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The Fear of the Body of Voice

Classical Greece bequeathed to Western culture a concept of nature utterly imbued with a sacred dimension extending to all its forms, from feminine plants to masculine rivers, wind and other sounds, as evidenced by a wide range of contributions to the mythological tradition: Muses [Fig. 1], Nymphs [Fig. 2], Sirens [Fig. 3], and a myriad of other episodes, including the most famous of them all, that of Orpheus [Fig. 4] rescuing his wife Eurydice from the Kingdom of the Dead with his song, or Ulysses [Fig. 5] managing to escape the fatal charm of the Sirens' call.

Hence, this legacy has left voice with a problematic and ambiguous role in Western culture over the centuries. If in a profane, everyday sense, voice is the vocal projection of the self, allowing the speaker to avail himself/herself of a mask or screen which hides and protects him/her, it becomes something else when conceived as sacred; although still manifesting itself through a corporeal, human medium, voice thus conceived disconcertingly remains of divine inspiration. The history of Western fascination with voice has its most ancient roots in Greek oracular religion, and in particular in the figure which, more than any other, embodies the power and mystery of its source: the oracle of Delphi. It is here that we find conjoined the immaterial and bodiless character of voice, its possible non-human or even divine origin, and the need to attribute this voice to a body, a source, in short to anthropomorphize it through a medium which circumscribes a power otherwise perceived to be unlimited. In the oldest Greek oracle, Dodona [Fig. 6], voice was initially conceived as a true blue 'matrix' of the gods, and was indistinguishable from natural events tied to air, believed to be the origin of wind, sound and the



Fig. 1
The Nine Muses of the Greek Mythology (above, left).

Fig. 2
Nymph Thetis, Greek mythology, National Archaeological Museum, Ferrara (above, right).

Fig. 3
Atergatis, Goddess of the moon in the Phoenician piece of currency (middle, left).

Fig. 4
Jean-Baptiste Corot, *Orphée et Eurydice*, 1861, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (middle, right).

Fig. 5
Ulysses and the Sirens, VII-V sec. a.C., British Museum, London (below, left).

Fig. 6
Dodona Zeus Temple Ruins (below, right).



Fig. 7
Aegeus consults the Pythia, Attic red-figured kylix by the Kodros painter, Antikensammlung Berlin (left).

Fig. 8
Beata Osanna Andreasi da Mantova (1459-1505) (right).

Word.¹ Moreover, it was typically women who were charged with oracular duties: in this tradition, the Delphic Sibyl [Fig. 7], the Pythia, made her prophecies spontaneously through recourse to wind and leaves, drawing on these for oracles that would later assume written form.

The disquiet stirred by a word which allows the Divine to manifest itself, and in which absence becomes presence, explains on the one hand the gradual abandonment of oracular practices in Western culture, and on the other the diffidence, and even fear, towards those who wanted to act as mediums of sacred communication.

With the coming of Christianity, especially in period of the Renaissance this was particularly the case for the 'Living Saints' [Fig. 8] for whom a special brand of persecution was reserved.

With God now newly speaking through the young bodies of these volunteer martyrs, Church authorities began to fear the power of these women, and through a process of naturalization of the female body as a cultural artifact, they transformed divine possessions into demonic ones. For Christianity, the woman-medium, as in the context of pagan civilization, once again became the point of entry of Evil into the world. Evil and anything diabolical presented them-

¹ On the oracle of Dodona see Erodoto, *Storie* II 52, vol. I, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 1984, pp. 382-83.



Fig. 9
D. Martynov, *The Witch of Endor summons the Ghost of Samuel* (detail), 1857.

selves as God's voice going astray. An emblematic case: the sorceress of Endor was a ventriloquist witch controlled and possessed by the Devil [Fig. 9].²

The Church opposed the prophetic and visionary claims of the female laity because they presented a challenge to reigning orthodoxy and to the community of the faithful. For Origen (Ὠριγένης, *Origénēs*, 185-254 d.C.), oracular possession degenerates into demonic possession; the woman must be helped by the power of faith and by the gift which Christ bestowed on the Apostles, namely the power to exorcise malign spirits.³

In a burst of extraordinary ventriloquist fantasy, the new Christian map of the female body located both the voice and femininity in general in the lower organs, thereby uniting her phonic powers to her genitalia. The female body was thus transformed into a mobile space: the free exchange of activities among different parts of the body provoked a confusion which extended to the body's relationship with the outside world. This alleged internal chaos of the female body allowed detractors to discredit both the oracular powers of women and the ways in which these powers manifested themselves. Consider the example Joan of Ark [Fig. 10] and the 'voices'

2 For a commentary on the biblical text about the witch of Endor, see K.A.D. Smelik, "The Witch of Endor: I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis Till 800 A.D.", in *Vigiliae Christianae*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1979, and Manlio Simonetti (ed.), *La Maga di Endor*, Nardini, Firenze, 1989.

3 See Origenous eiston Basileion, Keph.ké – *Uper tes Eggastrimouthou* in Manlio Simonetti (ed.), *La maga di Endor*, op. cit., pp. 45-75.

