

***Principia Schizophonica***  
***notes towards a morbid anatomy of the voice, off***

Gregory Whitehead

In the opening years of the twenty first century, it should go without saying that every living speaker is enveloped by airspace riddled with the dead. Blurred by such widespread postmortem vocal activity, the line between first generation and pre-recorded language becomes increasingly hard to tell. This is most true with regards to utterances that might be considered difficult to comprehend even when auditioned under tightly controlled and acoustically sanitized conditions. In the anarchic, dirty world of dead air, spontaneous verbal eccentricity quickly bleeds into mass lingual necrosis; the innocent listener can only guess at the difference.

What our dead air amounts to, in the end, is a thriving population of partially decapitated and decayed remains from an infinity of public outerings and private mutterance. F.T. Marinetti, who was particularly fond of head wounds, referred

to this population as *l'immaginazione senza filii*, the wireless imagination. How can we begin to figure out the nature and intent of such a teeming mass of wounded drifters, cut loose from the natural warmth of the human glottis and cast forth into the cold anti-nature of the schizophrenic speech apparatus, left to decay, beyond all sense, inside a crackling inferno of garbled interference?

Maybe they're just overjoyed to be away from us all, and what appears to be a mad Totentanz is in fact a dance of liberated ecstasy. Whatever their mood, if we want to elucidate the occluded identity of contemporary schizophonia, we shall at least require the elaboration of a *morbid anatomy*, first principles for an investigative science designed to name and classify the swollen organs of disembodies fished postmortem from their electromagnetic juice.

## I

The famous finger tapper Thomas Alva Edison, though partially deaf, made innumerable contributions to the early history of the cut throat. He was especially articulate when pronouncing dramatic overtures for his own uncanny phonographic inventions: *This tongueless, toothless*

*instrument, without larynx or pharynx, dumb, voiceless matter, nevertheless utters your words...* Let us begin, then, with a bit of finger tapping of our own, along scar tissues left by Edison's tell-tale phonectomy.

1. The original speech act begins to disintegrate as soon as it comes to grips with its schizophonic double. The first sign of postmortem decay is provided by the migration of intestinal organisms into the local nervous tissues, quickly gaining access through a multitude of channels to the lymphatics, blood-capillaries and veins, and thence to the body tissues in general. Aerobic organisms quickly deplete the tissues of oxygen. Although their numbers are reduced as available oxygen begins to diminish, they do help to create favorable conditions for the far more destructive anaerobic organisms deriving mostly from the intestinal canal. At this stage, the careful listener can still make out what the real speaker really said.

2. An early and obvious postmortem change is rigor mortis, a state in which there is stiffening of the muscles, both involuntary and voluntary, and regardless of their size. Under normal circumstances rigor commences about two hours after death and persists for roughly thirty hours before the muscles soften and the stiffness passes off. The schizophrenic refers to this latter stage as *mixdown*. Though the original speech act can still be discerned, the sound is remote, as if delivered from some deep cavern within the earth.

3. In the magnetic remains of some disembodies, we observe the spontaneous inhibition of postmortem changes known in the field as *soaping the stiff*. This process, largely chemical in nature, involves the translation of fatty laryngeal substances, such as conditional verbs, into a highly viscous wax. The body of the voice can then be resurrected only through the sustained application of external pressure, exerted through a sharp stylus. From here on, talk of authentic meaning is buried in the nether world of noise and interference. It all starts to sound like utter nonsense to the original speaker, who invariably responds by saying: *Is that how my voice really sounds?*

Modern thanatology considers the process of gradually being turned into a bar of soap, *handle me this way, needle me that*, as an inescapable precondition for pursuing plain talk in the present. The fact of the matter is that upon release from their waxy crypts, confirmed schizophrenics have lost all feeling for the difference between living and dead. By consequence, ordinary language games played by speakers under the influence of local disembodies begin to arrange themselves in other ways, often assuming narrative forms and rhythms strikingly similar to traditional accounts of otherworld journeys and more contemporary reports of near-death experience. Consider, for example, the following next world travelogues, as recorded by members of the International Association of Near-Death Studies (voice simulation):

