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'Last Night a DJ Saved My Life': Aspects of the Social Phenomenology of the Record

PLAY Mariah Carey, 'Last Night a DJ Saved My Life' (from *Glitter*, Virgin 7243 8 10797 2 0 (2001))

On one level the story is conventional enough: forget your troubles, lose yourself in song, find solace in dance. But this scenario is insistently gendered. The rappers' voices make explicit what we could anyway assume – that the DJ will be male, and that the object of his ministrations will be female, here 'embodied' (as it were) in the little-girl-lost voice offered by Mariah Carey. The DJ stands for authority, an authority with pedagogic power: 'Hey listen up to your local DJ/You better hear what he's got to say/There's not a problem that I can't fix/Cause I can do it in the mix.' And towards the end of the track, Carey takes over these words; she has learned the lesson.

I'll return to the issue of embodiment. For now, just to note that, in spite of the elaborate textural gestures towards the sensation of a live event, actually all these voices are body-free. The record form itself, generically, marks this erasure. But it's amplified by the digital technology used to produce this particular recording: all the voices recorded in different studios, Carey producing her own backing vocals, the mix created with the help of Protools software. The voices come to us from..... from where? We have no idea – except that we know, if we stop to think about it, that they emerge from some apparatus, from a machine. This is canned music, its ontology most clearly centred in things – the CD, the audio equipment, the surrounding visual images of Carey; as a persistent strand of criticism throughout the twentieth century told us – 'Keep Music Live', said the Musicians Union – this music is *dead*. How can a DJ, whose professional activity lies in the spinning, the spinning out, of this simulacrum of performance, possibly 'save a life'?

As is well known, the connection of phonograph technology with tropes of death stems from its very beginnings.¹ Preservation of the voices of the dead, it was envisaged, would be one of its principal functions. Barbara Engh reports that the editors of the *Scientific American* in 1877 'pronounced Edison the only man alive capable of raising the voices of the dead'.² 'Upon replaying the old cylinder,' writes Friedrich Kittler, '...it is a corpse that

¹ See for example Jonathon Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 287-92, 297-8, 303-7. Sterne points out the deep embedding of phonographic memorialising in broader discourse around 'preservation', including spiritualism and 'canning' (e.g. of food).

² Barbara Engh, 'Adorno and the Sirens: Tele-phono-graphic Bodies', in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. Leslie C Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120-135 (124)

speaks.³ – a sensation whose uncanniness we should make every effort to reconstitute, for as the fictitious composer who features in Maurice Renard's short story of 1907 – a story reproduced by Kittler – puts it: 'How terrible it is to hear this copper throat and its sounds from beyond the grave!'⁴

In his early writings on the new recording technologies, dating from 1928 and 1934,⁵ Adorno laments the fading of this uncanny, disruptive power following the domestication of the apparatus into a piece of bourgeois furniture. He suggests, though, that the needle's direct inscription still retains the potential to summon up images of a pre-lapsarian *Ur*-language: 'committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove'⁶, this 'machine-writing' points towards a condition marked by a kind of pre-subjective subjectivity, a state before the babble (Babel) of divergent meanings, when 'things could speak' for themselves. Much later, Kittler picks up this idea: 'Ever since the invention of the phonograph, there has been writing without a subject... Record grooves dig the grave of the author.'⁷ (I'll come back to the overlapping territories of groove and grave.)

At first sight, Adorno's position might seem to manifest a dismaying nostalgia – or at best to draw upon the messianic strand in the thought of his friend Walter Benjamin without fully assimilating it to his own rather different project. As cultural technology, records enter a social field that is always already formed – is alive and lively, one might say – and their voices are always already subjectivated. The image of the tortured parrot in a box presented in music-hall singer Gus Elen's 1896 song, 'The Finest Flow O' Langwidge Ever' Eard', and discussed in a recent conference here by Liz Leach, comes to mind.⁸ Elen's 'phonygraff', as depicted on the song-sheet, is nothing more than a parrot hidden in a hat-box, into which four listeners are plugged via 'hearing tubes' (as so often with such images, the inter-connection of the listeners through a central machine has a cyborgian look to us today, and indeed medical technologies such as the stethoscope played an important role in the emergence of this new imagination of the sounding body, as Sterne has pointed out⁹). The parrot is forced into speech (by prodding with a pin, dropping burning tobacco on it, putting pepper in its seed), but its 'songs', in successive refrains, engage common music-hall scenarios, inhabited by stock characters. The scene may be surreal, even uncanny, then – nature and machine conflated – but the musical result is both socially specific and culturally familiar. Thus the parrot may certainly be

³ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 83

⁴ *Ibid.* 53

⁵ T.W. Adorno, 'The Curves of the Needle' [1928], trans. Thomas Y. Levin. *October* 55 (1990): 48-55; 'The Form of the Phonograph Record' [1934], trans. Thomas Y. Levin. *October* 55 (1990): 56-61.

⁶ Adorno, 'The Form', 59

⁷ Kittler, *Gramophone*, 44, 83

⁸ Elizabeth Eva Leach, 'Parrots, Phonographs, and Other Imitators', paper presented at the conference 'Representing Performance: Musical Recordings in Culture', Royal Holloway, 30 October 2004. I am grateful to Liz for making available to me a copy of her paper.

⁹ Sterne, *Audible Past*, 154-67

read as 'foreign' – an exotic other – but has been domesticated too (a pet in a cage), and, although it impersonates both men and women, its babbling subservience positions it discursively, I would suggest, as feminine, its flow of mechanical mimicry a nicely suggestive complement to the contemporaneous figure of (silent) masculine fidelity offered by the celebrated HMV dog, Nipper.¹⁰ It is also low-class, its 'finest flow o' langwidge' clearly (and not surprisingly, given the torture that provokes it) a stream of obscenities which produces mixed reactions, of amusement or of outrage, from the respectable bourgeois listeners depicted on the song-sheet. Gus Elen, himself positioned as a cockney coster (a lovable, working-class exotic), has the role of a kind of *deus ex machina* (or *deus machinae?*), whose 'negotiation' of/with this feminised, rough-trade avian other at one and the same time falls into a familiar pattern of music-hall cultural politics and looks forward to what would become (as we shall see) a standard dynamic within the cultural economy of recorded song.

As Leach makes clear, what is crucially at stake in Elen's song is the status of 'writing', as this has been and can be figured across a range of practices – from vocal performance through textualities of various sorts to mechanically and electronically mediated reproduction – and across a *longue durée* with roots deep in the Classical equation of language and reason, passed on through the traditions of Christian Platonism. In the beginning was the word, which was with God and which wrote nature into existence. If the book of nature is there, for science, to be read, it is also there as an ambivalent stage-setting for the voice of Man, at once source and threat. Elen's parrot stands not for nature in any primordial sense but for nature on the rack, subjected – as Adorno might well have pointed out – to the ravages of instrumentalised reason, forced to reflect back to us our most inane blather. Leach also points out that the parrot is not the only bird species to feature in this discursive tradition; just as it stands for irrational imitation, so the nightingale stands quintessentially for a kind of natural (as against human) reason, each in its divergent way being deployed to set off the distinctiveness of music proper. Yet singers too have over the same period often been compared to both parrots (silly reproduction machines) and nightingales (artless vehicles of nature). Were they 'phonygrafts', or even musical cyborgs, *avant la lettre?*

For the Romantics, the book of nature was a *secret* one, and Adorno – following Benjamin – picked up the idea of a pre-representational 'hieroglyphic' system which, he suggested, it was music's utopian role, hinted at in the directly inscribed form of the record, to encrypt and to reveal. The parrot's mechanical 'flow o' langwidge' might also remind us, then, of the hypnotic effects associated mythically with the singing of the Sirens, who would become important to Adorno's argument as he subsequently developed it, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: the Sirens who, as Barbara Engh

¹⁰ Parrots of course identify themselves as 'pretty Polly' and cannot stop talking; Nipper, by contrast, whom many early viewers of the original image took to be sitting on his master's *coffin* (see Sterne, *Audible Past*, 301-3), is all ears.

