

Voice and Vision

Prelude: frames of vision

I should like to speak about *voice*: voice in the context of culture, cultures and the consequences, such as possible ‘clashes’ of culture, within its contemporary context– the *culture* of culture perhaps. It is a particular challenge for me to speak about voice in such a cultural context. First, I will discuss a popular way of understanding the difference between voice and vision, hearing and seeing, and speech and writing. In the second part of my talk I will explain what it means to regard such conceptions of that difference as distinct ways of attributing voice and vision. In the third and final part I will discuss the *visual logic of attribution* that is assumed in the operating of ‘voice’. There I shall also propose one possible way of looking at the functioning of voice in Katarina Zdjelar’s work.

Let me begin by looking at an old cliché about a traditional opposition that has everything to do with voice. The active power of voice, be it emancipatory, revolutionary, or simply its noise in the cultural background, rests on the passive capacity to *hear*. Hearing has often been portrayed as passive, in contrast to the active process of *seeing*. Hearing is thus opposed to seeing, much like voice is opposed to vision, or perhaps in a more familiar form, like speech is opposed to writing. Whereas speech is related to passive hearing and thus has a kind of immediacy, writing, since it operates through the sign, is related to active seeing, and therefore it has been thought of as mediated. Writing, we find in Plato, is treacherous, inauthentic, second-hand and susceptible to forgery and misinterpretation. It is, as Plato says, a *pharmakon*; it is poisonous, a supplement to speech and a dangerous supplement at that. Speech takes place under conditions of presence, while writing compensates for absence. Speech is original and authentic; writing an inauthentic repetition.

This can be expressed in the values attached to acoustic and visual space in certain forms of cultural critique. Acoustic space is a space of nearness relative to the distance allowed for by visual space. As Michel Serres says: “a visible event is localized and locatable in its distance (...) A sound event does not take place, but occupies space (...) Vision provides a presence, sound does not. Sight distances us (...)”<sup>1</sup> And when these spaces are mediated, the visual dominates

because it is a logic of exchange of signs that dominates the media.

Likewise, and this is perhaps the critique of vision most often heard or seen: hearing is a quiet form of perception, while seeing is always a classifying and objectifying perception. For Sartre, for instance, each look is a mortifying gaze through a keyhole, or rather a being trapped, objectified while looking through the keyhole.<sup>2</sup> The classifying and objectifying character of vision also explains its political salience. The disciplinary society described by Foucault is that of a generalized form of *vision* in the form of panoptic surveillance.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, having *voice* is deemed crucial to being a democratic subject. And in a similar vein, there is a *call* of conscience and a *voice* of reason.

The opposition has at times been seen as marking a crucial divide between the premodern or medieval world and modernity.<sup>4</sup> Hearing is then thought of as the sense of the Middle Ages, with vision only taking centre stage with the advent of Baroque art. Starting in the 18th century with the model of the *camera obscura*, through to the society of the spectacle of the 20th and 21st centuries, seeing is a form of objectifying. Seeing is objectifying, reducing, restraining – in feminist thought it is downright violent. The *camera obscura* first of all tries to objectify vision in a machine-like way, before the body and especially before the autonomous subject. The subject of vision in the 18th century optical experiments is reduced to a fixed point that can be mathematically located and whose vision follows equally calculable paths.

What the *camera obscura* and the spectacle, becoming possible after the 19th century, have in common in this very popular interpretation is this quality of objectification. The difference lies in the *objective* objectification of the 18th century ideal and the autonomy of subjective vision from the 19th century on<sup>5</sup> – an autonomy that facilitated the rise of the spectacle as a significant machine of desire. This means the *referent* of vision is no longer rooted in an objective world, but in a capitalist logic of consumptive exchange, in which the subject asserts its autonomy, not by obeying a law of reference but by *creating* it. It creates it along capitalist patterns of exchange and the vision of the other is socially reproduced as referring to an unproductive and largely unattractive referent – in each case fixed by a subject's autonomous vision. That vision, in turn, stabilizes and ensures the autonomy of the subject.

So seeing is not only objectifying and classifying, but the logic of the spectacle which is bound up with the logic of capitalism, is central to the economy of desire that late capitalism entails. One finds here a complete and modern update of Plato's critique of writing.

The capitalist logic of exchange, which has become the logic of the sign, the spectacle, is a contemporary *pharmakon*.<sup>6</sup> Philosophy, as Alfred North Whitehead said, does appear to consist of footnotes with Plato.

