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Visible Language, 35.1
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Visible Language,
Audible Language,
Inarticulable Language
and
the **“Supplementary
Signifier”**

An examination of the writings of multimedia practitioner Henri Chopin and the critic Roland Barthes form the core of this essay. Both question the limits of language and the ineffability of human experience. The role of the technological is contrasted to that of the body itself.

— *Shift Linguals* — *Cut word lines* —

— *Photo falling* — *Word falling* —

— *Towers, open fire* —

Burroughs (1964: 75)

The most distinctive quality of tape-recorded and tape-orchestrated sound poetry is not so much the way in which it routinely *breaks up* the lines, phrases, words and syllables of grammatical writing in the traditions of stream of consciousness prose, simultaneous declamation and automatic writing, as the unexpected way in which it still more strikingly *breaks out* of textual line into the technocultural realm that the French sound poet Henri Chopin associates with “millions of sonic variations.” (1998: 10)

But what are the precise quality of such sonic variations? According to the Swedish text/sound composer Sten Hanson, the “supremacy of sound poetry over most other forms of expression open to modern man” derives primarily from the way its “combination of the exactness of literature and the time manipulation of music makes it possible to penetrate and influence the listener more deeply and more strongly than any other artistic method.” (1982: 16) Sound poetry, Hanson suggests, is therefore best defined by combined analytical paradigms, drawing upon the conventions of text *and* sound, poem *and* composition or literature *and* music.

In turn, the French sound poet Chopin’s writings similarly observe that sound poetry effects the “union of the two great languages of poetry and music.” (1998: 13) But far from conceding that sound poetry’s most distinctive energies lend themselves to adequate analysis in terms bricollaged terms combining such familiar concepts as the “exactness of literature” and the “time manipulation of music,” Chopin argues that sound poetry’s innovative “sonic variations” exist “beyond the traditional rules of diction and music,” (1998: 10) and therefore require entirely new categorization.

At this point, the theoretical implications of sound poetry — (like those, as we shall see, of certain kinds of photographic and filmic imaging) — offer extremely interesting exceptions to the traditional rules of early text-based structuralist theory. According to Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” (1968), for example, all written texts — and by general implication, all kinds of “cultural texts,” be these written, performed, photographed, filmed and so on — are fundamentally a “tissue of quotations.” For Barthes, such texts inhabit “a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.” Here, Barthes concludes, writers simply mix writings, and at best “only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original.” (1977: 146)

Were this really the case, then Hanson’s and Chopin’s general suggestion that sound poetry simply combines, unifies or mixes literature and music seems entirely convincing. To the question What is sound poetry? — one can confidently respond: A partially unfamiliar multidimensional space in which sound poets mix and blend familiar anterior literary and musical gestures. And to the question: How can one analyze it? — one can equally methodically respond: By mixing and blending familiar anterior literary and musical concepts.

For Chopin, however, sound poetry's most distinctive vocalic qualities are far more complicated. On the one hand, quoting the mediaevalist Paul Zumthor, Chopin provocatively argues that, when considered in terms of its most ancient forms, poetic orality is "anterior to language," (1998: 7) and therefore irreducible to familiar linguistic paradigms.

On the other hand however, Chopin still more challengingly identifies the post-linguistic vocalic impact of the multimediated *audio-poésie* that his "Open Letter to Aphonic Musicians" defines as "made for and by the tape-recorder," as "a matter of vocal micro-particles rather than the Word as we know it," and as recorded compositions "more easily codified by machines and electricity ... than by any means proper to writing." (1967: 11)

In much the same way, Barthes' subsequent essays "The Third Meaning" (1970) and "The Grain of the Voice" (1972) identify the extra-textual impact of equally heightened imaging and articulation. Against all structuralist odds, "The Third Meaning" argues that the distinctively filmic energies of Eisenstein's stills constitute a surprisingly authorial "new — rare — practice" empowered by a kind of *supplementary signifier* (1977:62-3) that exists both "outside (articulated language)" and "within interlocution." (1977: 61)

