the voice that are of importance, but what it tells us of the speaker. Its tone comes to be more important than what it tells. “Speak, in order that I may see you,” said Socrates.

(Reik, 1956, p.136)

As such, psychoanalytical listening aims to be attentive to the intricate and barely perceptible sound variations in the patient's voice as she or he talks. Moreover, to the extent that it aims not to project meaning onto what is said but strives to remain both distant and open, there is an analogy to be made between listening with the third ear and listening to music: "Floating attention is a musical listening" (Küchenhoff, 1992, p.36 [my translation]). Yet Reik also emphasizes the fact that there are *unsounding, quasi-silent* voices that the analyst can train him or herself to hear. Indeed, Reik's third ear is able to pick up two channels at the same time: the unspoken, unsolved conflicts of the patient on the one hand, and the analyst's own inner voices, on the other:

It can catch what other people do not say, but only feel and think [...]. It can hear voices from within the self that are otherwise not audible because they are drowned out by the noise of our conscious thought-processes. The student of psychoanalysis is advised to listen to those interior voices with more attention than what "reason" tells about the unconscious; to be very aware of what is said inside himself, écouter aux voix intérieures, and to shut his ear to the noises of adult wisdom, well-considered.

(Reik, 1956, p.147)

This awareness that the analyst must not only register what he hears coming from the patient but also consider his own responses, marks a gradual move, within the history of psychoanalysis, towards problematizing the relationship between the patient and the analyst. With regard to the status of voice, a shift can be observed that goes from considering the patient's voice as a symptom of disorder (Freud), to taking that disorder to be in a certain sense characteristic of normal language (Lacan). This shift goes hand in hand with a change in the nature and intentionality of analytic listening. From a listening stance that originally aims to comprehend the unconscious (as the signified or psychoanalytic "truth" of the subject), via the intermediate stage of listening with the third ear, we move to Lacan's more radical notion of a listening that actually aims to *not* understand: "It is important not to understand for the sake of understanding" (Lacan, 1992, p.278).

This brings us to consider the role of voice in the teachings of Jacques Lacan. And here we may note that despite the fact that Lacan's idea of the voice as object of desire is arguably the pivotal or, perhaps more aptly put, *vanishing* point of his psychoanalytic theory taken as a whole, references to or attempts to elucidate this enigmatic theory in depth remain relatively fleeting, fragmentary and

few.² In fact, two distinct periods can be identified with regard to the figure of voice in Lacan's works. While his early works can be seen to have focused on the voice as a symptom in psychotic patients, in line with the Freudian tradition he embraced, the most central theme of his later works is arguably his identification of voice as "*objet a*" (pronounced "*objet petit a*" or "object little-a"). With this theory the move is accomplished from an understanding of voice as a positive index of the hidden truth of the subject to a thoroughly negative concept of voice as the empty left-over of a (structurally neurotic) subject defined by lack, and whose desire, moreover, can never be fulfilled. It is to this negative and curiously *soundless* notion of voice as "*objet a*" that we now turn.

Jacques Lacan: Voice as "*objet a*"

What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body
(Dolar, 2006, p.73)

To begin with it is interesting to note that Jacques Lacan's relationship to the figure of the voice marks one of those exceptional places in the history of thought where life and theory seem to merge in uncanny and fascinating ways. For a start, it has often been noted by some of those who attended his famous *Séminaires* that Lacan had a most peculiar and quite theatrical way of talking. In a poignant description of what he refers to as the "ethics of Lacanian speech", Michel de Certeau, who attended Lacan's seminar, recounts how such sounds as coughing, throat clearing, mumbling, the chewing of words and sighing – in short, an array of *disturbances* of the voice – constantly accompanied Lacan's practice of talking or holding speeches, as if what he said was always on the brink of dissolving, of retreating or regressing, into a kind of incomprehensible physicality. And whilst being clearly audible to the assembled listeners, these "scars of phonation", which would not so much interrupt as *constitute* the master's speech, remained totally incomprehensible with regard to their reference or meaning (Certeau, 2002, p.243). In fact, Lacan's eccentric style of talking can thus be seen as a kind of performative enactment of his theory of listening and of voice: it is not about understanding but about letting one's unconscious take in and react to what is heard; the voice brings to the foreground, *but in a*

² This point is made by Meyer-Kalkus who attempts to make amends in Meyer-Kalkus (1995 and 2001). Other accounts can be found in Miller (1989), Žižek (1996) and Dolar (1996 and 2006).

movement of suspension, of retreat, that of which the speaker has no knowledge.

