THE ART OF BEING NONSYNCHRONOUS

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I first encountered the term "native speaker" in a junior high school English class in Japan. Our teacher said: "Now let's listen to the pronunciation of a native speaker" and switched on a sturdy black cassette recorder that resembled a family altar. At first all we heard from the machine was a crackling noise, but soon it was followed by a voice reading the text from our book.

The sound of this language had a surprisingly powerful effect on me: The *a* of *cat* opened its jaws like a furious tomcat. The *m* of *mother* held a sip of whiskey in its mouth without a word, while the *p* of *pen* exploded with impatience.

Imitating these sounds was difficult. The cassette recorder had no mouth, so you couldn't see how it was producing the one or the other sound.

Even today the term "native speaker" makes me think not of a person but of a cassette recorder.

Many years later I had the opportunity to observe a person speaking English more closely. I then realized that to speak English it was necessary to open one's mouth not just vertically, but horizontally as well. Up to this point I had been unable, for example, to distinguish between *ear* and *year,* but once I saw the speaker's lips, I started to hear two different sounds. In other words, hearing isn't done by the ear alone; the eye hears as well.

When I first arrived in Germany as a twenty-two-year-old, I was surprised to find that in every major city nearly every evening there was a poet willing

to read his poems to an audience. In Japan, poetry readings are rare. I found it just as surprising that on German television the samurais in a Kurosawa movie spoke German fluently, as did the figures in anime films. Even Lieutenant Columbo, who on Japanese television had spoken only Japanese, now spoke German as if he'd done so all his life.

Although the lieutenant's face remained the same as ever, I had the impression he'd now become another person. I was just as surprised to hear a friend of mine suddenly speaking a different language. Usually my image of people was based on their voices, their choice of words, and the little pauses between words that made up the rhythm of their speech.

But when you speak a different language, both your voice and your speech rhythms differ as well. I wondered whether I really knew this woman or just a cassette recording inside her. Can the body be compared to a cassette player in which you can keep changing the tape?

When I was little, one of my playmates showed me a doll that could talk. When the doll was undressed, you could see two little doors in its back. One of them concealed a battery and the other a tiny cassette containing a recording of the doll's voice.

The word "to dub" is *fukikae* in Japanese. *Fuki* means "to blow" and *kae* "to exchange." A different voice is blown into a body and replaces the old one. Dubbing is a shamanic activity. If for example a person wishes to speak with his dead mother, he goes to a shaman who summons the souls of the dead. The soul of the dead woman enters into the shaman's body and speaks through his mouth. Like a film actor, he lets himself be dubbed.

Poetry readings always make me think about dubbing and shamanism. To begin with, we have the body of the poet. We have his voice, through which we are hearing the poem, and then there's this poem as written text. But what do these three things have to do with one another?

When you watch a dubbed movie, you should theoretically be able to notice a discrepancy between the lip movements and the voice if you look closely enough. This thought has troubled me for some time. Like a woman possessed, I stare at the actors' lips, waiting to discover moments where the synchronization doesn't work. Sometimes I find myself so preoccupied I miss the plot of the movie.

What I am hoping to see is a pair of lips standing still while I am hearing a word, or lips broadly, lustily in motion, producing inaudible sentences. But dubbing techniques nowadays are so sophisticated, it's practically impossible to find an error. Film and television actors express themselves fluently in languages they don't speak, as if there were no such thing as a language barrier, no division between their voices and bodies.

One day I saw an installation that once more drew my attention to the dubbing process. Unfortunately I've forgotten the artist's name and have been unable to find him on the internet. This was in 2001, at Art Basel, the international art show held in Basel once a year. A drive-in theater had been set up outside the exhibition center, and on the large screen I saw two cowboys dismounting from their horses and chatting with the reins in their hands. "A typical scene from some Western, what's the point," I thought. You couldn't hear the sound, but even a person like me who has never seen a Western from beginning to end could easily imagine the sorts of things they were saying. An empty car was parked in front of the screen, and when you got inside and put on headphones, you could hear the cowboys' voices. And what a surprise! The film had been dubbed with philosophical texts. A writer who was there with me shouted in delight: "It's Heidegger!" The work was perfect: There was no apparent discrepancy between the text and the movements of the cowboys' lips.

It's quite possible, in other words, to take a voice from some far-off location and arbitrarily place it in the body of a film actor.

To whom does the voice belong? The voice erases the question of whom. On the other hand, the voice is often used in democratic society as a metaphor for a person's authentic opinion. We speak of people being given a voice when they are able to assert their political will, and in some languages, such as German, a vote is literally called a "voice."