Fig. 10
Eugène Carrière, *Jeanne d'Arc écoutant les voix*, 1899, Paris, Musée du Louvre.



for whom/which she interpreted; the voice mediated by this woman was always the powerful voice of the masculine supernatural. The power of voice thus comes to belong to an ideal and masculine authority which finds a perfect match in the feminine medium-body. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries in particular, the body as dynamic crossroads between internal and external, physical and metaphysical, divine and demonic forces becomes an object of public property, of social and collective significance beyond its magical or fantastic powers. The voice, product of a now disenchanted and normalized body, becomes trapped in a secular projection which neutralizes its demiurgic and divine power. Channeled into sterile and measured expressions suitable for defining and distinguishing social phenomena, voice loses its supernatural power and assumes a merely human form. For the Enlightenment, 'ventriloquism' is a human, medical phenomenon [Fig. 11], distinguishable from ancient convictions and the possessions of earlier centuries. If possession was characterized by the presence of two entities in the body of the victim – the soul nevertheless remaining intact – and by the physical manifestation of the Devil, the 'voice' of the Encyclopaedists speaks of a single, united body possessed with the power of simulation and able to take possession of another voice ('imitation') and thereby to subvert space. The voice is a human voice, but one which is able to free itself from the body which produces it, disembodied itself so to speak, projecting itself onto another body and making its own body invisible. The tangible presence of the Devil and the female body (as gestures of possession) are thus replaced by fragmenta-

VENTRILOQUE, *f. m.* (*Médecine*) ce nom est formé des deux mots latins *venter*, ventre, & *loqui*, parler; il répond au grec *ωτρυπιουδης*; on s'en sert en médecine pour désigner des malades qui parlent la bouche fermée, & semblent tirer les paroles de leur ventre. *Galen. in xxij. vos. Hippocr.* Hippocrate fait mention de ces fortes de malades (*epidem. lib. P. & PII.*) il dit qu'on entend dans leur poitrine des sons très-distincts, semblables à ceux que rendent certaines devineresses inspirées par Python; voyez l'article suivant **VENTRILLOGUE** (*art diviner.*); & il attribue cet effet aux collisions de l'air qui en traversant les bronches, rencontre des matières visqueuses, épaisses, qui s'opposent à la sortie. Salomon Reiskeus parle d'un célèbre buveur cèlibataire, âgé de 36 ans, nommé *Andri Sucklin*, qui étoit plus exactement *ventri-loque*; cet homme déjà sujet à bien d'autres incommodités, sentoit depuis 6 ans des bruits assez considérables dans son ventre, assez analogues au sifflement des vipères; ses domestiques qui entendoient ce bruit, ne doutoient pas qu'il ne fût produit par quelque animal; le malade rapportoit ces sons au-dessous de l'estomac, & quelquefois il le sentoit monter jusqu'au cardia, ce qui lui excitoit des douleurs très-vives: ce bruit augmentoit après qu'il avoit mangé des aliments doux, & les amers le dissipotent: cet homme étant mort, & son cadavre ouvert, on trouva les intestins & l'estomac si distendus par les vents, qu'à la moindre

Tom. XVII.

Fig. 11

Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, ed. Denis Diderot and Jacques d'Alembert, vol. 17 (Neufchastel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), pp. 33-4.

Fig. 12

Denis Diderot, *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (*The Indecret Jewels*), 1748.



tion, dehumanization and the invisibility of the medium.

The culture of the Enlightenment, when a more secular worldview was adopted, did everything it could to expunge irrational elements. The oracular voice thus comes to be replaced by a voice governed by the powers of Man, even if, ironically, this still entailed recourse to the magical. We find an interesting example of this shift of horizons in a famous text by Diderot, *Les Bijoux indiscrets* [Fig. 12], set in an imagined Orient which serves merely as a space where detachment works marvels. In the Court of a despotic sovereign, Mangogul, a ring has the power to force women who find themselves under its spell to tell the truth, out loud and in public, so that all those present can get to the bottom of their intrigues and amorous entanglements. Their secrets are not pronounced through their mouths, but rather through a part of the body which Cucufa defines as “the most honest part that there is in them, the best educated in those things that you (Mangogul) wish to know” (Diderot 1968: 40), namely their sexual organs. Through the magic of the ring, the king is able to listen to all the gossip that the women would prefer to keep to themselves in order to keep up appearances and maintain their social positions within the Court, as well as to become invisible and to move from one place to another in a twinkling. Stimulated by

curiosity, Mangogul tries to use the ring on his female companion, but as he reflects on the consequences of this, Mirzoza wakes up and, after being informed of the ring's extraordinary powers, asks the king not to use it on her. Mangogul therefore decides to use the ring on Alcine, in the presence of all the women of the Court. Suddenly, in the middle of mundane conversation, an unknown voice becomes audible which silences the young woman from which it came, shamelessly revealing all its ‘owner’s’ affairs. Mangogul is not a supernatural being entering the body of a woman, eliciting prophecies or otherwise tormenting her. As with the degraded forms of oracular power or the demonic possession and magic of the 16th and 17th centuries, the female is depicted as a highly eroticised body, possessed and traduced through her sexual organs. Nevertheless, the novel inverts this form of power: it is the woman's organ which speaks, revealing the secrets of its ‘owner’. The king is a sort of 18th-century ventriloquist able to activate this vocal presence, degrading its power through the comic and farcical aspects of the situations faced. Moreover, he does not take possession of the voice of his victims, but rather allows the woman's true voice to make itself heard: it is not Mangogul who projects his simulated voice onto the body of the woman – as was the case in country fairs or in the