points out, are described as half-woman, half bird. Adorno sees Odysseus's encounter with them as standing for that fateful moment which marks the way (male) logos would learn to resist the blandishments of (female) pathos – if only by stopping up the ears and immobilising the body – but for Adorno, Engh insists, this points not only towards the historical trajectory of gender difference but also to the still more basic problematic within which the human differentiates itself from beastly nature.¹¹ Adorno's narrative – like this discursive tradition as a whole – has a distinctly theological cast: music's task, in Thomas Levin's words, is to 'name the name itself' in a form of 'demythologised prayer'¹² – a phal-logocentrism whose hierarchic effect is hardly overturned by those inversions in certain feminist moves which locate a foundational stratum instead in some pre-linguistic bodily 'knowledge' to which women (like birds? Like Sirens?) have privileged access.

Clearly, the implications of Adorno's argument are far more subtle than my initial sketch may have suggested. He would perhaps agree with the suggestion that, as the needle circles towards the central 'black hole' – a Lacanian 'organ hole' through which the culture can continue to be, in Derrida's term, 'invaginated', connected dialectically, as it is, to the 'horny' loudspeaker – as the needle circles towards this black hole, it's clear that the social dynamics within which records are emplaced are always gendered, always raced.¹³ Still, I believe that Adorno got the positions here somewhat awry. In his account, female voices don't record effectively because they need the physical presence of their originating bodies, whereas the male voice – quintessentially for him that of Caruso – works precisely because here voice is identical with self, with logos, we might say; hence, to pick up Engh's psychoanalytic extrapolation, the record machine, in a sort of mirror-phase procedure, *becomes* the male body, his disavowal of his 'castration' made workable through his demand that the female performing body fill in for his lack. But in the actual music history, things are surely not like this.

¹¹ Engh, 'Adorno', 134. In at least one early twentieth-century image, from the cover of a 1913 *Telephone Review*, the new sound-reproduction technologies take up the Siren function. In this picture, entitled 'Her Voice Alluring Draws Him On', three attractive young women in the foreground use the telephone to work their wiles, while the mythological Sirens look on from the background. See Sterne, *Audible Past*, 171.

¹² Adorno, quoted, Thomas Y. Levin, 'For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.' *October* 55 (1990): 23-47 (41). Before 1909, when the Gramophone Company adopted the image of Nipper as its emblem, their trademark had centred on a 'Writing Angel' inscribing the grooves with a heavenly quill (see *ibid.*, 40 for reproductions); the shift from supernatural inscription to domestic respectability mirrors the trajectory of Adorno's lament (and note that the 'coffin' in the original Nipper picture was subsequently cropped out: see Sterne, *Audible Past*, 302).

¹³ Adorno writes of 'the scriptal spiral that disappears in the center, in the opening of the middle, but in return survives in time' ('The Form', 60; one wonders if the ambiguity of 'in return' – suggesting both a reciprocity of going and coming, and the preservation-effect of the repetitions of mechanical reproduction – is deliberate, but in either case the reminder of the Freudian *Fort-Da* is hard to miss). On the psychoanalytic concept of 'organ-holes' as objects of desire and sites of subjectivity, and their relationship to Derrida's concept of 'invagination', (in turn related in terms of gender rhetoric to his concept of 'dissemination'), see Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington IN: University of Indiana Press, 1988), 66-71. The sexualisation of the voice that is implied in my description of grooves, holes and horns might remind us of the old idea of the genital voice; this played a significant part in the history of ventriloquism (see Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 54-5, 70-72, 166-75, 182, 195-208), which in turn forms important background to the phenomenology of records, and will return later in my argument.

In the field of popular song, we might speculate (however reductively), the privileged objects are the voices of women, and by extension of blacks and feminised men. Meanwhile, control of these voices is normally in the hands of white males – either exercised through an authoritative lead vocal or, more typically, through a ‘voice off’ in the studio – or in the spinning hands of the DJ: that DJ whose ‘performances’ animate the traces in the record grooves, in a process of Derridean ‘archi-writing’ which will place any quest for an *Ur*-writing in question but which will persist in its belief that only in his hands can technics save life.