Hearing a poet read his work only strengthens my impression that the voice is coming from far away or from a person not literally present. You stare at the poet's lips to reassure yourself that you really do have before your eyes the authentic source of the poem. But the more closely you watch his lips, the more difficult it is to say where the sound of a poem comes from.

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Ever since the invention of sound recording technology, it's been just as easy to preserve the human voice as a manuscript. Not only can a voice be recorded and played back again as often as desired, it can be copied, cut, and edited as well. The voice is no longer something that must be produced on the spot from a living body. It's now become commonplace, one can say, for the owner of a voice not to be physically present when the voice is heard. When we sit in a movie theater, for example, the actors who appear in the film are usually, with very few exceptions, elsewhere and not in the theater itself. And how fortunate it is that the people we see on television are not actually sitting in our living rooms! In our day-to-day lives, we devote a great deal of time to the telephone and internet.

At night, the intimacy of a voice has a stronger effect than during the daytime. The people whispering in my ear from the radio are not sitting beside me. Some of them are even dead. But the ghostly immateriality of a voice is not generally seen as cause for alarm. It's only on rare occasions that you'll find yourself suddenly struck by the uncanniness of a disembodied voice. In my case, this happened with an onboard navigation system in someone's car. The voice, which I couldn't even assign to any particular body, responded to the driver's presence and told him where to go. This voice was sitting quite close beside the driver, closer than would be possible in reality. It was like an imaginary character speaking in a lonely person's head.

Before digital technologies became a part of everyday life, the letter was considered one of the most important instruments for the transport of words. Even the telephone was unable to destroy the culture of letter writing. People who before had frequently written letters continued to do so to communicate things they preferred not to say on the telephone. The letter has developed its own form of distance that allows people to express things it might be difficult to say in person. This has less to do with inhibitions or politeness than with style. Writing a letter, you can borrow this or that turn of phrase from literary tradition to apply to your own life much more easily than on the phone. It wasn't until the advent of electronic communication that the culture of letter writing began to lose some of its dominance. There are many differences between an email and a letter on paper, but one in particular stands out, namely, the consciousness on the part of both sender and

recipient of the distance between them. Even in the case of an overseas email, people tend to expect a response in the next few hours, as if the recipient's desk were in the same room. Mentioning the time difference or weather in an international email can already be interpreted as a personal, even romantic gesture. A handwritten letter, however, almost automatically announces the writer's absence to its recipient.

Yasushi Inoue's story "The Hunting Gun" (1949) consists for the most part of three letters written by three women to a man. The first letter is written by the daughter of the man's lover. The young woman is making an assumption about distance when she writes that he surely isn't here in the city but rather in his country house. And she demands an even greater distance: She writes that she never wants to see him again. The second letter is from his wife, who writes it sitting at her husband's desk in his absence. It is a farewell letter in which she calmly but quite clearly proposes a divorce. The third letter is the last will and testament of the man's lover. By the time he receives this letter, she is no longer alive. Her absence is then complete.

A person who's lost his hearing feels the isolation more acutely than one who's lost his vision. Hearing someone's voice can make you feel a certain closeness to that person. Even an electronic reproduction of a voice is capable of simulating proximity. Where is the voice coming from? Where is the voice at the moment we are hearing it? The invisible waves touch our eardrums, which are stretched taut deep within our ears. Every voice from outside resonates within our head, not before our eyes. Many commercial films take advantage of this property of the voice and attempt to use the synchronization of image and sound to eliminate our distance from the characters. This seduces the viewer into identifying with the characters.

The sort of art I value doesn't try to make its medium invisible but rather thematizes it in the work itself. A poem ought to contain its own theory of poetics and speak not only of its visible "contents" but of writing itself. A play should always reflect the formal properties of the theatrical arts. Thus I am particularly interested in films that emphasize certain forms of synchronization, for example, dubbing. There are classic examples, such as Wim Wenders's film *Lisbon Story,* in which the sound engineer with his large recording apparatus plays a major role. In this essay, however, I would like to discuss a few more recent examples I have experienced in person.

In the summer of 2002 I attended an international theater festival in Hamburg and saw a performance entitled *Memory* put on by the Theater am Neumarkt from Zurich. On the screen, a filmed interview with three old women was projected without sound. An actor and two actresses stood on stage dubbing the film. There was something surprising and touching about the juxtaposition of these young voices with the old faces. The discrepancy was not only of age but of gender: one of the speakers on the stage was male, while all three faces on the screen were female. The face of the woman being dubbed by the male actor looked so beautiful and multifaceted, as though it had already received into itself many male and female faces. Thus it was fitting that her voice was being dubbed by a male actor and not an actress.