texts by De la Chapelle and Brockden Brown – but the ring which allows the ‘jewels’ to express themselves. The ring is the supernatural element, not divine but nevertheless magical, halfway between the source and the instrument which triggers off the female voice. As happens for the role of the sovereign, which could have been the 18th-century incarnation of the power of the source but which reduces itself to following its own interests and whims, the ring is a travesty of itself. Like a magic (and symbolically phallic) stick in reverse, the ring is a vent, an opening, a gem (bijou) capable of making other pieces of jewelry talk but unable to talk about itself.

[Fig. 13], The voice theme returns to the centre of Diderot’s attention in another seminal text, *Le Neveu de Rameau* in which the eccentric protagonist, the nephew of the musician Rameau, becomes a kind of all-in-one orchestra, using his body to simulate the sounds of a wide range of instruments: [Fig. 14], “You would have been blown away by the manner in which he recreated the effects of the different instruments. With puffed, bulging cheeks and a hoarse, solemn sound, he rendered the horns and bassoons; a flamboyant nasal flourish brought the oboes to life; the strings were played with extraordinarily fast and nuanced vibrations of the vocal chords; he whistled the piccoloes, recast the flutes; shouting, singing, struggling like a maniac, doing the dancers and the singers all by himself, a whole orchestra and theatre troupe rolled into one, twenty roles condensed, now running, now stopping, like a lunatic, his eyes sparkling and his mouth foaming” (ivi 1962: 469). This body which imitates a multiplicity of sounds, precisely because it can, now governs these sounds, thereby reducing to the realm of human physicality what would once have been considered a supernatural gift.

This idea – namely, that everything must be reduced to something empirically verifiable – informs all the enunciative strategies of Enlightenment culture concerning voice. It is in this context that we witness the shift from medieval mechanics to the 18th-century passion for automation, which implied the possibility of controlling the human realm through its technical reproducibility, as preached by La Mettrie in his *Homme machine* (1747) [Figg. 15-16].⁴

4 On the connection between *automata* and mechanistic philosophy see



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Fig. 13

Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau* (*Rameau’s Nephew*), 1762 (above, left).

Fig. 14

Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *Œuvres romanesques*, Paris Gallimard, 1962, p. 469 (above, right).

Figg. 15-16

The Jaquet-Droz, *Automata: the musician, the draughtsman and the writer* (1767-1774) (below).

Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past, Cultural Origin of the Sound Reproduction*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003, pp. 72 sgg.

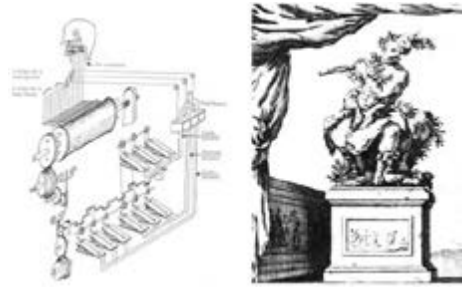


Fig. 17
Jacques de Vaucanson, *Automated machine: the flautist*, 1733.

Jacques de Vaucanson (1733), for example, created several automated machines, including a flautist [Fig. 17]. As a flute allows the user to modify the sound by changing the position of her lips on the instrument, the constructor of this flute-machine was forced to undertake the complex task of reproducing a wide range of pneumatic pressures and mouth positions.

At the turn of the 16th to the 17th centuries, literature found itself already in thrall to the magic of talking heads. Robert Greene, with *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) dramatises the age-old desire of man to give life to an artificial creature through his depiction of Bacon and his interest in 'talking heads' [Fig. 18]. In this work, the wizard Bacon charges his servant Miles with guarding a brass head which, thanks to demonic intervention, has acquired the gift of speech. After an uninterrupted vigil of sixty nights, Roger leaves the post to his servant and goes to sleep. Miles hears the statue starting to speak, and, keen to hear more, does not wake his master. After the brass head has finished saying its three phrases, two magic hands appear beside it and smash it to pieces with hammer blows. Thus woken by the cries of his servant, the wizard laments the destruction of a wonder which would have brought him fame and glory [Fig. 19]. The theme of the talking head enjoyed such a success in this period that we even find it in chapter LXII of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*: don Antonio tries to treat don Quijote's madness with a talking head built by one of the most famous 'encantadores', one of Master Escotillo's disciples [Fig. 20]. The head, which talks only on Fridays, is bombarded with questions by those present and offers wise and 'discrete' answers for all, leaving everyone 'upside-down with shock'. Obviously the statue does not have any magical power



Fig. 18
Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594) (above, left).

