

Sonic technologies of Postmodernity and the grain of the voice in Robert Lepage's *Lipsynch*¹

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Abstract

This paper unpacks the relationships between the human voice and sound technologies by re-reading and re-evaluating Roland Barthes seminal essay, 'The Grain of the Voice' an oft cited but frequently misunderstood text, in the light of Robert Lepage's *Lipsynch* (Canada, 2012). This production explicitly uses analogue and digital sound technologies to reveal the complexities and contradictions operating within the sonic economy of the performance with particular reference to the way it uses digital dubbing, miming, voice-overs and lip-reading to unsettle assumptions about the connections between the language, speech and the human voice. The paper will also unsettle any simple understanding of the voice as the locus of identity, and uncover the manner in which sonic digital technologies enable us to better apprehend 'the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs' (Barthes, 185) while remaining sceptical about the existence of a primordial, unconstructed body.

Introduction

A woman stands in front of a plush, red velvet curtain. Melancholy music slowly builds in volume; it is an extract from Henryk Górecki's Symphony #3 (also known as the symphony of sorrowful songs). The woman, an opera singer, opens her mouth and sings exquisitely, summoning shamanistic intensity, marshaling a slow, deliberate, virtuosic vocal performance, which creates an immersive, meditative ambience. The lyrics of her song, translated from Polish with the aid of surtitles, tell of a mother's deep love and devotion to her child. The curtain parts, revealing a large, dimly lit stage containing a cross-section of a plane's fuselage replete with an array of slumbering passengers. A spotlight picks out a young woman holding what appears to be a baby who is apparently crying: its raw, inarticulate, ear-splitting shrieks offer a striking contrast to the sublime operatic voice, which preceded it.

The opera singer, now a passenger in the simulated plane, rises from her seat in the vehicle's elite front end, and moves towards its rear seeking the source of the distressed cries. She discovers the distraught child in the arms of a young woman, presumably the child's mother. It transpires that the young woman has died, leaving her newborn infant motherless. So, worlds collide within the confines of a jet plane. A baby's raw wail is juxtaposed with a highly sophisticated operatic soprano, arguably, the sonic apex of human vocal achievement. An apparently random encounter engenders a collision between rich and poor, young and old, living and dead. So begins Robert Lepage's production, *Lipsynch*, a rich, densely layered work that tells the stories of nine interconnected characters over a span of nine hours.

First performed as a five-hour show at Newcastle upon Tyne's Northern Stage in February 2007, *Lipsynch* evolved into a mammoth nine-hour production, which continues to tour the world (this paper is based on my viewing of the work in Melbourne, Australia in August, 2012). In the words of its creators, *Lipsynch* is about 'the human voice as a select locus of identity and emotion' (Ex Machina, 2015). In his director's statement Lepage claims that:

We often confuse voice, speech and language, but those are indeed three very distinct and totally different things. *Lipsynch* is about the specific signification of all three and their interaction in modern human expression (2015).

In this paper I will critically explore Lepage's theatrical investigation of the relationship between voice, speech and language by drawing attention to how various sonic technologies of modernity and postmodernity — primarily analogue and digital sound recording technologies, but also broadcasting and communications technologies such as radio, and telephony — unsettle any simple equation between voice and identity. I will also explicate select ideas about the status of the human voice drawn from Roland Barthes (and to a lesser extent from Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida). My main theoretical focus will be on Barthes seminal essay, 'The Grain of the Voice' (1978) an often quoted, yet frequently misunderstood work.

The invocation of these theorists will enable me to underscore the ways that *Lipsynch* works for and against its director's stated intentions, for I claim that the play productively confuses and complicates the relationships between voice, speech and language as *distinct* elements by dramatizing the ways in which sonic technologies disturb verities about the connection between voice, speech, language and identity. *Lipsynch* is a long and complex work, so any detailed elaboration of its dramaturgical and narrative structure requires lengthy exposition, which is not possible in the present context. However, readers interested in mapping the complex connection between the work's nine major characters and story arcs can find a useful summary [here](#). This paper will focus on two key scenes that most directly dramatize the role sonic technologies play in unsettling common understandings about the relationship between voice and identity, which I will provisionally define as an individual's sense of possessing a singular self. I will begin by framing my engagement with these exemplary scenes with a summary of some of the most persistent mythologies about the status and function of the voice in the formation of human identity by unpacking the antinomies in Barthes' essay 'The Grain of the Voice', since this highly influential work directly challenges Lepage's contention about voice, speech and language being distinctly separate things.