I was instantly reminded of an old female shaman who spoke through the mouth of a dead man. This shaman was possessed by the man, and thus she turned her body into a medium. The dead man no longer had a body; he needed a medium in order to speak.

This was a form of dubbing. But unlike dubbing of the usual sort, which attempts to simulate the identity of voice and body, the theater piece *Memory* intentionally showed us that the voices were coming not from the projected faces on the screen but rather from a medium, in this case the body of another person.

After the show I happened to overhear a critical question being posed by an audience member as we were filing out: Why had they robbed the old women of their voices? Why hadn't they been allowed to use their own voices to tell their stories? There are particularly high expectations of "authenticity" when it is a question of autobiographical narrative. And yet all too often one forgets that even in a documentary film, the material is subjected to a number of manipulations, even when the voices appear to be presented in their original form.

Where does a voice come into being? Perhaps a vibration is first created in the vocal chords, the palate, on a person's tongue. But this is not yet a voice. Only in the listener's head is it constructed as the voice of a person. We hear selectively, we correct, add to, and adulterate what we are hearing. Otherwise it would be impossible to understand the person speaking to us. We contribute to this process by bringing in our own knowledge, preconceptions, imagination, and repressed thoughts. Thus every act of listening is already a dialogue, even before we open our mouths to reply.

Little children dub books when they read them aloud. The storytelling voice, which at first was the voice of the author, the voice of one of the characters or of the mother, is thus transformed into the voice of the reader. This reader takes in a story by first placing the words on his tongue and only afterward enjoying them with his ear. I can still remember the glorious feeling I sometimes had as a child when I read my books aloud: It was as if I myself were creating the stories.

Even big kids — by which I mean all of us — take pleasure in reading literary texts aloud. When this is a text written by someone else, it becomes mine when I read it aloud. When it is my own text, reading it aloud turns it into something separate from me.

In 2004, at the same festival in Hamburg two years later, I saw a performance by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué that bore the title *Biokhraphia*. An actress stood onstage performing a scene in which a journalist was interviewing an artist. The actress was playing the roles of both the one being questioned and the questioner. The effect was completely natural, perhaps even more natural than in the usual sorts of interviews you see on television. We were seeing the face of the actress through a thick wall of glass, hollow on the inside, that was slowly beginning to fill up with water. But our view of her was scarcely distorted since the water was clear. But soon a second liquid was injected into the water, and all at once a chemical reaction made all the liquid turn milky. You could no longer see the actress's face until a face was projected onto the white surface. It was the same face, but now it appeared to be coming from a projector. This video must have been recorded beforehand, but the lip movements corresponded exactly to the voice we had been hearing without interruption since the beginning of the performance.

At the end of the show, the actress divided the liquid into little bottles and placed them on a table like schnapps. They were for sale. What was in these little bottles? The voice that had come to us through the wall of glass or the face that had been projected on it? Unfortunately I don't know since I didn't have any money on me that day and thus was unable to buy a bottle.

In February 2007 during the Berlin Film Festival I saw Guy Maddin's *Brand upon the Brain* at the Deutsche Oper. It was a silent film, and black and white as well, though it had been produced not during the 1920s but in 2006, in Canada. The actress Isabella Rossellini accompanied the film with onstage

narration. The sounds in the film were produced live by three musicians working with musical instruments, water, pieces of wood, vegetables, and other objects. When you stared at the screen, the images and sounds fit together well, as in an ordinary film. But every time you glanced at the stage, it was a surprise. On the screen, for example, you might be seeing a person whose bones were being broken, while onstage one of the musicians was crushing a fennel bulb with his bare hands.

Adulterated sounds have become part of everyday life. There are now sound designers for electrical products. A vacuum cleaner, for example, makes an appropriate noise when you turn it on. And we often forget that this sound, too, has been composed and is not "authentic." For when a vacuum cleaner is too quiet, it's difficult for its owner to believe it is truly effective in eliminating dirt. The actual sound has been dampened and then dubbed with an artificial sound to make it appear more "real."

