“THE MEGAPHONE OF DESTINY—”
COMPOSITION, VOICE, AND MULTITUDE IN THE AUDITORY AVANT-GARDE
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: GERTRUDE STEIN, SAMUEL BECKETT,
JOHN CAGE, AND FRANK ZAPPA

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the critical history of the term ‘auditory turn.’ Following Marshall McLuhan, I argue that the emergence of sound and sound-oriented concepts in Twentieth-Century literature and culture exemplifies a paradigm shift in the way a literary text operates. This shift affects not just literature but forms of literacy and literary analysis. By drawing on McLuhan’s notions like ‘the scandal of cubism’ and the ‘acoustic space’ as well as Walter Ong’s ‘secondary orality’ along with subsequent research in media and sound studies, I examine a group of selected works that manifest the idea of auditory text, a text characterized by performative sonority, aspiring to the condition of music. The thesis offers four ‘representative anecdotes’ of the ‘auditory turn’ in avant-garde and experimental literature, Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, and Frank Zappa, each of which is engaged in a separate chapter. Chapter 1 draws on the relationship between sound and presence and landscape as it applies to Stein’s ideas concerning composition and landscape theatre. Chapter 2 turns to selected short prose works of Beckett to demonstrate the attention to sound in the way in which the problem of voice as a marker of self preoccupies Beckett. Chapter 3 examines selected writings of John Cage that engage the problem of sound and voice both theoretically, as themes addressed critically, and in his practice of using voice as an instrument. Chapter 4 directs critical attention to Frank Zappa’s writings as well as musical compositions that explicitly engage the issue of sound, voice, and noise in popular culture. The four chapters help develop systematically the structural argument of the thesis concerning the interface of sound, text, and image, demonstrating this interface to manifest in three related ways, as composition, voice, and multitude (also referred to as peopling).
PREFACE

This thesis contains original, independent, and never previously published work by Tomasz Michalak.
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INTRODUCTION: THE AUDITORY TURN-ON

A recent conference hosted by the Butler School of Music at Austin, Texas, *Thinking Hearing — The Auditory Turn in the Humanities* (2009) offers in its title the term ‘auditory turn,’ declaring in the conference proposal the importance of ‘the auditory’ as an emerging paradigm in the humanities and social sciences, calling on scholars to turn critical attention to sound and aurality as pertinent areas of investigation: “Are the humanities on the verge of an ‘auditory turn?’ Do we need an equivalent to visual studies — aural studies, as one might call it?”

The ‘auditory turn’ may indeed be a gesture in the direction of aural studies. Applied to literature and writing, and so closer to the purview of this thesis, the term helps to make sense of the growing theoretical and critical interest in what Marshall McLuhan, early in the history of media studies, called the ‘acoustic space,’ the space of listening, of the ear and orality. McLuhan’s critical interest in the auditory/acoustic draws the literary scholar’s attention to the ear as a silenced organ of perception. In McLuhan’s mind, print-oriented cultures marginalize the ear, replacing it with the eye as the preferred mode of sensing and of making sense. The eye becomes the dominant regime of thought, understanding, and culture of the so-called Gutenberg civilization with its complex ocular epistemologies of seeing, sight, and vision. However, the explosion of the mass media in the 1950s and, increasingly, of the audio-visual-computer media of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s that foreshadowed the global-digital synergies of today, brings the aural/auditory world into the foreground. In this thesis, I examine auditory snapshots of that foreground.
Although it’s difficult to pinpoint the ‘auditory turn’ at a particular historical moment, it clearly traverses several points of the Twentieth-Century with its unprecedented surge of new recording and communication technologies, calling for new forms of literacy and social and cultural practices. Here the ‘auditory turn’ helps to group related cultural phenomena, understand them in the context of larger social practices, infer relationships between them, and draw their larger cultural implications. More specifically, the emphasis on the auditory/acoustic helps to interrogate the eye as an organ of unique insight and a model for understanding in the systems of knowledge referred to by McLuhan as the Gutenberg Galaxy (also the title of his cultural-ethnographic magnum opus); it then extends the eye telescopically as an instrument of understanding beyond sight and vision by connecting and relating it to other senses. At stake is the capacity to make sense of multi-media and multimediation as the epistemic-aesthetic paradigm of the century, to image beyond the gaze, as an acoustic perception, floating in the non-localizable, multi-perspectival ‘acoustic space’ proposed by McLuhan. The ‘auditory turn’ in this sense — in the sense and in the act of bringing the senses into the fold of a multi-mediational understanding — is not limited to sound alone but comprises a range of sense orientations, the whole affective-semantic scale. As a sense-oriented concept, the auditory/acoustic is esemplastic, to use a term coined by Samuel Coleridge in his discussion of the extensions of literature in relation to imagination; esemplastic here means that the auditory/acoustic is a multi-media hybrid, engaging visual, textile, tactile, and sonoric registers, connecting tactility and language, color and feeling, sound and taste.