And to transfer the cliché to art: should it be surprising that Van Gogh cut off his *ear* rather than his *hand*? The ear is related to the autonomy of the other, to hearing the other, while the hand is central to the autograph and authorship that define the visual landscape of the modern artist and, through this, the autonomy of the artistic self, of the artist as *auctor*.<sup>7</sup>

### Attributing vision

That is one cliché (or perhaps a collection of clichés) of the opposition between speech and writing, and – for the moment stepping over the intricacies of the details in which such parallels eventually might run to ground – I regard hearing and seeing and voice and vision as ancillaries to that opposition. It is, as I have said, a cliché, and one can find numerous historical references that support the exact opposite. One might conclude that vision has been regarded as the highest sense, as it is highest in the human body. One might describe the centrality of vision in the Middle Ages or at the advent of the Renaissance, for instance in Cusanus' *De Visione Dei*. One might illustrate how Leonardo or the Renaissance Platonists such as Ficino were preoccupied with vision, how the modern avant-gardes experimented with vision. Or one might, as Jacques Rancière has recently done, point at the many and diverse functions of the image, the alignment of which is the labour of art.<sup>8</sup>

The crucial point is not to debunk what is a 'cliché' and to then provide opposing historical evidence, but to regard such frames of vision as bundles of *attribution*. They are creative contemporary constructions that ascribe a specific frame of vision and of voice to certain ages, cultures, groups, artists and thinkers. It is productive to regard such images of voice and vision as consisting of temporal and spatial lines or even arrows of attribution – pointing, as it were, to precise times and locations, identifying individuals and collectives as holding certain views of vision, as speaking in a particular manner of voice. But it would be unproductive to erect an ideal of objective history in order to ascertain which frames of voice and vision were actually present. The same goes for contemporary views of vision. It is productive to see these not as natural attributes, but as attributions

that engage in the age-old game of classifying the senses. The critique of classification is itself a way of classifying. This is what, from a sociological point of view, the world looks like. It is not made of pre-existing actors but of actors brought into existence through classifications and attributions. The social world is, as Niklas Luhmann holds, comprised of various relatively chaotic media. Only distinctions, the drawing of a line that separates, within the medium, two spaces as two sides of a *form*, generate meaning and communication. The difference between chaos and communication is indeed a difference: a line, a mark. Actions and communications can then be assigned a place on either side of the form.

What that means in everyday social life is this: can political action be localized into one acting individual? That would be very difficult, but the political system operates on the basis of attributions that do so nonetheless, and regardless of the objective validity thereof. Can economic profits be said to derive from the management of corporations? Hardly, but most are nevertheless attributed to it. Can you, when pushed in a crowd or having your toes trodden on, really look angrily at the person behind you as if that person, and not the crowd dynamic (of which you are a part), is responsible for the pushing or the treading on your toes? You do so anyway, and you reduce the complexity of social life by means of an attribution. You could get into an argument about this and have an entire conversation based on mutual attributions and mutually contested attributions. Can the art world seriously believe that Damien Hirst is the author of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, knowing full well that hundreds of workers, as well as dealers, agents and critics, not to mention at least one fisherman and two shark-parents were involved in the actual production of the work? It can, because it *attributes* the work to a fixed address – and it can legitimate this by an appeal to various theories, ranging from the genius of the artistic producer to the conceptual work attributed to a single brain. Can the law really abstract from the causal mesh and identify one person as either guilty or not? Well the law is nothing *but* a machine of attribution of guilt. The system of science can honour genius by attributing breakthroughs to individuals, thereby discarding all steps before the final one, and it can legitimate such attributions through publications and prizes. And to give one last example: how do you know your lover loves you? In the end, you have to decide this is the case and you have to attribute love to your lover. In that sense, all love is a form of self-love, an *amour propre* through the medium of the other. But there is no other way to be loved than to attribute love to the one you presume loves you. In general, both in

everyday interaction and in larger social systems, action is *behaviour attributed to an acting system in the environment of the attributing system*.<sup>9</sup> Action is always ascribed action, and in that sense it is always artificial.<sup>10</sup> That means it is always the product of attribution; it is not a result of the inner process of a subject's intention.

So it is reasonable to assume that there exist various machines of attribution, be they rules and procedures, theories, reward structures or quite simply systems of presupposition and prejudice. The most general classifier and the most active machine of attribution available today goes by the name of *culture*. Culture is a master-classifier that classifies classifications: a machine of attribution that allocates attributions according to a 'cultural' logic. That is, according to a set of assumptions deemed a priori applicable to a certain population. 'Culture' is the most noticeable machine of attribution in today's social life.<sup>11</sup> It is the primary mechanism of differentiation, of assigning and ratifying difference. Cultures in the plural are classes of classifications. In an era of *actually existing multiculturalism* 'culture' is a master-frame of attribution. The same goes for an age in which the distinction between theory and practice is no longer plausible and everything counts as a 'practice', i.e. as 'culture'. Lastly, culture is a main mechanism of attribution when it comes to individual identity. Which 'voice' becomes articulated in our time, and where silence and noise are located, therefore depends heavily on cultural attributions.

### Attributing voice

Just as action is not necessarily tied to the functioning of an intentional subject, it cannot be tied to a body. Nor can such be said of voice.