1. *My heart had stopped... Everything was completely black... this void soon took the shape of a tunnel, and before me appeared the most magnificent light; it's The Light... it's... the essence of God.*

2. *I went straight into this blackness, traveling what seemed like a million miles a second. I went up into this great void. The only way I can describe it is that I was part of everything in the universe. Everything fit together and made sense to me.*

## II

In all schizophrenic remains, mixtures of gases quickly appear in the soft tissues of the epiglottis, imparting to them a crepitant feel. Blisters develop in the skin as portions of softened and partly detached epidermis begin to disintegrate. Deeper tissues separate along fascial planes, and organs assume a "honeycombed" appearance. The body swells; blues, reds and dark greens tint the skin. The eyes pop and the tongue protrudes; skin blisters erupt and the bloated trunk ruptures. Little wonder that Francis Bacon was convinced that only the most purposeful "spirits" could have wrought such awful change.

Discoloured natural fluids and liquefied tissues are made frothy by gas and some exude from the natural orifices, forced out by the increasing pressure in the body cavities. At one time, it was a popular notion that coffins would bulge and bend outwards due to pressure from gas; legend has it that the body of Queen Elizabeth I so swelled with gas that it burst her coffin with a loud bang, provoking riotous behavior in the streets of London.

That the vocal body remains almost entirely alive after death is definitive. Certainly, organs and tissues begin fading out, but always to their own pulse. When the heart stops beating, the liver continues to make glucose, the muscle still responds to stimulation, the hair reveals new growth. Death only sets in when life has fulfilled its timely transformation of the unstructured into the structured, of the meaningless into the meaningful. From this perspective, the duration of our life is best measured by distance from our first fetal grumblings passing not through the esophagus but through the bowels. The same may well hold true for the castaway disembodied, degenerating from the comparative order of the live speech act to the radical disorder of broadcast gas.

### III

Francis Bacon explained processes of putrefaction as the work of unquiet Spirits of Bodies who, wishing for release, break into confused and inordinate motion powered by a fierce struggle for freedom. Bacon probably knew his Plato by heart, and was familiar with the following observation from the **Timaeus**: *Often, when the flesh is disintegrated, air which is*

*enclosed in the body and is unable to pass out releases the same pangs as those caused by air entering from without.*

The history of schizophonia abounds with first-hand overhearings of unquiet Spirits of Bodies crackling from every conceivable groove, or pushing through the creases along each frequency band. In 1968, a vintage year for morbid anatomy, an obscure specialist in matters of the disembody published a book of his empirical findings entitled **The Inaudible Becomes Audible**. The pre-history for this controversial study begins with tape recordings of birdsong made by a Swedish ornithologist named Friedrich Jürgenson. Beneath the acoustic signatures of the warbling birds, Jürgenson noticed faint human voices, which then became the subject of his only two non-birder books: **Voices From Space** and **Radio Links With The Dead**. Dr. Konstantin Raudive, who was a Latvian, encountered Jürgenson's tapes in 1965, heard the twisted discourse of the garrulous disembodies, and devoted the remainder of his scientific career to their capture and autopsy.

In his book, Raudive concedes that the unaided human ear can not pick up the voices immediately, but should be carefully tuned for periods of up to three months. "Raudive voices", as they are now known in the literature, use words

from as many as six different languages in a single sentence and are structured more as ciphered telegrams than as ordinary oral utterance. Speaking for himself, Raudive claims many illustrious members for his private necropolitan salon, including Tolstoy, John F. Kennedy, Nietzsche, Hitler and his late mother. Most importantly, he claims that the conversations are two way. For Raudive, the dominant position of living speakers in the politics of language is forever short-circuited by the infectious charm of voices off.