The personal nature of Lacan's relationship to voice is further revealed in the fact that Lacan was not a keen writer. The texts of the *séminaires* are for the most part reconstructions put together and edited by one of the students who attended them (between 1975 and 1995 nine of the 25 seminars were "reconstructed" and published by Lacan's son-in-law, Jacques-Alain Miller). And of the texts that constitute his "Écrits", many of these seem to challenge the conventions of what written texts are usually expected to be like since they often make little attempt to follow the conventions of rational discourse but come closer to a kind of textual screaming; they are, so to speak, more *Écris* than *écrits*!³

The pivotal role of voice in Lacan's teachings takes on a peculiarly existential dimension, however, in the light of the fact that in the final stages of his life, Lacan suffered severe aphasia. Thus, the twenty-sixth seminar of 1978-1979 remains "silent", as by then Lacan had practically lost the ability to talk at all. But the real poignancy of his sad fate in this regard is perhaps only revealed in the light of Lacan's actual theory, which culminates in the figure of a voice that cannot – and indeed must not – speak.

Lacan's theory of the voice as drive object (or *objet a*) and the associated appeal drive (*pulsion invoquante*) were first introduced in Seminar X, his lectures on "anguish" ("*Angoisse*") held in 1962/1963 and only fairly recently published for the first time in the original French (Lacan, 2004). Here Lacan discusses what he later considers to have been his most original contribution to psychoanalysis: the addition of gaze and voice to the list of (partial) drive objects that, after Freud, included the breast (oral drive), faeces (anal drive), urethra (urinary drive), and penis (phallic drive). However, in stark contrast to the implications of developmental psychology, which considers the drives to occur in succession (i.e. as a series of stages) within the development of an individual, in Lacan's theory they are to be understood in purely *structural* terms.⁴

³ The vocal or screaming aspect of Lacan's texts is perhaps already contained in the title of his written work, *Écrits*, which whilst referring to that which has been written (*écrit*) also sounds like a conjugated form of the verb *écrier* which in French means to shout out or scream. Cf. Widmer (2004, p.151).

⁴ Cf. Miller (1989, p.176).

Lacan's notions of gaze and voice are embedded within the complex psychoanalytical relations that exist between the Unconscious, desire, "*objets a*", *jouissance*, the law and the Other. It is not our purpose and we cannot possibly hope to explain all these concepts here, let alone do justice to the connection between them. Suffice it therefore to say that gaze and voice are *objects*, that is, they do not belong on the side of the looking/seeing subject but on the side of what the subject sees or hears (Zizek, 1996, p.90). Moreover, it is not a particular person's gaze, and not a particular sounding voice, that these objects refer to. Instead, gaze and voice have a quasi-transcendental status in Lacan's theory insofar as they refer to the fundamental relation from outside (the other) to inside (the self), which in constituting the subject at the same time defines it as lack. The letter "a" refers on the one hand to the *a* of *l'autre* (other); on the other hand, as the first letter of the alphabet, it stands for both the beginning of a symbolic system as well as for the algebraic placeholder, meaningless in itself, but essentially open to take on significance in a particular context.

Without delving too deeply into the intricacies of Lacanian theory, one distinction that perhaps helps to understand the figure of the voice as "*objet a*" is the distinction Lacan makes between needs ("*besoins*"), wishes ("*demandes*") and desire ("*désir*"). Whilst needs are of an essentially physical nature (e.g. the infant's need to be fed, to be washed and to sleep), wishes belong to the symbolic realm of language; they call for understanding and aim for the reciprocal recognition of others. Desire is the most enigmatic of the three. It is defined as that which remains, like a residue or leftover, after one's needs and wishes have been satisfied. Desire reaches beyond the boundaries of the symbolic; *it belongs, in other words, to that which cannot be said*. Moreover, desire is that which comes closest to touching the core of the subject whilst at the same time calling that subject's very centre into question, revealing it to be inaccessible and empty. The relation between desire and its object is thus necessarily negative and aporetic: desire wants what it cannot have and doesn't want what it can have. This aporetic structure characterises the figures of gaze and voice as "*objets a*". If, however, according to Lacan's theory, voice belongs to the realm of desire, indeed if it is to be understood as an *object* of desire, what kind of a voice or whose voice are we in fact talking about here?