I can’t look in any detail at the history of the social dynamics involved in this configuration. I’ll refer to Barbara Bradby’s analysis of the divergence in dance music between male rapping and female soul-singing, the one centred on language, the other on embodied feeling;¹⁴ and to John Corbett’s parallel discussion of the lead/backing vocal hierarchy: while for Corbett, recorded music as such is in a sense ‘entirely voice-over’,¹⁵ within this overarching scenario a lead voice typically articulates the narrative while backing vocals offer an often linguistically nonsensical ‘sonorous envelope’. The latter are positioned normatively as female – and by extension, as also black; and hence as *castrated*; which (continuing the metaphor across the sexuating divide) produces a permanent threat of *bleeding* from one category to another, for example from female – that ‘black hole where meaning drains out of the system’, in Kaja Silverman’s words¹⁶ – to male. Corbett’s argument points, rightly, towards a more nuanced picture than the binary I outlined a moment ago. ‘For it is lack of the visual, endemic to recorded sound, that initiates desire in relation to the popular music object.’¹⁷ Thus recording technology, by evacuating bodies from the scene of subject-production, places previous systems of both gender and race relations into crisis, a crisis which reassertions of familiar binaries will try to nullify – as in ‘Last Night a DJ Saved My Life’ – but whose underlying mode – usually hidden, sometimes visible – is one of *hysteria*. Hysteria is, typically, a female complaint; according to Lacan, its identifying question is ‘Am I a man or a woman, or, more precisely, What is a woman?’ The complement, on the male side, is *fetishism* – manifested, as Corbett suggests,¹⁸ in masculine fetishising of aural fidelity (an aspect of a familiar economy of possession). (Racial hysteria and fetishism follow similar patterns – allowing for the different terms in the structure.) But in a moment of crisis, both conditions migrate. Within the vocal field, the hysterical question, for the female, as Engh points out, concerns the issue of disembodiment, while for the male, it centres on loss of control over memory (Engh, 121-3, 132-4).¹⁹ In Renard’s

¹⁴ Barbara Bradby, ‘Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology and the Body in Dance Music’, *Popular Music* 12:2 (1993), 155-76

¹⁵ John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Of from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 56-67 (60)

¹⁶ Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror*, 62

¹⁷ Corbett, *Extended Play*, 37

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 40-44

¹⁹ Engh, ‘Adorno’, 121-3, 132-4

story, his composer listens obsessively to the sounds held within a 'double-horned' sea-shell, which he compares to a gramophone; 'women were singing... inhuman women whose hymn was wild and lustful like the scream of a crazed goddess... and the same maddening scene was repeated, periodically, as if by phonograph, incessantly and never diminished.' Driven to distraction by his inability to notate the 'sexual screaming' he hears, the composer falls down dead; and 'what if', asks the narrator, 'he died *because he heard the sirens singing?*'²⁰ But what about the Sirens, what happens to them? Is their hysterical question, mediated by the encounter with another (the phonographic) 'reproductive body'²¹, a question that takes the form of a demand for the return to them of phallic motherhood – of woman not as the source of infantile babble but the territory of 'she who writes', and beyond that, of meaning-production which goes all the way down into nature itself?

George Clinton is demanding to be heard – but before he is, I need to situate the record economy, however briefly, in something of its pre-history: an archaeology articulated in the intersection of several long-lived tropes in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. First, Hegel's master-slave dialectic – permeating both social registers (woman, black, popular, all imagined as slaves) and the march of reason itself, with its outcomes in such technologies as the phonographic 'invisible master' demanding fidelity from the voices he deploys; second, the mapping of 'slavery' to the psycho-social dynamics of commodity-production and commodity-fetishism (notice how records even look like coins, and are collected – hoarded – as if they were); and third, the way this drama of having and being (as Lacan would describe it) provokes that decisive shift in the structure of ventriloquism described by Steven Connor, from possession *by* (a supernatural force) to possession *of* (a dummy, genie, stooge).²² Small wonder that the voices of women, blacks and feminised men have been favoured by the phonographic ventriloquists. Disco might mark a key moment: when 'slaves' in all these categories – the 'living dead' brought to life – were summoned to the dance floor and took it over.²³ The key issue then might become, not so much the surface politics of possession – who controls whom – but the deeper question of the structure of possession as such, and its implications for subjectivity.