In other words, whereas "The Death of the Author" insisted that textual culture's almost axiomatically unoriginal "tissue of quotations" can be traced to a ready-formed textual and theoretical dictionary (1977: 146), "The Third Meaning" concedes that the highly original — and one might add, highly authorial — *supplementary* impact of Eisenstein's imaging "cannot be described ... because in contrast to obvious meaning, it does not copy anything." (1977: 61) Accordingly, while "born technologically" and "aesthetically," it "has still to be born theoretically." (1977: 67)

At this point one glimpses threefold parallels between Chopin's and Barthes' most lucid insights. Both visionaries successively question the text-based rules of "basic literary ideas" (Chopin, 1992: 51) and "obvious meaning" (Barthes, 1977: 61), emphasize the intensity of those poetic or iconic *signifiers* manifested whenever multimedia most impressively "open fire," (Burroughs, 1964: 75) and outline the ways in which postmodern culture's most original *supplementary* energies urgently require commensurately original *supplementary* categorization.

More often than not, of course, most mainstream critics instinctively resist the challenge of multimedia innovation by protesting: That's not art! That's not poetry! or That's not music! Indeed, as the multimedia poet and artist Brion Gysin recalls, even the dadaist veteran Tristan Tzara grumpily deployed monodisciplinary categories in order to defuse Gysin's enthusiastic accounts of the mid-fifties avant-garde's pioneering "use of tape-recorders to make Sound poetry," contending that such work was not so much poetry as Music? (1982: 76)

As Gysin points out, the inflexible either/or logic behind Tzara's distinction between poetry and music seems to typify the way in which "Dada, French Surrealists and later Existentialists, Situationists, New Philosophers, *et al*, have always abominated music" because it lacks the "ratiocination to which the French language lends itself only too easily." (1982: 76) One way or another, one might also now add, structuralist and poststructuralist theory has endlessly insisted that language — rather than music, sound, photography or multimedia performance — conditions us, controls us and (so the theory-story goes) "speaks" us.

But as Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966) indicates, such claims usually hinge upon the assumption that all writing can be analyzed in terms of the structural cha-cha-cha steps of a "logic there exposed, risked and satisfied." (1977: 124) Radically qualifying this claim, Barthes provocatively posits that "What takes place" in narrative becomes far more complicated, once one concedes that logical textuality alternates with the kind of orgasmic textual ecstasy that he evokes as "the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming." (1966: 124)

But what happens when language — according to this translation — "comes?" How does language "come?" And when language "comes," is it still language? Or do the orgasmic energies of the text ejaculate — so to speak — beyond the structural logic of the printed page into realms of intertextual or extra-textual bliss? And if so, how might we define this process? As one hears the earth move, or at least hears language "move," does spasmodic language cease to be language and mutate, for example, into music?

Barthes' later essay, "The Rustle of Language" (1975) certainly toys with this possibility. Positing that "The rustle is the noise of what is working well," be this the rustle of "happy machines" or the rustle of "bodies whose amorous sites are carefully adjusted to each other," Barthes initially answers the question "can language rustle?" negatively, given that "there always remains too much meaning for language to fulfill a delectation appropriate to its substance." (1986: 76-7)

Reassuring himself, however, with the consoling thought that "what is impossible is not inconceivable," Barthes enthusiastically speculates that in its "utopic state," "language would be enlarged" into what he conceives of as a "vast auditory fabric" in which "the semantic apparatus would be made unreal" and "the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be employed in all its sumptuousness." (1986: 77) Here we surely find an almost direct counterpart to Chopin's discussion of the way in which his successive audiopoems tangibly reveal the "unknown or supposedly unknown forms of orality, especially those of the *voice* ... beyond all the laws of versification and prose" (1998: 24) and beyond all "ancient semantic values." (1998: 10)