Fig. 19
Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha* (*The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*), 1605-1615 (above, right).

Fig. 20
Gustave Doré, "cabeza respondona" (right).



and is manipulated by a young man hidden behind it and connected to the head through tubing. The answers coming out of the head are the mere fruit of this man's knowledge and 'discretion', but the power of the 'cabeza respondona' is such that the Church asks don Antonio to destroy it so that the masses will not be led astray.

Rather more concretely, and still in the context of the fascination exerted by the idea of controlling voice via an artificial head, between 1770 and 1790 as many as four inventors, applying their studies in human physiology, built talking creatures modelled on the phonic organs. These were not magic statues, but physiologically anthropo-

morphic machines which extracted the voice from the human body and confined it in an instrument. The voice is thus literally disembodied, separated from the body and from the realm of the human, and becomes an artificial product. There were various differences between these four machines, both in terms of how they were produced and how they worked, but all four tied artificial vocal production to an anthropomorphic representation of the machine, both in the physiology of the internal voice-producing organs, and in their external presentation. The machine becomes an artificial body, the source of voice, but also a forerunner to the body-medium of late 19th-century technologies in its desire to remain anthropomorphic.⁵

The first of these creations was conceived by the abbot Mical⁶ [Fig. 21] who, in his thirst for recognition, created talking heads which exchanged compliments celebrating the king's grandeur, but later destroyed them when he felt that he had not received sufficient rewards. Then, in his turn, Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein [Fig. 22], member of the Imperial Academy of Saint Petersburg, built a machine capable of pronouncing vowel sounds in response to a challenge laid down by the university to demonstrate physiological differences in the pronunciation of the five vowels (1773). Kratzenstein's invention was based on an anatomical study of the phonic organs, but was destined to remain as a series of diagrams from which one could only imagine that the machine would have been capable of producing the various sounds through manual stimulation of the proposed acoustic resonators. Then Wolfgang von Kempelen, already known for his chess-machine hoax [Fig. 23], built in 1778 a machine [Fig. 24] capable of pronouncing individual words and short phrases like papa, mama, Marianna, astronomia, Romanum Imperator semper Augustus, and Maman aimez-moi. Contem-

5 See Arnaud Maillet, "Des instruments d'optique comme pièges. De l'anthropologie historique du regard à sa politisation", in *Romantisme, Cultures visuelles du XIX^e siècle*, n° 187, 2020, pp. 79-89.

6 About abbot Mical's talking heads, and the imagery of the talking machines during the Eighteenth Century, see Francesca Pagani, *Le macchine nella letteratura dei Lumi*, Aracne, Roma, 2014.

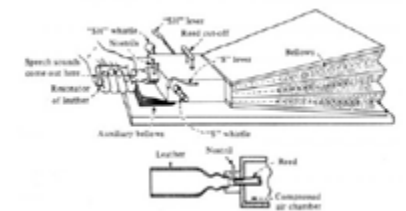


Fig. 21
The Abbot Mical's talking heads,
1783 (above, left).

Fig. 22
Christian Gottlieb Kratzenstein's
acoustic resonator, 1779 (above,
right).

Fig. 23
Wolfgang von Kempelen, *The Turk
Chess Automaton Hoax*, 1778 (mid-
dle, right).

Fig. 24
Wolfgang von Kempelen's Speaking Machine, 1779 (below).



porary observers noted that, unlike von Kempelen's chess player, the invention did not have anthropomorphic features, but insisted on the machine's capacities for speech. The inventor soon came to make up for this 'anthropomorphic deficit' by dressing the machine in the clothes of a five-year-old child in subsequent public appearances.⁷ In the meantime, Erasmus Darwin was busy realising his air

7 See John P. Carter, *Electronically Speaking: Computer Speech Generation*, Howard M. Sams & Co., Carmel, 1983, and Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1995.



Fig. 25
Erasmus Darwin, *Talking Head*, 1799.

machine [Fig. 25], with its leather lips, wooden mouth, apertures for nostrils and tape for the tongue. The invention was able to pronounce the letters b / p / m / e / a.⁸ The ability of these machines to talk captured the public imagination of the time to the point that John Buddle, Duke of Worcester, included the 'talking head' in his list of incredible inventions.

At this point we can register two singular developments, which also constitute two 'perversions' of the 'talking head', and which were subsequently subject to various reelaborations. First and foremost, *The Invisible Girl* (1805) testifies to the early 19th century popular interest in exhibitions mixing science and illusion: a stunned public found itself in front of an enormous sphere capable of responding to questions via a kind of telephonic receiver. The trick lay in the fact that the girl inside remained invisible – a forerunner of Chion's *acoumètre* – not enclosed in the sphere like a 19th century Pythia, but responding to questions from a floor above, connected to the sphere through tubes.⁹ The Invisible Girl depicts the magic of pop-

8 See Erasmus Darwin, *The Letters of Erasmus Darwin*, Desmond King-Hele (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 63, and James Lastra, *Sound Technology and American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000, pp. 31-32.