The Grain of the Voice

Barthes' essay is important for a number of reasons — it is certainly one of the most cited articles by critics who want to account for the singularity of a particular artist's voice. It is also crucial to the present task of unpacking Lepage's exploration of voice and identity in *Lipsynch* because 'The Grain of the Voice' explicitly deals with the voice's production of language as a signifier of singularity. As I read it, Barthes' essay is primarily about the relationship between language and music as mediated through the materiality of the human voice. It is also a somewhat idiosyncratic account of the pleasure its author derives from listening to specific genres of music (opera and classical music). And while he proffers a schematic and eclectic critical vocabulary for analysing the relationship between language and music, it is crucial to acknowledge Barthes' primary aim is to investigate the *source* of the 'thrill' he experiences while listening to particular singers. As he writes, 'what I shall attempt to say of the 'grain' will, of course, be only the apparently abstract side, the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing' (181). In summary, Barthes compares two opera singers, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Charles Panzéra, with reference to something he calls 'the grain of the voice,' arguing that his preferred singer, Panzéra, the one capable of giving him the experience of *jouissance*, foregrounds the grain while his counterpart, who in some ways is perhaps a technically superior singer, lacks this crucial quality. What is this *grain*? And why has it become such an important term in the cultural, as opposed to the musicological, study of popular rock music when Barthes obviously draws his examples from the world of classical music?

Barthes makes a distinction between what he calls the pheno-song and geno-song where the first term refers to 'everything in the performance which is the service of communication, representation, expression' (182). That is, such things as a song's genre conventions, language, the singer's interpretation of the lyric, and so on. The second term denotes a more elusive phenomenon, which he succinctly expresses as 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue' (182). For Barthes, then, the geno-song is that which

forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or that depth) of production where melody really works at the language — not at what is said, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers, of its letters — where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work (182).

Barthes also refers to the grain of the voice as the 'sung writing of language' (185). So, a good singer, that is, a singer with discernable 'grain' allows the language she sings to become manifest as a form of *writing*, which, for Barthes, is a *text* that is open to multiple interpretations, for writing is 'that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing' (143). Moreover, the 'grain' is that which exceeds meaning, and establishes an affective, erotic relationship between the singer's body and the listener. In short, the 'grain' is the *body* in the voice, but the human body, as we shall see

shortly, can never be apprehended in an elemental or primordial state. It is always mediated by discourse and, increasingly, by various technologies.

However, for Barthes, the 'grain' primarily refers to the phenomenological perception of the materiality of language and speech in the singing voice with no reference to how the body's materiality might be mediated by discourse. In other words, his essay assumes, what Judith Butler calls, an 'unconstructed body' (4).² On one level, the 'grain' appears contrary to Lepage's understanding of the human voice as a distinct entity that can be apprehended without reference to language or speech, yet, as we shall see, *Lipsynch*, actually resonates with aspects of Barthes account of the 'grain' not only because human identity is predicated on possessing language, but because both Barthes and Lepage formulate a theory of the human voice's role in the production of identity through speculative and essentially aesthetic explorations.