Significantly though, Barthes discusses these possibilities as a more or less impossible dream, at best exemplified by “certain experiments in rustling” that he vaguely evokes as “certain radiophonic researches” and “certain productions of post serial music.” Undeterred by his inability to exemplify rustling more comprehensively, Barthes optimistically concludes: “This is a utopia, no doubt about it; but utopia is often what guides the investigations of the avant-garde.” (1986: 78). Utopian ambition is indeed what guides the investigations of the avant-garde, but utopian creativity is what tangibly realizes this ambition. Here, as on other occasions, one wonders how and why Barthes’ writings remained so silent or so ill-informed regarding the tangible utopian creations of his avant-garde contemporaries.

Discussing the utopian energies of photography more precisely in *Camera Lucida* (1980), just a year after Chopin published his pioneering history of sound poetry, *Poésie sonore internationale* (1979), Barthes observes how the “unlocatable” (1983: 51) effect of photographic images, such as Robert Mapplethorpe’s self-portrait and his joint portrait of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson, mysteriously rustle their way out of the “civilized code” (1983: 119) of intertextual quotation, generating this or that “floating flash” (1983: 53) of “photographic ecstasy.” (1983: 119) One way or another, Chopin and Barthes conclude, the finest new wines of postmodern sound and image cultures need far more flexible categorization than the civilized binary bottles of either/or categorization.

Emphasizing how avant-garde twentieth century poetics has always been allied to avant-garde imaging, music and performance, Chopin typically observes: “Luigi Russolo was a painter, a composer and an inventor. Pierre Albert-Birot was a typographer, a sculptor, a poet and a dramatist. Arp was the same — several disciplines. Seuphor too. Throughout the twentieth century, all of these categories have exploded.” (1992: 53) Not surprisingly, Chopin answers the question of whether he should be “categorized as a composer or as a poet,” by dismissing it, reasoning: “the best critical solution seems to be to suggest that as a result of this research the frontier between poetry and music no longer exists.” (1992: 53)

In turn, arguing that “The lines separating music and poetry, writing and painting, are purely arbitrary,” and noting how Chopin’s use of “ever-expanding technical facilities” creates “effects that have never been produced before,” thereby “opening a new frontier for poets,” Burroughs similarly contends that to the question “as to what line can be drawn between music and poetry . . . the answer is that there is no such line.” Assuming that there are also no such lines between a poet’s prosaic, poetical, artistic, musical or performative work, Burroughs concludes that “sound poetry is precisely designed . . . to free poetry from the printed page without dogmatically ruling out the convenience of the printed page.” (1979: 9)

Confirming this argument, Chopin acknowledges that while he is “a sound poet who has broken with writing” and “a visual poet who has broken printed semantic values,” his book *Les Riches Heures de l’Alphabet* (1992), co-authored with Paul Zumthor, at least partially reconciled him to the printed page. (1993: 371) Conceding that “Writing” is and remains necessary, he insists that it is no longer “exclusively so,” (1998: 20) once one discovers how the supplementary energies of sound poetry reveal realms of “vocal and physical sensoriality” that writing can never attain. (1998: 10)

For Chopin, in other words, sound poetry is primarily a verbal, extra-verbal gestural, corporeal and partially musical art, orchestrating poeticized vocal and physical sensoriality, and culminating in recordings and performances interweaving live and multimediated verbal, vocal and physical micro-sounds. As such, his practice is almost wholly abstract and extra-semantic, although as he also notes, such abstraction simultaneously evolves both *from* and *beyond* semantic communication. All vocal energies, Chopin concludes, constitute “an infinite field far apart from conventional language,” even though initially emerging from “such language.” (1998: 10)

In this respect, sound poetry presents a curious chicken and egg dilemma. Which comes first? Sound or Poetry? Language or Vocalic Energy? Performance or Score? On the one hand, if multimediated sound poetry makes language more abstract, by generally refining semantic referentiality into post-semantic or extra-semantic “vocal and physical sensoriality,” (1998: 10) then it surely adds what Barthes calls a “third meaning” (1977: 64) to ordinary language.