9 "From an *Aerostatic Globe* of Eighteen Inches Diameter, Suspended between two ornamented Hemispheres in the middle of the Room, the VOICE OF A LIVING FEMALE is distinctly heard as if originating in its Centre, and will answer QUESTIONS PUT BY ANY PERSON PRESENT, or maintain a *Conversation*, either in *Whisper*, or in a more *Audible Tone*; the Lady will also, if requested, entertain the company with specimens of VOCAL MUSIC, producing most peculiar Effect.

ular illusion typical of the fair, but cloaked in the language of recent scientific discoveries. A girl's living voice, hanging in the void, inside an 'aerostat' which is too small to contain her, is able to respond to questions from the public and entertain spectators with music. This figure, or rather this voice, marks a return to the singularity of the Delphic oracle; distanced from, and invisible to, the world surrounding it, the girl remains in a protected space which is no longer a cave but an aerostatic sphere. The voice emerges, therefore, from a mechanical invention which ends up being a mere fiction, thereby demystifying Enlightenment ideology while appearing to adhere to it. The other 'perversion' to be created in this period, a mechanical reconstruction of the wind pipe and phonic organs based on Kempelen's work, came from Viennese inventor Faber, and was displayed in the Egyptian Hall of Piccadilly in 1846 [Fig. 26]. The reconstructed vocal apparatus was mounted on a piano-like device, with preset tunes activated through a keyboard [Fig. 27]. The materiality and volume of this 'talking head' [Fig. 28] was grotesquely counterbalanced by a female funeral mask hung to one side, facing the spectators and speaking to them. This face was a kind of lifeless pantomime, empty just like the artificial late 19th-century reworkings and reproductions of the female form devoid of the vivifying power of voice. Even the atmosphere in the display room was artificial, more like a closet than a stage worthy of giving life to drama. Unlike *The Invisible Girl*, which was a mere novelty attraction, the Euphonia was a working invention, although the public still paid a shilling for

.....
This LIVING AEROSTAT and Its Incomprehensible Voice Form a most impenetrable Puzzle to the inquisitive Mind, at the same time that conjuncture is equally excited by another singularity attending to the Lady of the Balloon, who, though herself invisible to the Keenest Eye, seems to be in the middle of the Assemblage, and sees everything that passes in the Room; she is distinctly heard to *breath*, to *sigh*, &c. and by her answers returned instantaneously of every hint, thought, and action of the Company". This description is quoted in *Collectanea, or a Collection of Advertisements and Paragraphs From the Newspapers Relating to Various Subjects*, ii. *Public Exhibitions and Places of Amusement*, scrap book in British Library, 1889 e5, folio 247. Also quoted in Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck. A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p. 352.



Fig. 26
Egyptian Hall of Piccadilly, 1846
(above, left).

Fig. 27
Joseph Faber's Euphonia (*The Marvelous Talking-Machine*), 1835
(above, right).

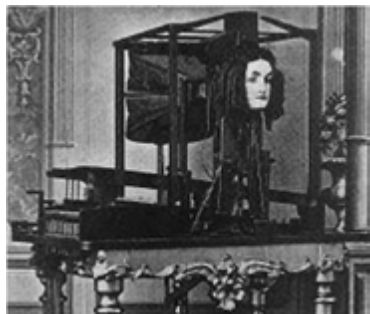


Fig. 28
Joseph Faber's Euphonia (*Talking Head*), 1835 (below, left).

the privilege of seeing and listening to it.¹⁰

The undisputable veracity of the mechanism was demonstrated before the viewers' eyes, almost as if it were a corpse ready to be dissected in an anatomy theatre; those present for this unveiling could peer inside the Euphonia as if it were a dead body on which Faber had worked. Science, still in many respects linked with magic in the public imagination for its mysterious and scarcely comprehensible achievements, found fertile ground in human voice-machines, and Faber's invention was no exception. Although he presented himself more as a scientist and inventor than as a huckster and charlatan,

10 In his autobiography, the theatrical impresario John Hollingshead remembers: "I paid my shilling and was shown in a large room, half filled with box and lumber, and badly lighted with lamps. In the centre was a box on the table, looking like a rough piano without legs and having two keyboards. This was surmounted by a half-length weird figure, rather bigger than a full rough man, with an automaton head and face looking mysteriously vacant than such faces look. Its mouth was large, and opened like the eyes of Gorgibuster in the pantomime, disclosing artificial gums, teeth and all the organs of speech". John Hollingshead, *My Lifetime*, Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., London, 1895, p. 68.

and although his invention actually worked without the help of tricks or mysterious agents, Faber did not achieve the fame he had desired, and ended his own life, destroying his machine in the process. The machine's inhumanity was reflected in the Professor's scruffy and dirty appearance, and his habit of living and even sleeping with the machine at his side. Although the narrator does not allude to the machine's feminine aspects, or to the sexual nature of Faber's relationship with his creation, the female face projects the spectator firmly into the world of the (female) medium, with its voice decoupled from its body, thereby reinforcing the value of 'female' machines capable of creation and incorporation. Faber and the machine are a couple who live and sleep together, and who tragically die together. This morbid aspect of their relationship comes from the machine itself, namely from the fact that its voice is not 'living' like the voice of *The Invisible Girl*, but rather seems, with its sepulchral tones, to come from beyond the grave. This machine is an imitation of life; its voice does not succeed in bringing it to life, as the presence of a mortuary mould-like mask. The 'deadly' nature of the Euphonia's voice did not escape listeners; instead of imagining ventriloquist tricks or hidden tubes, they were forced to imagine, despite the device's grotesque transparency, a human being trapped inside and forced to parrot the Professor's words [Fig. 29].