I am not suggesting that either Barthes or Lepage are being wrong in proffering such a viewpoint, nor am I arguing that only a strictly physiological investigation of the human voice can yield more useful insights into its mysteries. On the contrary, I am interested in accounting for the persistence of those tropes that equate voice as the most intimate and powerful locus of human identity. Before leaving Barthes and focusing on *Lipsynch*, I want to note that a contemporary reading of Barthes now takes place in a context that enables any interested reader to actually subject Barthes' observations about his preference for Charles Panzéra's 'grain' to close scrutiny. As Franziska Schroeder observes, 'the ways in which "access" to listening is becoming altered, in particular through our engagement with social networks as well as through the move from Music 1.0 towards Music 2.0' (24) means that the act of consuming music today is significantly different from Barthes' time. Anyone with a *Spotify* account can listen to the singers Barthes analyses in his seminal paper, and verify or contest his observations about Panzéra's apparent vocal superiority. We can, in other words, listen for the 'grain' and make our own minds up about Barthes' analysis.

After a close and concentrated listen to both singers two things become evident to me: first, I find myself incapable of making a confident judgment about the respective merits or shortcomings of either singer. They both possess, to my untrained ear, baritone voices that sound vaguely similar, especially when they sing in the same language — it is important to note that while both singers recorded works in a range of European languages, Barthes makes a point of identifying Panzéra primarily with the French *mélodie* tradition and Fischer-Dieskau with the German *Lied*, thus underscoring the extent to which his concept of 'grain' is tied to the sonic characteristics of specific languages (Barthes, 1978: 186). Perhaps the listener needs to be conversant in the nuances of opera singing to hear what Barthes hears. So, on one level, listeners who lack the requisite degree of cultural capital to be familiar with opera, an art that Barthes himself acknowledges as thoroughly bourgeois, may struggle to discern any substantial difference between the singers in respect to Barthes 'grain'.

The second thing that becomes evident is the role sound recording technology plays in my apprehension of the singers. Listening to recently re-mastered version of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's rendition of Schubert's *Erlkönig: Wer reitet so spät*, I am aware of how the clarity of the recording makes it easier for me to discern the production of phonetic qualities in Fischer-Dieskau's performance (the rolling 'r' sounds in his articulation of German speech, for example). Recording technology obviously colors the sound of a singer's voice not only by amplifying it, but by also giving it a particular sonic signature. Certain microphones, like, say, the Neumann U 87 Ai, are revered by recording engineers and audiophiles for what they contribute to the singer's 'natural' voice. Moreover analogue recordings subjected to digital editing processes also have an impact on the 'grain' of a singer's voice (Garner, 2014). In contrast to the relatively pristine recordings of Fischer-Dieskau, Panzéra's recordings are marked by a relatively low signal to noise ratio; that is, the level of analogue tape hiss, and degree of wow and flutter add noise to Panzéra's work (the terms wow and flutter refer the noise produced by the mechanical rotary components — the cogs and wheels — in the analogue tape transport mechanisms).

The presence of these factors function as a constant reminder of the way recording technology contributes to the sonic signature of a singer's voice. In fact, discernable tape hiss in analogue sound recordings is often fetishized as a signifier of authenticity (Berk 2000). Barthes pays scant attention to the role recording technology plays in production of sound, focusing instead on the relationship between body, language and sound with little reference to technical mediation. This focus precludes an engagement with the role technology plays in the production of the 'grain'. By contrast Lepage's *Lipsynch*, as we shall see, foregrounds the role technology plays in (dis)connecting voice to identity.

In summary, Barthes concept of 'grain' is a somewhat elusive concept that is perhaps best understood as an attempt to characterize the human voice in erotic terms with reference to the manner that the materiality of language (the physical/physiological production of sounds) carries meaning and the singular 'grain' of a singer. In Barthes words, the 'grain is the body in the voice as it sings ... I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic' (188). Consider the way he compares Fischer-Dieskau's voice with Panzéra's:

With FD, I seem to hear only the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose. All of Panzéra's art, on the contrary, was in the letters, not in the bellows (simple technical feature: you never heard him breathe but only divide up the phrase). An extreme rigour of thought regulated the prosody of the enunciation and the phonic economy of the French language ... This phonetics — am I alone in perceiving it? Am I hearing voices within a voice? (Barthes, 1978: 183-184).