But on the other hand, as Chopin suggests, if it is the case — as Paul Zumthor posits — that “Poetry, considered in its first evolutionary phase, is anterior to language, and that there need be ‘no exclusive or absolutely necessary link between poetry and language’” (Zumthor quoted in Chopin, 1998: 7), then sound poetry’s explorations of sonic abstraction can also be defined as a multimediated return to realms of pre-semantic primordial *first meaning*.

Paradoxically then, Chopin defines sound poetry in terms of two quite different cultural traditions. Viewed retrospectively, he suggests that sound poetry’s abstract orality can be traced back to the pre-technological and pre-writerly vocality that he equates with “*incalculable* millennia of unrecorded orality.” (1998: 7) But viewed futuristically, multimediated amplifications and orchestrations of this same orality invite definition as a distinctively post-writerly vocality facilitated by successively new technologies offering innumerable vocal variations. (1998: 24)

Not surprisingly, Chopin’s harshest comments are reserved for those of his contemporaries who fail to share his commitment to those realms of almost wholly extra-semantic musical abstraction where he believes that “vocal sounds . . . discover their integral independence.” (1998: 11) Speaking from the perspective of a poet compelled to “reinvent the voice of the sound poet — as music,” (1998: 9) Chopin

singles out the American John Giorno and the Frenchman Bernard Heidsieck as well-known poets whose work has never fully entered the world of sound. (1998: 11) In much the same way, Malevich's equally passionate defense of painterly abstraction in *The Non-Objective World* (1927) prompts his parallel contention that "the naturalism of the Impressionists, Cézanneism, Cubism, etc." has "nothing to do with ... the heights of nonobjective art." (1968: 341-42)

Both Chopin's and Malevich's claims refine distinctions between rarefied degrees of abstraction and nonobjectivity; a complicated realm at the best of times, as Hans Richter emphasizes when discussing the subdivisions between dada's different abstract agendas. Recalling how the trees along Zurich's *Bahnhofstrasse* prompted both his own analytical enthusiasm for the "powerful melody" of their "living skeleton," and Hans Arp's more tactile admiration for the surface qualities of their "skin," Richter memorably concludes: "Both of us were right; our attitudes, opposed as they were, belonged together. The difficulty was semantic rather than real. The fault lies with language, and as language is the tool of thought, the fault lies with our way of thinking." (1970: 60-61). In turn, the fault lines in most acrimonious discussions of sound poetry, similarly result from needlessly over-literal responses to monodimensional polemic.

Contemplative visionaries attempting to articulate what Malevich and Chopin define as pure feeling (1968: 344) and universal orality (1998: 28) may well need to create such landmark iconic or sonic abstractions as the suprematist square and the *audio-poème*. But there is no more need for all postmodern poets to explore abstract *audio-poésie* than there was any need for all modernist artists to paint suprematist squares. Rather, what really makes writing, performance or imaging successful — and what allows divergent innovative practices to "belong" together — are what Jean Baudrillard thinks of as the shared kinds of "Viral," "erotic" and "poetic singularity" (1996: 103-4) contributing to the "event" of verbal and photographic "magic." (1996: 58)

In turn, John Giorno notes how such amazingly powerful poetic magic culminates in the "great moment in performing ... when you and every individual in the audience become one." (1989: 19) Dismissing the various ways in which "All those fucking sound poets have had so much to say about me over the years," Giorno pragmatically concludes: "I have done just what I want to do, and now I'm doing music. I don't care what they think!" (1989: 18)