The concept of voice does not escape the logic of attribution. In today's world, one does not simply *have* voice, one *receives* voice. A voice receiver is not a passive listener, but a person to whom voice is attributed. That means that at the heart of voice lies a visual mechanism: voice needs *recognition*. One needs to be recognized, not in the multicultural sense<sup>12</sup> of having a voice in a society whose structures one has not helped to build, but in the sense of being heard at all. Having voice does not mean having a voice that resonates: neither does it mean being represented. Recognition is meant here in a more basic sense. One is to be recognized as speaking – to be assigned a voice. From such a sociological perspective, the only

alternative would be to introduce metaphysical constructs such as the subject or inadequate concepts of a presocial body into the analysis. It is not a self that has voice; it is the other that has voice – only to locate it in another, in a self that receives voice. Voice therefore requires a visual aid: it requires the recognition of a person, a subject, as a speaker, as a carrier of voice. That attribution is never independent of that person or subject, so ‘carrier’ should not be seen in the structuralist sense of the epiphenomenal subject. But in the final instance, voice is only that when it is visualized and attributed.

What is democracy other than *the visualization of voice*? And, inasmuch as the language of art is still a visual language today, does not art, when it engages with the concept of voice, amount to something very similar? Voice itself, in the bodily sense or in the subjective sense, is nothing; it is the recognition and representation of voice that is political. The truly political act is therefore not voice itself but the attribution of voice. The political moment of voice lies immediately *before* the utterance of voice. This is a problem from a democratic point of view, since democracy is usually understood as a deliberation, a discussion among various voices. The political moment of the construction of voice through selective attributions of voice, silence and noise is then a problem for democracy, but a problem that never appears because its very appearance requires an articulation that would deny its authenticity as voice.

The attribution of voice in an age in which culture is a main machine of attribution means that voices are distributed according to the fault lines constructed in the cultural arena. In debates about culture, voice appears in a selection of ready-mades. A voice can for instance readily be attributed to and withheld from ‘woman’, what is called in the Netherlands a ‘Muslima’. To be classified as such means to speak the grammar of ‘coming out’, of conversion to ‘Western culture’, of admitting to having been oppressed by the ‘non-Western man’. Another ready-made voice is that of the ‘realist’, which I have called elsewhere the ‘multiculturalist’: the person who distances him- or herself from the naive multiculturalism that used to be present in the Netherlands – whether that is actually the case or not.<sup>13</sup>

It is, then, all too seductive to start attributing when we see a visualization of speech that does not yet fit the ready-made cultural voices that are currently at hand. It is easy to ‘recognize’, not in the ethical sense, but in the attributive sense of ‘this is such and such a voice’, which allows only the hearing of the voice that was thus attributed.

I should like to suggest that Katarina’s work pays attention to this process of attribution, to this moment right before voice is

heard. That is where we are, in Katarina's work: we *see* her work and are caught in the moment of hearing, right before actually hearing. We are alerted to the process of attributing voice by means of a suspension of attribution. When we see a language course in a citizenship class, we see *classification* at work. It is a play of attributions, of possible classifications and a possible drawing of distinctions that is present in this work. Her videos make one hover in the space and time of attribution itself, never fully finishing it and therefore never fully arriving at a voice. The voice in this work, I should like to suggest, is not a speaking nor a silent voice, but a *liminal voice*. It is a voice that hovers in a certain space *between*: between the physical act of speaking and the social process of receiving voice. It is a voice on the threshold, not yet fully visible, still in the process of being recognized as voice, caught in the moment just before hearing: a liminal voice. This is art that doesn't enact the worn-out figure of transgression, but stops on the limit – a voice on the limit, the threshold that is always about to open onto voice.

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- 1 Serres, M. (2008): *The five senses: A philosophy of mingled bodies*. London: Continuum, p. 47.
- 2 Sartre, J-P. (1956): *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: The Philosophical Library, pp. 259-260.
- 3 Foucault, M. (1975): *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, p. 202: "La visibilité est un piège."
- 4 See: Jay, M. (1993): *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 35.
- 5 See: Crary, J. (1990): *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 69.
- 6 One may recognize in this reading of the common opposition between speech and writing Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, for instance of Plato in Plato's Pharmakon or of Husserl in Speech and Phenomena. Derrida distances himself from the visual as he critiques Husserl for giving priority to perception and hence to presence, obscuring the necessary absence that the supplement of language offers to perception. I shall not go into this much deeper, only to say that I do not think that Derrida's reading of Western thought leads to the clichématique critique of vision – it rather supplements vision with its own blind spots.
- 7 See: Bourdieu, P. (1993): *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity, p. 124.
- 8 Rancière, J. (2007): *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso,
- 9 See: Luhmann, N. (2004): 'Erleben und Handeln', in: *Soziologische Aufklärung 3*. Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 67-80 (p. 69); Luhmann, N. (1984): *Soziale Systeme: Grundriss einer allgemeinen Theorie*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, p. 191.
- 10 Luhmann, N. (1997): *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 333-334.
- 11 Compare: Eagleton, T. (2000): *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 130.
- 12 See: Taylor, C. (1994): 'The Politics of Recognition', in: Gutmann, A. (ed.): *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 25-73.
- 13 See: Schinkel, W. (2008): *De gedroomde samenleving*. Kampen: Klement.