As I have already suggested, I cannot perceive the phonetics Barthes hears in Panzéra's singing for various reasons: my unfamiliarity with opera, and my acute awareness of the role technology plays in shaping my aesthetic prejudices and responses to the recordings under review. So, is Barthes' concept of the 'grain' ultimately an essentially subjective one? In his exemplary musicological analysis of Barthes' essay, Jonathan Dunsby writes,

We can all, for sure, go along with Barthes in appreciating the surplus of signifying embodied in the voice, but is it intersubjectively true that there is a surplus of structuring to be heard in Panzéra's that is not heard in every singer and especially not in the singing of Fischer-Dieskau? (2009: 123)

Dunsby provocatively asks whether Barthes' logic finally suggests 'that the singer we find to be the best is merely the singer to whose body we are most attracted?' (123). In many ways, the sheer volume of references to Barthes' essay in the work of scholars interested in popular music is a testament to the erotic charge present in the concept of the Barthesian 'grain'. In a recent paper on Elvis Presley's 1968 comeback special Harry Sewall describes the singer's performance in overtly erotic terms, and notes how the eminent cultural theorist of rock music, Simon Frith, also uses erotic epithets in conjunction with Barthes' concept of 'grain' to account of Presley's phenomenal popularity. He writes:

the only way we can explain his appeal: not in terms of what he "stood for," socially or personally, but by reference to the grain of his voice. Elvis Presley's music was thrilling because it dissolved the signs that had previously put adolescence together. He celebrated – more sensually, more voluptuously than any other rock 'n' roll singer – the act of creation itself (1985:165).

So, for Frith, the erotic appeal of Elvis Presley exceeds meaning; it is the erotic charge emanating from the very materiality of his voice that set him apart. I do not want to underestimate the importance of eroticism in Barthes' account of the 'grain', but I hope I have demonstrated that the concept is far more elusive and problematic than it initially appears, especially if used to unpack the relationship between voice, language and identity. Let us now return to *Lipsynch*, armed with these Barthesian insights.

Ada and the Distribution of the Sensible

As stated earlier, *Lipsynch*, tells the overlapping stories of nine characters from different countries who are connected in various ways, some more directly than others. The play unfolds like a Dickensian novel in terms of the chance encounters and coincidences that drive its narrative. I will resist the temptation to unravel the play's multi-layered narrative, and focus instead on its account of the role played by voice and language in the formation of human identity. While their narrative paths converge and diverge, each section of the work remains focused on some aspect of the world of sound,

and its apparently elemental role in structuring human identity. The opening scene, described at the start of this paper, succinctly sets up the oppositions that structure the performance by contrasting the primordial with the sophisticated, the rich with the poor. The dead woman on the plane turns out to have been a Nicaraguan prostitute, Lupe. The opera singer who opens the play, Ada, is an affluent Austrian-Canadian who adopts Lupe's child who she names Jeremy. The salient issue in the present context concerns the status of the so-called 'mother tongue' and the role it plays in the formation of the human conception of self. Put differently, *Lipsynch* posits language itself as a technology of identity.

Jeremy, due to the tragic death of his birth mother, is given an English name, and grows up speaking English and French instead of the official language of Nicaragua, Spanish (or any of the other languages of that country). Clearly, Jeremy's social environment together with the cultural and economic capital he inherits from his adopted mother and father (a German neurologist, who specialises in speech and language disorders) shape his identity. Moreover, the relationship between Jeremy and Ada is mediated by a sonic economy that underscores the centrality of the singing voice. Jeremy, like his adoptive mother, Ada, possesses a beautiful soprano voice until he reaches adolescence. His voice 'breaks' as does his relationship with his mother. Jeremy forsakes classical music for heavy metal — a genre that requires a different 'grain' or, put differently, a different connection between body, voice and identity. This representation of the relationship between mother and son in terms of sound and song underscores the relational and connective nature of sound. Sound waves literally emanate from one body to another establishing a corporeal web of connections. As Brandon LaBelle observes:

Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect (2012: 468).