Here, nevertheless, we have a real talking head, fully in tune with Enlightenment ideology (with its control over voice), yet paradoxically recalling a magical dimension: the head invokes the presence of an impossible human component. We are faced here with precisely the brand of perversion we find in Huysmans' novel *À Rebours*: real flowers that seem fake, fake fish in a real aquarium.

These paradoxes will form the basis for all future developments in the field, despite constant technical progress. With the invention of stenography (Isaac Pitman, 1837), the transcription of voice assumed a self-referential character; reproducing sound visually, continuing up to Scott's *Phonograph* (1857) [Fig. 30] which transcribed sound onto smoked paper; but it was only with Alexander Melville Bell's *Visible Speech* that voice [Fig. 31] directly appears to the audience. A degree of artifice is required for vocal control, and this applies

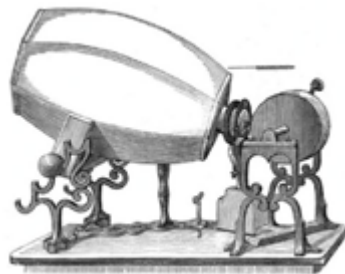


Fig. 29
Joseph Faber's *Euphonia* (Talking Head), 1835 (above, left).

Fig. 30
Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, *Phonoautograph*, 1857 (above, right).

Fig. 31
Alexander Melville Bell, *Visible Speech*, 1864 (below).

to automata as well as castrati: their voices are sexually ambiguous expressions – just like their bodies – achieving peaks of vocal purity beyond the possibilities of language. The castrato's voice [Fig. 32], just like a woman's voice, is an erotic object, and puts him in the company of other culturally asexual beings such as angels, children, and birds. These creatures, endowed with a 'divine voice', are pure, asexual, but above all inhuman.¹¹ Honoré de Balzac's novel *Sarrasine*

11 In his study on the castrati voices in Opera, Angus Heriot transcribes the impressions of Emma Calvé to the show of the castrato Mustafâ, at the end of the Nineteenth century. She defines his voice as "strange, sexless, superhuman, disturbing". Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1974, p. 22.

Fig. 32
Corrado Giaquinto, *Carlo Broschi, called Farinelli* (detail), 1753-56.



offers a fascinating example: the old castrato's pointy, skeletal form, similar to that of an automated machine, is accompanied by that of a fresh, beautiful young female singer. The castrato is one human strategy among many, in terms of both the collective imagination and artistic creation, to take possession and control of voice. From the asexual song of surgically artificial castrati, to mechanically artificial talking heads and the myth of the actress and her artistic artifice, these attempts all involve an artificial 'reformulation' of the 'female' body.

The culmination of 19th-century attempts to free voice from the body, however, lies in the dream of freeing the voice of the soprano, the only accepted representation of the supernatural or enchanted voice to survive 18th-century rationalism, from the female body. In the early decades of the 19th century, the opera singer was a sanitized figure with roots in the sexless voice of the castrato and the cross-dressing theatrical codes. This parallel literary topoi, applied to the asexual and angelic image of the soprano, renders her in a certain sense inhuman. The woman is an angel not for her intrinsically angelic characteristics, but for the effect that her positioning produces: the woman becomes an object of impossible desire. One can add to this definition the idea that it is precisely her 'divine' voice and her 'femininity' which once again project her into the imaginary sphere of the traditional divine oracular medium, reconnecting her to the (artistic) power and charm of the superhuman voice. Such a voice, however, can only ever be located in a sexually undefined

(or sexually inactive) body, a pure sacrificial vessel like those in the grand tradition of the divine voice.

The reduction of woman to an instrument or machine becomes widespread in 19th-century culture, [Fig. 33], starting from Hoffmann's novel *Councillor Krespel*, in which the voice of Antonia, the young singer who is the object of male desire, is enclosed in a vaguely anthropomorphic instrument, a violin which conditions her existence. The illusionism, spiritism, and new communications technologies of the 1860s, together with developments in photography and 'talking heads' technology combined to make up for modern woman's lack of humanity. After a long and difficult gestation period, the android was born with Villiers de l'Isle-Adams *L'Ève future* (1877), influenced by Bell's invention of the telephone (1876) and Edison's phonograph (1877) that the artist was able to admire at the 1878 Universal Exhibition [Fig. 34]. New inventions in the fields of communication and sound led some to believe that contact with the beyond, or with supernatural and magical realms, was possible; the close links between esoteric doctrines and the new technologies allowed for Hadaly's legitimization of artificial and mechanical bodies. If the telephone and phonograph were inspired by human anatomy, in which the audio-vocal apparatus is an electrical system rather than a pneumatic one (*à la talking heads*), such a body can be 'wired' into a network in which physical bodies, people, and tangible, fleeting identities are excluded by machines which capture and transmit only sound. Individuals are forced to cede place to their voices which, unmoored from their bodies, become so powerful as to constitute vocalised bodies built – so to speak – by the Word. Through the deification of sound technology, the magical and religious aspect of the newly subjectless voice assumes a quasi-scientific value; the inventions which piled up towards the end of the century in this field are testimonies of the force of this concept of a faraway voice severed from its source. In an opposite but symbiotic process, the phonograph becomes synonymous with the automatic writing of the spirit-medium; new technologies are 'phantomized', while spiritism assumes a material dimension [Fig. 35]. The sourceless voice which comes out of these sound machines is similar to