So here, nurtured in the same dance-music lineage as gave rise to disco, comes the freaky figure of Dr Funkenstein, one of George Clinton's several aliases, to go with his many bands: Parliament, Funkadelic, and, with particular resonance, The Brides of Funkenstein. Clinton developed a celebrated live show, centred on space-travel imagery – he emerged, in a

²⁰ Kittler, *Gramophone*, 54, 55. Leach point out ('Parrots') that Gus Elen's phonygraff scene *is* notated; but even here, as she implies, the assertion of the superiority of a performance culture centred on scores is troubled, for the parrot's words aren't reproduced, only reported in Elen's narrative: what is he afraid of – a parroted 'sexual screaming', offering the choice of catatonia or hysteria?

²¹ Engh, 'Adorno', 130

²² Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 191-225, 249-89

²³ From its beginnings, disco offered privileged spaces to blacks, women and gays. The original version of 'Last Night a DJ Saved My Life', by disco group Indeep, dates from this period (1982 to be exact).

clear birthing metaphor, out of 'The Mothership' – and John Corbett has argued persuasively²⁴ that Clinton's claims to 'alien' origins connect not only with themes of alienation, madness and liminal identity but also with the Afro-diasporic experience of displacement and slavery: to be positioned, however repressively, outside species normality (as 'non-human') creates a margin for subversion – maybe even a pointer towards the 'post-human'). So here comes Dr Funkenstein, and his posse of slaves, zombies, clones, duppy conquerors:

PLAY 'Dr Funkenstein' (from *Parliament, The Clones of Dr Funkenstein*, Polydor 8426202 (2001 [1976]))

Strange creatures indeed – but are they monsters or cyborgs (despite the importance of Clinton's live shows, it's clear that, in a reversal of the conventional assumption, the principles of his multi-polar, fragmentary aesthetic were worked out first in the studio, were made imaginable by studio technology²⁵)? Vocality is split apart, and it's far from clear where the lead is located. What genders are represented? Hard to say – and, while the groove is undoubtedly 'black', are there also echoes of Frank Zappa and Captain Beefheart, tribute to Clinton's earlier funkadelic fusion of acid and dance? (In the words of a slightly later Funkadelic album, 'one nation under a groove'.) One might diagnose symptoms of both gender and racial hysteria if the groove were not so relaxed – but for Lacan, 'hysteria' describes a certain social structure as much as a clinical extreme.

The mad scientist's funk is engraved in the groove, the bodies animated by system loops. (In the etymological history, 'groove' and 'grave' have linked origins, but there are sexual connotations as well – the groove can be the vagina – as well as drug overtones – possessed by grooviness – and of course the record groove spins us into the heart of the machine.) We have become used to funky machines – the robotic Grace Jones or Michael Jackson, 'slaves to the rhythm'. In Barbara Engh's discussion of Adorno and the Sirens, she points to an earlier episode in the *Odyssey*, where the hero, anonymous for the moment, *does* hear the song; memory floods in, dissolving self-control, as he imagines himself a woman, a slave – by implication, an animal, 'panting and dying'.²⁶ As the record-apparatus threads its way, via transistor radio, walkman, iPod, mobile phone and the rest, into every social space, public and private, as sampling and re-mixing constantly re-animate what Engh, after Adorno, calls the 'archive of subjectivity',²⁷ we are far from the domestication which Adorno lamented, and moving – perhaps – towards a new understanding of the objectivity of nature. If we interpret 'Dr Funkenstein' in the light of Donna Haraway's project to reinvent 'nature'²⁸ – problematising right across the categories of

²⁴ Corbett, *Extended Play*, 7-24

²⁵ See *ibid.* 144-54

²⁶ Engh, 'Adorno', 133-5

²⁷ *Ibid.* 125

²⁸ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991)

'simians, cyborgs and women' – we will have to ask if we find what she calls 'significant prosthesis' here: a new kind of embodiment.²⁹

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²⁹ 'Embodiment is significant prosthesis; objectivity cannot be about fixed vision when what counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about.' (Ibid. 195)