Not only does Lepage use music to unsettle any simple connection between 'mother-tongue' and identity, he underscores the fluidity and malleability of the voice, which in the case of Jeremy, proves to be eminently adaptable in terms of phonetics, expressivity and emotion. His voice literally changes as the character's body grows. Moreover, Jeremy's adolescent angst also draws attention to the politics of the voice with respect to social identity. The multi-cultural, multi-lingual cast of *Lipsynch* obviously occupy different class positions. This is significant since there are many instances during the play that emphasize the way that the voice conveys one's place within what Jacques Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. As I read him, Rancière is primarily interested in how communities are established on the basis of commonality.

This commonality for Rancière is the *sensible*: that is, the way certain ways of speaking, seeing, hearing and so forth are separated from other sensible

modalities in order to demarcate a community. So, the distribution of the sensible is about how this partitioning of the sensible creates groups that are either part of a political order, or dominant community, and those that are not. It is about the creation of a common *sense* about social and political hierarchy, if you will. The 'grain' of the voice, replete with its Barthesian 'erotic' charge is never neutral. The physiological manifestation of the phonetic properties of language is always socially coded to place subjects within the social and political order of things, so Barthes' aesthetic obsession with the human voice is necessarily politically inflected. As Rancière observes the distribution of the sensible is a 'delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the places and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (13).

This opening section of play concludes with a striking image that encapsulates the deteriorating relationship between mother and son, which is also conveyed in musical terms. Jeremy leaves the family home for America after deciding to forsake his musical career and pursue his new passion for filmmaking (he later directs a film based on the life of his birth mother, Lupe). His departure sees him singing a duet with his adoptive mother Ada, and as she gently floats backwards outside Jeremy's airplane, the specter of biological mother, Lupe, gracefully strides across the top of the plane.

Marie, Voice without Speech

The act devoted to, Marie, a jazz singer and voice actor suffering from post surgical aphasia. Her surgeon is none other than Thomas, the German neurologist married to Ada. This section of *Lipsynch* focuses on the aftermath of Maria's operation, which deprives her of, among other things, the memory of her father's voice. This is one of the most effective chapters in *Lipsynch* in terms of demonstrating how contemporary digital sound technology has radically altered our understanding of the voice's relationship to the body. As Jacques Derrida famously argued, Western culture has consistently privileged speech over writing because of an assumed and misguided assumption that it coincides with consciousness (1976: 11-12). The living human voice speaks the truth because it is manifested as a form of presence, whereas writing functions as a mechanical storage mechanism subject to manipulation and distortion when it reproduces bloodless thought severed from an intending consciousness. In his essay, 'The Voice that Keeps Silence', Derrida states that the, 'voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as consciousness; the voice is consciousness' (2012: 498).

Maria's situation is fascinating since it unsettles the connection between voice and speech, consciousness and identity. Marie's operation to remove a brain tumor renders her 'speechless' but she retains the ability to sing. At the beginning of this section of the play we see Marie recording her voice into a laptop computer. Her musical phrases, which are devoid of any sign of coherent recognizable speech, appear as waveform projections on a large

screen at the back of the stage. She repeatedly dubs her voice, producing a four-part vocal harmony in the manner of a Gregorian chant. This is yet another example of a virtuoso vocal performance within the play that not only elicits applause from the audience but makes an important philosophical point about the 'grain' of the voice. With Marie we apprehend the 'grain of the voice' without the phonetics of language conveying linguistic meaning. Thus, Marie's singing unsettles the Barthesian schema by illustrating how it is possible to use melody without reference to language. Barthes' obsession with opera blinds him to those musical genres, such as Jazz scat singing that enlist the 'voluptuousness' and erotic charge of the voice with no obvious connection to language as a conventional semiotic system. In other words, Marie's inability to speak foregrounds the materiality and musicality of her singing voice.

The scene also reinforces the important role that digital technologies play in unsettling our assumptions about the connections between voice, language, speech and identity, and, finally, demonstrates the complex relationship between sound and vision. As George Home-Cook observes:

unlike listening to a piece of choral music on the radio, the existence of the visual embodiment of the sounds played a crucial role in the experience of listening. These traces, these marks, enabled me to cling on to the sounds within the soundscape more tangibly, thus assisting the process of aural juggling (2011: 103).