My thesis takes up the ‘auditory turn’ along with auditory-related concepts in a critical foray into Twentieth-Century experimental writing, performance, and sound making to
demonstrate the flourishing relationship among sound, text, and image as an essential feature of Twentieth-Century text and writing. In its investigations, the thesis engages a group of texts that exemplify not just the style, but also the inherent and permanent aural/audial/auditory/acoustic dimension of writing. My goal is not to analyze the periodic changes or turns to discover what set of forces may cause them or to question what the paradigm’s exact characteristics may be, but to listen to the sounds already happening within the frame of Twentieth-Century literary modernity. Here the multi-mediational, multi-sensorial acoustic dimension of the auditory helps to theorize the interface of aurality, textuality, and visuality as closely interrelated media resonating through the literary ethos of the period stretching meaningfully, though without further historical consequence, from 1914 to 1991, effectively the period covered in the thesis.

Selected works of Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, and Frank Zappa provide ‘representative anecdotes’ that dramatize the coming together of sound, text, and image. They offer a critical perspective on the presence of sound cultures in Twentieth-Century literary theories and practices. These representative works embody an auditory kind of textuality, offering themselves as auditory texts in that they actively engage with the relationship between sound and text in practice, and at a theoretical level, by posing pertinent critical questions regarding the epistemic, technical, aesthetic, and political implications of this interface. The larger premise, and a starting point, is that the coming together of sound, text, and image constitutes one of the defining features of Twentieth-Century culture, which has direct implications for new technologies of reading and writing, and so affects all corresponding cultural practices. My thesis examines this particular sensory collision as it shapes the practice of writing and sounding as complementary and hybrid media, in other
words, as multi-media systems involving different degrees of coordination of visual, textual, and sonoric sources. The overall argument concerns the development and practice of auditory models of analysis of literary and related texts; it engages critical theory invested in sound to focus on the ongoing mediational symbiosis between literature and the recording and transmitting technologies of the period: the gramophone, radio, television, magnetic tape, and the compact disc. In that regard, the selected texts exemplify the break into the auditory; they are nodes in a complex relationship among sense perception, self, voice, and the social; they are problem-texts articulating aspects of the interface of sound and text.

To coordinate my theoretical task, I draw on critical works within the field of sound studies (Steven Feld, Don Ihde, Douglas Kahn, Jonathan Sterne, Les Black, Michael Bull); work with sound-oriented concepts, such as ‘acoustic space’ (Marshall McLuhan et al), ‘noise’ (Jacques Attali), the refrain (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari), the ‘auditory imagination’ (Don Ihde), ‘acoustemology’ (Steven Feld), the ‘soundscape’ and ‘schizophonia’ (Murray Schafer), and ‘participatory discrepancy’ (Charles Keil); I also attend to the auditory in the text by tracing a line of scholarship that addresses the elements and aspects of sound in literature (Mikhail Bakhtin, Steve McCaffery, Katherine Hayles, Marjorie Perloff, Garrett Stewart). Garrett Stewart’s phenomenological explorations in his *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* is one example of research on the auditory dimensions of text, and a tactic of listening for the ‘acoustic space’ in texts. Stewart’s ‘phonotext’ helps us to ‘visualize’ the encounter with a text haunted by a chorus of virtual voices, revealing the various disembodied and/or dislocated levels of the voice that accompany the reading process. Drawing on research related to the phenomenology of the voice (Don Ihde, Garrett Stewart), I explore its cultural production and transmission, inquiring into its ideology, mediations, and embodiments.
How does one locate sound in text? It must be there, animated by the voice of the reader, by no means a singularity as the concept may falsely imply. Moreover, it must be there in the first place inscribed in the act of writing, at times preceding this very act and structuring it processually as a series of sonic events: whispers, breathing, the rustling of paper, the staccato of a typewriter, or the clicking of a computer mouse. Writing considered as a technology, whether of the scripting quill or digital computer system, is submerged in sound; as well, insofar as the text, so animated with sonority, responds to its environment — both the larger cultural context and the most immediate surroundings, the study room, library, park, or café — the text contains a unique ‘soundscape’. Obviously, this ‘soundscape’ is materially absent from the text, but this particular absence doesn’t mean we can ignore it. It is so much more amplified for that very absence! This virtual ‘soundscape’ is the veritable ghost of the text that Stephen Greenblatt resurrects in his *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. When setting out to unpack a poetics of culture contained in the works, whose only principal life remains in the printed folios and their theatrical simulacra, he proposes the term ‘social energy’ as the material component, a concrete manifestation of the poetics in the making, that constitutes the social environment of the poet. One of my aims is to listen to the ‘social energy’ accumulated in the ‘folios’ of Cage, Zappa, Beckett, and Stein; to experiment with these texts as auditory events we engage in for the purpose of understanding, releasing, and being with ‘social energy.’