I like to think back on an old-fashioned studio I once visited where at one time radio plays were produced. In the studio one saw a tub of water, a flat aluminum box filled with dried peas, and a squeaky wooden door in a frame. I often picture this studio when I am listening to a radio play, though nowadays most of the sounds are produced digitally. The German word *O-Ton* (original sound) tends to be enunciated respectfully, with the *O* an exclamation of surprise, as it is unusual for a *Ton* to be original. But what does it mean for a sound to be original? So-called original sound is sound that has been recorded and then processed before being broadcast on the radio. The sounds aren't necessarily coming from the thing we're looking at. The voices aren't coming from the persons whose lips are moving in an appropriate fashion. Has the entire optically perceptible world that surrounds us been dubbed? This suspicion is nothing new; we repress it day after day.

In 2005, a unique opera project was put on in Graz, Austria, by the composer Peter Ablinger. The goal was to turn the entire city into an opera. How can a musician think up a city? What sort of singing voice might a city's mouth emit? I was the so-called librettist for this project, but my libretto was not to be put to music and sung as in ordinary circumstances. Rather I attempted to make a book out of the city's song. I began my work by carefully listening several times to the tape recordings Ablinger had made in the city. There were more than four hundred recordings he had made on the street, in fac-

tories and schools, on various bridges, in private homes, restaurants, bars, streetcars, and other locations in the city. The visitors to the audio-space, which was housed in a building in the city, could put on headphones to listen to this collection of sounds. Several fragments from the collection appeared in the symphony Ablinger composed. The sounds of the city struck me as refreshing and strangely organic in the context of this symphony. Because of the huge number of tapes he had made, I could listen to only an embarrassingly small subset of them. Therefore I made a point of not informing myself beforehand as to the locations where they'd been recorded. But soon I realized that what I'd be able to write down was not what I was hearing but rather just my "guesses." I wrote, for example, that someone was opening a door. But how was I supposed to know it was a person? Perhaps it was only the wind opening this door and not a person at all. And how could I be sure it was a door? Perhaps it was an oar scraping the side of a boat. Suddenly I saw a lake at night, a boat swaying upon its waters. The door was no longer a door, it was a boat, and the person was wind. And the moon in the sky? The voice of a coot? In place of the bird's voice I heard a sound that might have come from a zipper. My thoughts quickly returned to the room I'd visualized at the beginning. It had to be a suitcase with a zipper like that. Or did the nocturnal landscape itself have a zipper you could open to see the sunrise? It's a hotel room, not a room in a private home, I thought. Otherwise the person wouldn't have opened the door so slowly and carefully. I didn't want to subordinate the sound to an image to render it explicable. But I was no longer able to slow down the images that kept popping up one after the other, ever more of them.

My writing process took several more detours and seemed to go on forever. I didn't want to just write down the images the sounds evoked in me but rather take the sounds themselves into my hand like concrete objects and then set them down on the paper. How can something we've heard be translated into language? Is an onomatopoeic expression a solution? Should I write, "crackling, scraping, tinkling"? But these onomatopoeic expressions are also culturally encoded, they aren't pure sound. When I write *shitoshito* in Japanese, only Japanese speakers can hear the sound of a gentle rain. A strong rain, on the other hand, is *zaazaa,* but this too works only in Japanese. The German verb *plätschern* (to patter) sounds similar to the Japanese *pichapicha* and is also quite similar in meaning, but such coincidences are rare.

An onomatopoeic expression automatically entails the specification of what is being described. A pattering sound cannot come from a block of

wood. But when I was listening to the recordings, I sometimes couldn't tell whether a sound was coming from thunder or a sheet of metal. I wanted to represent the sound, not the person who was producing it, nor its metaphorical significance. It took me quite some time to come up with a solution: My solution was not to find a solution, but rather to enter into the crevice between sound and language and make countless little notes. This dark crevice was a treasure trove of possibilities for what language can be: Language can produce an image from a sound or juxtapose several images. It can clumsily imitate various sounds and invent new words precisely because of its clumsiness. Language can link a sound to a color, or think up an adjective to go along with it while at the same time questioning its legitimacy. Language can compare what we hear with other things. Then the images invoked only by way of comparison begin to assert their independence. Language can offer up its own hollow interior for use as a concert hall or sing songs of its own upon the stage. And all the while it keeps secretly repeating: "I am not music, even though music is part of what I am. That music is the other sort." There are so many possibilities in the dark treasure trove between language and the audible. It is so difficult to keep the door to this chamber ajar that holding it open can be seen as an achievement in its own right.