All the same, in an era of technologically transformed performance, it is surely crucial that audiences and critics — as well as poets, artists and techno-performers in general — should also *re-think* past cultural categories, and as Bernard Heidsieck notes, these diversify into predictably "parallel and contradictory" (1998: 51) alternatives. "Certain a-semantic sound poets juggle with phonetic effects or with vocal and buccal exercises; others by contrast, retain semantic values and work

with language, with or without recording technologies,” and “Others, pushing electronic technologies to their extremes, explore the frontiers of music.” (1998: 51) Whereas Chopin’s abstract compositions fall into to this partially musical category and lead him to work with vocally, corporeally and technologically *poeticized sound*, Heidsieck’s meticulous montages of fragmentary words and vocal and non-vocal sounds culminate in a kind of *sounded poetry* self-consciously conserving much of conventional poetry’s textual and semantic specificity.

For Heidsieck, the sonic energies of sounded language differ primarily from the silent energies of visible language in terms of their supplementary performative dynamism. Preceded by scores “to be read in public with the support of pre-recorded tapes,” and to be printed in multimedia formats such as his recent 3-CD book, *Respirations et brèves rencontres* (1999), this kind of performance offers the distinctively post-typographic impact that Heidsieck describes as the “public tape/reading (based upon written texts conserving semantic contents).” (1998: 53).

From this perspective, what sound poetry reveals — (and what monodisciplinary cultural categories conceal) — are the kind of *supplementary signifiers* (1977: 63) that Barthes’ discussion of Eisenstein’s stills identifies outside culture, knowledge, information, (1977: 55) in “that region where articulated language is no longer more than approximative and where another language begins (whose science, cannot be linguists, is soon discarded like a booster rocket).” (1977: 65)

In turn, Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* (1980) describes the *punctum* of individual photographs as equally inarticulable images, far from the “usual blah-blah” defining conventional photographic Technique and Reality. (1983: 55) When “tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits,” Barthes observes, photo-imaging remains within the codifiable confines of tame realism. But at its more absolute and original extremes, Barthes suggests, it attains a “mad” or “intractable reality,” (1983: 19) far removed from the pseudo-grammatical categories (1977: 109) outlined in his introduction to structural analysis.

Like many other postmodern visionaries, Barthes successively discovers seemingly inarticulable realms of extra-grammatical and extra-linguistic creativity, welcomes extra-textual revelation, forsakes what Burroughs calls the “Word-God,” (1986: 103) and progressively extricates himself from what Chopin calls the “empire of words.” (1998: 17)

But whereas Chopin’s audiopoems tangibly suggest imponderable discourse, beyond “all measure and all law,” (1998: 18) Barthes’ challenges to such laws are conceptual rather than creative. Accordingly, his theoretical and speculative insights make best sense when complemented, consolidated and generally supplemented by the still more specific theoretical and creative insights of multimedia practitioners such as Chopin.

On the one hand, for example, Chopin's theoretical discussions of unknown realms of oral energies "beyond all the laws of versification and prose," (1998: 24) usefully confirm Barthes' sense that cultural theory should extend its agenda to include the kind of extraverbal performative energy "outside of any law," that "The Grain of the Voice" (1972) locates in terms of his "erotic" response to "the body of the man or woman singing." (1977: 188)

But on the other hand, Chopin's multimediated performances also offer Barthes' theories still more concrete confirmation in practice, as the American concrete poet and fluxus artist Dick Higgins perceptively indicates when discussing Chopin's sonic and iconic presence in terms of "the erotic vitality of his performing with the microphone, the curious abstraction of his sounds which transcended specific reference but always maintained their intensity." (1992a: 23)

Observing "nothing malignant" in Chopin's gestures, but finding himself at a loss for words before the particularity of Chopin's performative aura, Higgins dramatically likens it to that of "a powerful vampire, a super-Dracula" (1992a: 23) and of "The golem in the text." (1992b: 23) In turn, Barthes' awe before the collective vocal "rustle" and filmic images of a group of Chinese children prompts "The Rustle of Language" (1975) to forsake the confident objectivity of his earlier analyses of written language's "tissue of quotations" (1977: 146) for the utopian subjectivity of the following evocation of this "immense tissue of sound" or *immense tissu sonore*. (1984: 94)