‘Social energy,’ as the auditory space of Twentieth-Century literature and culture, resonates through what McLuhan, in a televised conversation with Edwin Newman, calls “the scandal of cubism.” He explains the term in the following statement:
We live in an electric age which is non-visual and non-visualizable. The scandal of cubism or the scandal of much symbolist art was the scrapping of visual space — the throwing away of the visual in favor of the audile-tactile. Civilization is a technical term based upon the dominance of the eye over the other senses. There are no connections in matter as understood by the New Physics but there is a perpetual resonating interval between or among particles. It is in this interval of resonance that the action takes place. In the world of resonance man becomes completely involved. (“Speaking Freely with Edwin Newman”)

The statement takes the listener beyond the visible, and the divisible, as the pun here makes sense, into the shimmering electric subatomic flow of radio and television particles emitting their discourse through auditory waves. The statement necessarily considered in the context of its televisual appearance forays into the audio-tactility of sound, touch, image, and movement as media and extensions that replace the visual regime. The audio-tactile articulates through resonances, vibrations, and pulses; it’s about intervals and oscillations, intuitions and affects, the permanent in-betweenness of sound, its repetition in the beginning again and again of Stein and Beckett. Thus “the scandal of cubism” helps McLuhan reference a specific moment in the history of plastic arts: the emergence of a haptic visuality in the form of a non-perspectival seeing, forging a synaesthetic simultaneity of different points of view, the “interval of resonance [where] the action takes place.” For McLuhan, this specific moment in history is when history and sound technology meet, in the explosion of mass media and their dramatic shift from print oriented literacy to the age of the computer-digital system via the cartoon, the comic book, the advertising poster, a radio or television program, or a pop or rock song.
For McLuhan, media clearly involve us on a physical level, literally at the level of radiation from the TV tube or the blast of air from the sound system at a rock show, in a controlled-home little atomic explosion mirroring all the graphic-visual horrors of the century, or in a public space transforming and mutating through the multiple uses of sound. The emergence of the simultaneity of points of view and sense perceptions brought about by the media has specific social implications; and so the analysis of that shift traces in effect a social development, the making of a people. Within the print orientation, this cubist turn transcends the boundary of text as a visual and perspectival medium, breaking away into the acoustic/auditory as a social space/project beyond the constraints of the logos — the eye and print culture — as a dominant form of knowledge. What happens outside the print, at the edges or margins of it? The notion of acoustic resonance, what McLuhan calls ‘acoustic space,’ along with the media and sound studies can make sense of it in the context of a specific cultural production or set of practices; that’s the key to tracing the “essence of what happens,” to borrow from Stein, in a so-called literary text during the 20th Century: to listen around it.

Could one understand a text as an ‘acoustic space’? What would such a reading mean? What kind of procedure would it involve? In *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*, Richard Cavell makes the point that McLuhan’s notion of ‘acoustic space’ must be understood as a “hybrid of oral and literate modalities” (xiv), a combination of writing and speaking, writing in the breath of speech, writing/recording what one hears, hearing what one writes. McLuhan, as literary scholar, takes the words on a page and applies them at once to cognitive psychology and media studies, making up the latter from a combination of communication studies, cybernetics, rhetoric, ethnography, sociology, and literary analysis.
Cavell further explains that ‘acoustic space’ is not simply a space filled with sound, but rather a mosaic of dynamic and interactive sensory experience involving auditory and visual cognitive processes, an “allatonceness” (55) as Cavell calls it. This ‘acoustic space’ is characterized by a juxtaposition or pile-up of images, speech, sounds, noises, silences, text, and empty spaces between words; it is a space that involves working with visual and linguistic channels of cognition.