At this point it is important to realise the radicality with which Lacan strips the drive objects of any real content: the voice is actually devoid of phonic substance. For in fact, in Lacanian theory, the function of the objects is actually to extinguish the material to which they owe their existence. In so doing they leave a vacant space that constitutes

the lack which is the origin of desire. Thus, just as the gaze (*regard*) is not only attached to sight but might also manifest itself in an acoustic experience, so too is the voice by no means exclusively related to the acoustic dimension or to hearing. Silent inner voices, but also acoustic sounds that are not human, like the sound of the Shofar as described in Theodor Reik's analyses of religious ritual,⁵ can take the place of the "*objet a*".⁶ As Meyer-Kalkus has emphasized:

What matters most to Lacan is precisely not the materiality of the voice as Roland Barthes would have it, and he does not seek to get at beautiful voices, song or accents, which have been classical themes in considering voice since the 18th century. Neither is Lacan's voice the carrier of reason, of inner dialogue, nor does it stand for the self-presence of meaning, as formulated by Derrida in his studies of Husserl. The voice as "*objet a*" is conceived as a totally essence-less object, as the ground of desire, the thing-in-itself of the invoking drive.

(Meyer-Kalkus, 1995, p.296 [my translation])

Thus, in the context of the Lacanian terminology of the "*objet a*", the central function of which is arguably not to refer to a particular object but to name an unresolved problem, in other words, to signify an absence, voice refers less to the physical sound produced by a particular speaking subject (mother, father or child) than to an area of analytical impossibility, to a point of theoretical resistance. In other words, Lacan's notion of voice is the empty placeholder that represents the limit of that which is thinkable or expressible in discourse. Yet, even within Lacanian theory, it would certainly be wrong to completely separate the "*objets a*" from the actual physical processes to which they owe their abstract existence. Even fantasized or hallucinated voices owe something of their existence to

⁵ In the seminar on angst, Lacan introduces the figure of the voice by means of an excursion into a text by Theodor Reik called the Shofar (yam's horn) in which Reik analyses the function of this ancient musical instrument in Jewish religious ceremonies. According to Lacan's interpretation of Reik's analysis, the Shofar comes to represent the voice of God, that is, the voice of the (Big) Other. It is not therefore an actually sounding *human* voice that is the object of desire in Lacanian theory. Cf. Reik (1948), discussed in Meyer-Kalkus (2001, p.411 ff).

⁶ In fact, nothing can ever quite take the place of the "*objet a*". In this sense it refers to the blind spot in any linguistic system, which whilst being *there*, never quite *presents* itself. Such is the quasi-transcendental nature of the voice in Lacanian theory which whilst being very different from Derrida's notion of voice can arguably be equated with the Derridean figure of *différance*, as that which actually conditions the possibility of language.

the original experience of being called, that is, by a certain name, by someone. And therefore, in Lacan's theory, just as in Lacan's life, voice denotes a place where the real and the theoretical merge at the same time as they strive to separate and distinguish themselves. The *sounding* voice and the *idea* of voice are paradoxically both different and the same.⁷ Ultimately, it becomes the challenge for a *philosophy of voice* to understand this aporia, which also means connecting – that is, not just metaphorically – the sounding, resonant, experience of an outer acoustic voice with that of an inner voice in, at times, its thunderous silence.

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⁷ Commenting on Lacan's theory of voice Mladen Dolar writes: "In order to conceive the voice as the object of the drive, we must divorce it from the empirical voices that can be heard. Inside the heard voices is an unheard voice, an aphonic voice, as it were. For what Lacan called *objet petit a* – to put it simply – does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them: it is both evoked and covered, enveloped *by* and conceals the voice; the voice is not somewhere else, but it does not coincide with voices that are heard" (Dolar, 2006, p.73-74).

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