The other evening, watching Antonioni's film on China, I suddenly experienced ... the rustle of language: in a village street, some children, leaning against a wall, reading aloud, each one a different book to himself, but all together ... the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me, by my not knowing Chinese and by the blurring of these simultaneous readings; but I was hearing, in a kind of hallucinatory perception ... the music, the breath, the tension, in short something like a goal. (1986: 78-9)

Pondering this experience in still more detail (somewhat like Proust's Marcel, after his first involuntary memory), Barthes remarks how Antonioni's filmic *son et lumière* is simultaneously visual, verbal, extra-verbal, sonic, musical and performatively "erotic" in the sense of constituting what Baudrillard terms a perceptual "event" (1996: 58) and what he himself equates with moments of perceptual "discovery."

Is that all it takes — just speak all at the same time in order to make language rustle, in the rare fashion, stamped with delectation, that I have been trying to describe? No, of course not: the auditory scene requires an erotics (in the broadest sense of the term), the élan, or the discovery, or the simple accompaniment of an emotion: precisely what was contributed by the countenances of the Chinese children. (1986: 79)

Despite his reservations before contemporaries working in traditional “choral groups,” (1982: 74) Chopin similarly traces the origins of his sonic sensibility to his encounters with the “infra-language or ultra-language” (1993: 362) of the songs of the Serbs, Croats and Slovaks that he heard in Czechoslovakia during the second world war. Such early experiences, he notes, gradually led him beyond very basic literary ideas, towards the discovery of “new values” manifested by “new technologies.” (1992: 51)

Chopin’s poetics, in other words, derives from a distinctive empathy with both the primitive abstraction in unmediated ultra-languages, and the futuristic abstraction of those high-tech corporeal ultra-languages orchestrated by postmodern multimedia. As Barthes notes in an interview of 1975, Surrealism, by contrast, remains too close to basic literary ideas, offers *too much* literature, and *falls short* of the body (1981: 230). In turn, Haraldo de Campos suggests that Surrealism evinces the kind of “small committee baroque” mentality that he contrasts with the “furious baroque” (1993: 387) sensibility prompting the call for “*verbivocalvisual*” (1968: 71) creativity in the Brazilian concrete poets’ Pilot Plan.” (1958) Arguably, Chopin refines precisely this kind of furious poetics in “work with the word, with orality, with song, with dance ... beyond written poetry.” (1998: 7)

What still seems most difficult to categorize, however, is the precise quality of this kind of extra-textual poetics, or what one might more frivolously think of as the precise quality of the kind of multimediated “wild thing” that makes even the most cynical postmodern theorist’s “heart sing.”

Variouly evoked as a kind of *grain* thing, *music* thing, *machine* thing, *viral* thing, *delectation* thing, *erotic* thing, *ecstasy* thing, *coming* thing, *punctum* thing, *floating* thing, *rustling* thing, *sumptuous* thing, *furious* thing, *mad* thing, *vampire* thing, *golem* thing, *third* thing, *infra* thing, *ultra* thing, or ‘*verbivocalvisual*’ thing, the most utopian energies of the postmodern multimedia arts repeatedly emerge, converge and diverge, between, across and beyond words, orality, song, dance, image and poetry, re-articulating auratically auditory, iconic and gestural variants of what Malevich calls “absolute, true value.” (1968: 346)

As Chopin’s writings, performances and recordings suggest, sound poetry’s purest supplementary signifiers command attention in terms of the ways in which their threefold energies blend and clash, referring back to language’s “abyssal” origins, referring sideways to familiar practices and facilitating such convergences as the “union of the two great languages of poetry and music,” (1998: 13) and referring forward to those still untheorized multimediated realms which, for the moment at least, remain “imponderable, and independent of all measure and all law.” (1998: 18)

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