Fig. 33

E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Rat Krespel*, (Councillor Krespel also known as The Cremona Violin), 1817 (above, left).

Fig. 34

In 1877, Thomas Alva Edison invented his first prototype phonograph, and in the same year the French writer Villiers de l'Isle Adam, began writing the earliest draft of his novel *L'Ève Future* (above, right).

Fig. 35

Jules Champfleury, *Les bons contes font les bons amis*, 1863 (below).

the (imagined) voice of the dead, and becomes a subject rather than an object, a return to the 'strange', excessive quality of ancient voices, whether magical, oracular, or religious. In this process of 're-enchantment' of voice, the (feminine) body, already rejected and supplanted for over a century, does not appear because it is invisible,

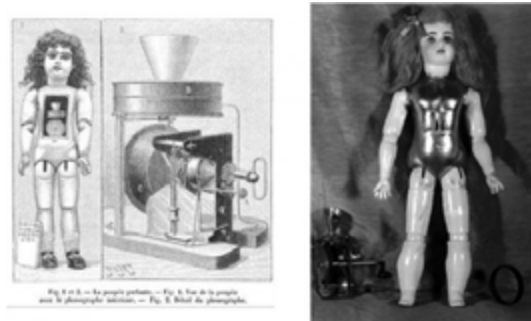


Fig. 36
Edison Talking Doll. The first Talking Doll was invented by Thomas Edison in 1877.

paralysed, reduced to a mere fragment, mechanised and substituted with a series of inhuman copies [Fig. 36]. The body, already the victim of 18th-century anatomy and the 19th-century obsession with fragmentation, is definitively reduced to the status of an object. Edison makes a magical, almost prophetic body of his creation, but not a human one. The thoughts contained in its lungs do not belong to it, but are chosen by Edison himself. The phrases, taken from a repository of great men's reflections, are rendered in the 'divine' voice of the beautiful Miss Clary. Hadaly is ventriloquised, as happens to Pizia with Apollo, her sexuality bringing to mind the figure of Tiresia, bard and fortune-teller, by the will of God (Edison) neither man nor woman, her powers contained in an undefined, hybrid body.

In *The Carpathian Castle* (*Le Château des Carpathes*, 1892), Jules Verne, takes on the theme of the substitution of woman by voice in still more radical terms. The baron Rodolphe de Gortz, in love with Stilla, a famous singer, asks the scientist Orfanik to bring her image back to life after she dies on stage. Orfanik, like all of Verne's mad scientists, indulges in the dream of passing from the 'body of the machine' to the 'machine as body' by capturing Stilla's magnificent voice. With a system of mirrors, he projects a life-size portrait of the singer, allowing the baron to imagine that she is with him. From the comfort of his armchair, Rodolphe is able to watch Stilla as she sings a piece chosen by him. This is the apotheosis of the passive spec-

Fig. 37
Léon Benett and Édouard Riou, the illustrators of Jules Verne's *The Carpathian Castle*.



tacle, in which the spectator, triumphing over time, is able to bring art repeatedly back to life in a mortal interpretation. Even before her death, Stilla is a mere voice and reflection of beauty, characteristics eternalised after her death. We know nothing of her character or personality: she is a singing Venus. Her 'person' is replaced by a machine which captures her vocal essence, imprisoning it in a precious casket, a sparkling transposition of her body [Fig. 37]. She does not move, but remains frozen in the moment depicted in the portrait, which captures her singing an opera on the day of her death. Rodolphe, unable to live without her voice, has in fact acquired the most beautiful and expensive portrait of Stilla, fuelled by the desire to possess the singer's voice together with an idealised image of her. The novel pivots around the theme of technological immortality, on the scientist's attempt to give to a chosen patron the perfect reproduction of the voice of his beloved, enclosed in a body which best represents her. This theme is partly romantic: Orfanik, like Chamisso, wants to steal Stilla's soul, capture her 'shadow' in a phonograph, the same task which Verne sets himself by trying to imprison the singer's voice in his novel. The writer transforms his banal tricks into a 'machine à écrire' (a 'type writer') in an attempt to make up for the lack of a female body with the body of the novel.