The desire to hear an authentic voice becomes stronger in particular contexts, for example, in the art of ethnic minorities and immigrants. There is always a lack of simultaneity between the character being described and the one doing the describing, even in the case of a first-person narrator who appears to be telling an autobiographical story. Added to this is an indigenous voice that intervenes in the narration, participating in the storytelling process. To this extent, every autobiographical narrative is also a dialogue. The 2003 film *WOZUHAUS* (WHEREISHOME) made by Hyun-Sook Song in collaboration with Jochen Hiltmann consciously plays on this problematic circumstance. The first scene of the film shows a woman pounding a pole into the earth in a rural landscape. You can see the slow, regular motions of her enormous wooden hammer, but the image and the sound arrive separately. Later in the film we hear the following words: "One is never synchronous. One is never simultaneous with the object one is painting or filming, about which one is thinking or writing. And the appeal of such activities lies not in eventually becoming synchronous but in increasing the paradoxes to attain a feeling for slowness and fastness in, for example, painting. As you will see, one can hurry or hesitate. Speech detaches itself from the mouth, the sound

detaches itself from the object, the skin detaches itself from the body, posing the question: What is it that at the speed of light reaches us from strange worlds?"

What is appealing about art is not achieving good synchronizations. It is precisely through visible discrepancies that the voice gains its poetic independence.

Before the invention of recording technology, the conventional forms of dramatic representation coexisted with other performing arts in which body and voice asserted their mutual independence. In the Japanese puppet theater bunraku (*ningyoojooruri*), for instance, a form of theater developed in the seventeenth century that is still practiced today, the puppeteers are joined by a narrator who sits to one side of the stage along with a few musicians and speaks all the different roles. The puppeteers move the puppets without making a sound. In kabuki theater, which got started around the same time and is still popular today, the live actors speak their lines themselves, but in part they are imitating the typical movements of the puppets in bunraku theater. The secret link between the bunraku puppets and the kabuki actors was brought to my attention in a surprising way in 1999 when I was collaborating on an international theater project in Graz directed by Ulrike Ottinger. She was putting on *Das Verlobungsfest im Feenreiche* (Betrothal in the Fairy Realm) by Johann Nestroy (1801–62) with an international cast. While the Japanese actors, two of whom came from the kabuki tradition, were performing, the Austrian actress Libgart Schwarz stood onstage speaking all the parts in German. Sometimes the Japanese actors spoke as well: either sentences that were then repeated in German or lines that were clear from context without translation. One might say that a sort of dubbing was taking place here, but this synchronizing of the lines was not being used to make the foreign elements of the production easier to understand; rather, it underscored this marvelous juxtaposition of bodies and voice on the stage without eliminating their differences. Various voices and the rhythms of various languages joined together with various movements to create a sort of music.

I prepared a Japanese translation of the play and during rehearsals whispered it into the ears of the Japanese actors who didn't know any German. I tried to speak my translation in the same tempo in which the Austrian actress was speaking German. I even corrected my translation so that the Japanese sentences would have the same length and, whenever possible, the same structure as the German ones. This, then, was my personal work experience

with dubbing. At some point during a rehearsal one of the kabuki actors said that he no longer needed a translation, as he was, in any case, able to orient himself only by the rhythm of the German language, not its meaning. This was one of the moments in which I learned something important about the theater.

It should probably be added that Ulrike Ottinger, who is even more famous as a filmmaker than as a theater director, doesn't have her films dubbed. In *Johanna in Mongolia,* for example, German, French, and Mongolian are all spoken without dubbing. Sometimes a subtitle appears, sometimes what is said is made comprehensible by other means. The foreign languages are never treated as an unavoidable inconvenience but rather are used as important aesthetic elements in the composition of the work as a whole.

I would like to conclude my thoughts on the subject of synchronization by describing an opera. On the evening in question, Berlin's Komische Oper was bringing back a production of Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail* (Abduction from the Seraglio) that had premiered in 2004. There are various things that can be said about this controversial production by Calixto Bieito, but I will limit myself to recounting what took place on this particular evening. The singer who was to play the role of Konstanze had fallen ill. And her understudy was not quite well either, so that she could be present onstage but was unable to sing. And so a third singer stood to the right of the stage, singing the role of Konstanze without moving. She had on a simple dark green dress, whereas all the other women onstage were playing up the eroticism of the work with their costumes and the way they wore them. The singer who was singing reminded me of the narrator in bunraku theater. I was surprised and delighted at the coincidence that an opera was being dubbed on the very evening when I was intending to finish writing this essay. This was a turn of events that involved not one but several chance occurrences. The production was outstanding. The soprano voice sounded so colorful, plastic, and dynamic that I even thought to myself: A singer should always lose her voice and turn into a body so that another singer whose body is not present can sing in her place. For the separation of body and voice must remain visible to make us appreciate the miracle that occurs whenever the two come together on the stage.