It is precisely this nervous, agitated and tireless play of unquiet spirits, these charmed *pangs* of the pneumatic impression, that sustains the contemporary custodial drive to polish the acoustic surface free from the faintest grimy fingerprint of interference and noise. Such an immaculate buffing can only be accomplished through the displacement of guttural utterance by a fully gutted number system, ushering forth the age of the digital disc. I am reminded of an interview I once did with an obsessive compulsive who spent her days in lengthy ruminations over household chores: Had she polished the kitchen floor? How could one know if a floor was truly polished enough? Could it be perfectly polished on the surface, but not enough underneath?

In ancient Egypt, two distinct means were developed for dealing with the greasy viscera: in one, oil was introduced into the anus which was then plugged before the outside of the body was treated, while in the other, a fairly complete evisceration was performed and the organs and carcass were treated separately.

#### IV

While in some cases facial details are impressive, the Egyptian mummy is on the whole apt to be anatomically disappointing. The integument and muscles are usually dry and very brittle and the bones crumble to dust upon exposure to air. For the modern disembodied, everything hangs on the condition of the tongue. With this strategic muscle in mind, and digging briefly into our Poe, let us reconsider the facts of the matter in the case of that "well-known compiler of the *Bibliotheca Forensica*", M. Ernest Valdemar, who, as a dedicated man of science, agrees to be mesmerized *in articulo mortis*:

*There was no longer the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurses, when a strong vibratory motion was observable in the tongue... In the first place, the*

*voice seemed to reach our ears - at least mine - from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch... I had asked him, it will be remembered, if he still slept. He now said: "Yes; - no; - I have been sleeping - and now - now - I am dead".*

No breath, no blood; and yet the tongue still vibrated. Seven months pass. At last, the sleep/waker demands to be either entirely awakened, or finally put to sleep: ... *amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely bursting from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once - within the space of a single minute, shrunk - crumbled - absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome - of detestable putridity.*

## V

The mesmerist hypothesis of a universal communicating fluid is absolutely critical for the morbid anatomy of the disembodied. Indeed, the clinics of M. Mesmer would have provided an enviable facility for treating the postmortem schizophrenic: body-proof "crisis rooms", patients linking thumbs and index

fingers to form mesmeric circuits, sudden communications from gelatinous or glutinous spirits. And then, of course, there were the infamous *tubs*, holding large quantities of vital juices for transmission to sick bodies through neat rows of adjustable iron rods. It should be noted that in modern broadcast studios, the position of the tub in the treatment is rendered obsolete by a small black box called an "exciter".

Hidden behind the present fetish for fiber optics and laser discs is the powerful desire to eliminate the slightest trace of pneumatic interference and gaseous noise from our cultural repository of acoustic materials. Advanced audio cassettes attempt to minimize the ghastly surface of signal putrefaction through the intervention of noise reduction circuits and, beyond that, through the technical displacement of *all* sense of performative pressure by optically encoded refiguration. But putting on a new face cannot change the outlook for the future of loose tongues. Interference, nonsense and noise are the life-blood of the terminal schizophonic: why disseminate at all if there is no longer a single dirty place to hang out?

In the digital age, vocal disembodies will remain spanking clean even centuries after their interment. But we scrub our discourse so fervently because we know how to contaminate so well, and I suspect that luminous fungi will always coat the surface of select castaways, causing the displaced epiglottis to catch fire in our heads. Caution: The subliminal power of magnetic language on the speech acts of the living should not be underestimated. If we continue to treat the disembody like just another dummy, the infernal clamor of the airwaves will soon be all that wags on every tongue.



By contrast, Tibetan Buddhists dispose of their dead through the ancient ritual of "sky burial". In this procedure, the corpse is meticulously dismembered, with body parts sorted into a sequence established by the feeding preferences of another species: *sarcorhamphus papa*, King of the Vultures. The sorted carrion is fed to the vultures, who then chemically process the remains and carry them to their final resting place. Thus the precise location of the Buddhist disembodied is randomly selected and entirely unpredictable, determined, as it is, by the digestive tracts of hungry birds. Might not the otherworldly journey of the broadcast schizophrenic pass through the same densely coiled tubes?