Today, a variety of mechanical and electronic storage mechanisms supplement writing as a 'non-human' recording technology. Moreover, digital technologies can now alter the sonic characteristics of the voice, which is commonly converted into digital information that renders it pliable and plastic to a hitherto unprecedented degree. It is possible for anyone owning a computer to effect shifts in the pitch, tone and frequency of the human voice. Marie's chapter further disturbs the equation of identity with the human voice in the way she manipulates digital technology to resurrect her dead father's voice. She is desperate to recall her father's voice, which has been erased from her memory. She employs a deaf woman, a skilled lip reader, to transcribe her father's utterances from a stack of silent super 8 films. The lip reader does as she's instructed, but Marie is disappointed by the banal utterances extracted from her father's moving lips. It's a slow, complicated process of transcription, but it yields a cache of banal phrases spoken by the dearly departed parent. Marie is searching for the unique aural features that function as a sign of her father's singularity, assuming that the voice is a singular entity because no two voices are exactly the same, apparently. Indeed, this is an underlying assumption in Barthes' account of the 'grain' of the voice, which is, after all, a paper about distinction, difference and aesthetic judgement.

If we accept that the voice is a marker of individuality and identity, it explains Marie's strong desire to remember the 'grain' of her father's voice. In addition to being a jazz singer, Marie works as a sound artist, dubbing dialogue for the

movies. In another incredulous coincidence, she's employed to voice the character of Jeremy's mother in a film Jeremy directs about his birth mother's life, or at least what he imagines her life might have been had it been a melodrama. Marie uses her connections within the film industry to hire a voice artist, played by Rick Miller — the same actor who portrays Jeremy — who is given the onerous task of reproducing the lost voice of Marie's beloved father. Of course, he fails dismally to find the correct 'grain'. Marie's sister, Michelle is observing proceedings from the control room. She suggests that Marie lip synchs to her father's voice. The sound engineer lowers the pitch of Marie's voice until it is transformed into something very close to the voice of her father. She finds her lost object of desire within herself. Put another way, Marie discovers that 'other' within herself, thereby upsetting the intuitive thesis about the voice's coincidence with singular consciousness. Derrida observes that:

hearing oneself and seeing oneself are two radically different orders of self-relation. Even before a description of this difference is sketched out, we can understand why the hypothesis of the "monologue" could have sanctioned the distinction between indication and expression only by presupposing an essential tie between expression and phone (2012: 496).

In short, Marie's discovery of her father's voice, through the technological manipulation of her own, creates an uncanny memory that forces a re-examination of the relation between voice and self.

Conclusion

By reading *Lipsynch* in conjunction with Barthes seminal essay, 'The Grain of the Voice' I have identified some of the antinomies within Barthes' work, and demonstrated the need to re-evaluate this oft-cited work in the light of new digital technologies that challenge verities about the relationships between voice, language, speech and human identity. As sonic technologies have developed and become embedded in everyday life, they have necessitated a radical reappraisal of the place of the human voice in the order of things. Today, it is possible to speak of the 'sonic turn' in the humanities, and I offer this paper as a contribution to the bigger interdisciplinary discussion about the politics and aesthetics of sound. *Lipsynch*, I have argued, is a landmark production because of the compelling manner in which it sometimes directly, and sometimes unwittingly, dramatizes and unsettles assumptions about the connections between the status of the human voice and the sonic technologies of postmodernity. It achieves this valuable critique by treating the voice as mysterious, sublime, liquid.

Notes

[1] *Lipsynch* is an Ex Machina / Theatre Sans Frontrères production directed by Robert Lepage with sound design by Jean-Sébastien Côté. Full production credits can be found [here](#).

[2] While I do not have the space to explicate Butler's argument in detail, it is important to note that her account of the body's as an effect of power relations and regulatory norms provides a useful point of departure for a more thorough interrogation of Barthes' understanding of materiality (Butler, 1993: 2).

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Biography

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