Half machine, half man, the phonograph is a cannibal that devours



Fig. 38
Advertisement of "Victor Talking Machine", 1908.

its victims by absorbing their vital essence (voice), which it then imprisons, [Fig. 38] as you can see from the advertisement from that period.

Thanks to the wonders of the phonograph, Verne eliminates the feminine category of existence; voice is the soul of the singer, and Orfanik and Rodolphe are transformed into diabolical figures because, by stealing it, they do not let her rest in peace after her death. In fact, Orfanik is Orpheus, one who charms with his music and tries to bring his love back from the dead, while Rodolphe, like Dracula, drinks and nourishes himself from the singer's soul until the final suicide, when a projectile destroys the phonograph and the explosion of the castle destroys the precious casket [Fig. 39].

As writers tried to reproduce women via machines, new technologies trying to offer to the world a flesh & blood feminine being succeeded only in making her disappear from the masculine, scientific universe, to return fragmented and caged in a phonograph – namely, a ghost of herself. With the advent of communications technology, woman was sacrificed and substituted with a perfect copy. After centuries of art history which managed to capture feminine beauty and grace in the eternal instant of a portrait or that of a statue, Orfanik captures voice, which in Stilla's case coincides with the fluidity of her art. The scientist succeeds in making the singer's

Fig. 39
Léon Benett and Édouard Riou, the illustrators of Jules Verne's *The Carpathian Castle*.



marvellous interpretations eternally present, an extraordinary development because it transforms every single musical work into something not only unique but that can be endlessly reenacted. The woman's body disappears; what remains is a copy of a work of art deprived of its human features, together with a casket studded with precious stones. Of Stilla only a bodyless voice remains, since the portrait vanishes in the explosion and the casket is annihilated by a bullet. Stilla as an identity projected in and through her body no longer exists. Orfanik, like Villiers' Edison, does not copy the woman, but rather her voice and her work of art.

If Alicia is a living bourgeois version of Venus Victrix; Stilla, or rather her voice, is the work of art to be reproduced in its entirety. If the creator of Menlo Park wanted to make a perfect being equal to a bourgeois goddess but at the same time improved her as a woman and as a person, Orfanik does not even seek this ideal because, artistically, the singer is the Ideal, the model of perfection.¹² The scientist reproduces the work of art while removing the obstacle of the body; even dead, Stilla continues to sing because her essence is

¹² For an exhaustive comparison between the novels of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam and Jules Verne, see Jaques Noiray, *Le romancier et la machine. L'image de la machine dans le roman français (1850-1900)*, vol. II, Jules Verne – Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Librairie José Corti, Paris, 1982.

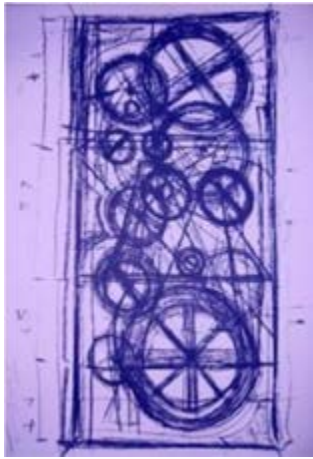


Fig. 40
Marcel Schwob, *The Talking Machine* (*La Machine à parler*), 1892.

not in her name (Silence) or her body, but rather in her voice. The spectacle of the 'disembodied voice' returns with Stilla; as a soprano, hers is the voice reaching the highest peaks of the inhuman, not least because she lacks a real, present body. Her song goes beyond the possibilities of the human, and transforms her into an objectifiable fetish (actress-body and portrait-body), but at the same time into something untouchable (voice).

These machines are damned because they are utopian and paradoxical, as is the case with Marcel Schwob's story machine *La Machine à parler* (*The Talking Machine* 1892) [Fig. 40]. A philosopher, simultaneously mad and brilliant, builds a machine able to speak without the slightest inflection, or in other words without a soul, designed to utter the blasphemous phrase, thus denying the existence of God in the form as well as the content of the phrase "I have invented a talking machine". This monstrosity, an enormous iron-cogged structure, appears as a gigantic throat, with two disproportionately large lips, mounted on something resembling a keyboard. A woman, the inventor's assistant (or slave?) manipulates the machine as if it were a piano, respecting the bourgeois tradition which consigned the female to the role of family musical entertainer, but this creature, more than a mere instrument, looks more like an enormous genital, a mixture of phallic and feminine elements. The epilogue to the story tells of catastrophe: the machine explodes while pronouncing

Video I

Creepily realistic robot can hold conversations and answer.

"Jules": the Androgynoid designed and built by David Hanson in 2006 for the University of the West of England., <https://youtu.be/SRPFbe-jEmqY>.



its blasphemy, leaving its maker deaf. The (real human) woman is behind all this, acting as the indirect instrument of divine retribution. Our present society, governed as it is by endless multimedia reproducibility, has left this archeology of voice behind and would like to pretend that this is an issue belonging to History. It would seemingly be dangerous, however, to affirm that we have overcome all its contradictions and paradoxes. Indeed, the magic, the technical reproducibility and the fetishism of TALK are still overwhelmingly present [Video I].

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