The term ‘mosaic’ is an important concept for McLuhan in this connection, signifying a type or model of composition that emerges in response to the multiple sensory stimulation of the media, in contrast to the ocular overstimulation of the typographic regime. With its close analogies to the Deleuzoguattarian ‘plane of immanence,’ the notion of the ‘mosaic’ postulates a model of composition as both an aesthetic practice and a kind of understanding, in both cases directing attention at an immanent copresence of heterogeneous elements, a simultaneous presence of a whole bunch of things. In that sense, the ‘acoustic space’ is both graphic and audible, graphic-audible. One could think of space as definable by what encloses it, by the perception of its boundaries, frontiers and landmarks; without walls or borders space would be inherently un-locatable, as in the famous zinger from Stein’s Everybody’s Autobiography “there is no there there” (289). ‘Acoustic space,’ however, encloses what is audible within it: the immediate audibility of the present, sounds and words in their presence.

The ‘mosaic’ is McLuhan’s response to the question of form and structure implied in the idea of composition. For McLuhan the terms ‘visual’ and ‘acoustic’ refer to a notion of structure or form. This emphasis on the form is, in visual terms, attention to the ground as the organizing principle that gives sense to the figure-content of the representation. The medium is the ground, to paraphrase the famous ‘medium is the message’ line. Put another way, in a
visual message, the ground is the content proper, what gives representation its unique
individual flavor and being. But where exactly is the ground located and how is it located in
relation to the figure within the allatonceness of the ‘acoustic space’? Where does the image
begin and end? The relationship between the figure and the ground is indeed resonant and
discontinuous in a manner similar to the acoustic structure as one of discontinuities, a mosaic
of communication stimuli that can be experienced as a simultaneity of sensory data that
reaches us from all directions. Within the ‘acoustic space,’ the figure and the ground, the
letters and the sounds of them, can’t be distinguished, but rather interpenetrate to resonate
along a multidimensional plane of relations that creates its own dimensions.

To read texts for their ‘acoustic space’, to read auditory texts, involves a form of
bricolage, an interpretive sounding out/reading that pieces together diverse materials, and
openly experiments with numerous possibilities of reading and sounding out, a paratactic
reading that connects various parts of the text via sound clues, visual clues, semantic, logical,
associative clues and other sense perceptions, echo-locating through it, making and unmaking
sense of what the ear can hear, the way the ear hears and understands. To read texts for their
‘acoustic space’ is to put trust in listening as a form of interpreting and understanding and to
allow voice and vocalizations to guide one through the reading process, in order to hear,
paraphrasing McLuhan, the resonating interval between or amongst the particles of text, play,
or lyric.

The ‘auditory turn’ indexes Don Ihde’s influential 1976 critical study Listening and
Voice. In his quest to study sound, Ihde engages a range of topics, from language, to music, to
metaphysics. One of the central relationships in this context is the relationship between the
body and technology, both in relation to theories of subjectivity, at the level of identity
politics, and in relation to social processes, at the level of body politic. *Listening and Voice* is an example of an early study focused on auditory cultures; following the McLuhan acoustic line of investigations privileging the non-linear cultures of music, dance, performance, and orality, Ihde traces the interlacing of the visual and aural perceptions as exemplary of social processes involving the auditory/acoustic, from speech and writing to opera and pop music, putting forth a phenomenology of listening and voice. Recently, Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening* extends this phenomenological line of investigation into sound and listening. His philosophical quest searches for “a visual sound” (3) and listening as a mode of intuiting in and thinking of truth (4), toward the understanding of the world conceptually, but in auditory terms, not as a series of visual metaphors and visualizations, but as sonorities and resonances across the practice and theory of sound and sound making. Music as a metaphor of reality, Nancy proclaims, “stems from a different logic [than ocularity/visuality], which would have to be called evocation... evocation [which] summons presence to itself” (20). This self-presence, this self-present actuality of presence, is the auditory copresence of all senses operating at once.

In taking up phenomenology anew, Nancy proposes not to return to the phenomenological subject as an intentional line of sight and inner vision but, rather, to move forward to a resonant subjectivity in the sense of an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in a self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to the same self (21), sense [being] first of all the rebound of sound, a rebound that is coextensive with the whole folding/unfolding of presence and of the present that makes or opens the perceptible as such, and that opens in it the sonorous exponent: the vibrant
spacing-out of a sense in whatever sense one understands or hears it... sense consists first of all, not in a signifying intention but rather in a listening. (30)

His *Listening* shifts the orientation of philosophical analysis toward musical meanings and an auditory comprehension of the world (32), grasping them as

a fundamental rhythmic [organization] of affect... the beat of a blending together and a pulling apart, of an accepting/rejecting or a swallowing/spitting: in fact, from movement (impulse?) from which there comes an outside and an inside and, thus, something or someone like a subject... the formation of a subject [being] first of all the rhythmic reployment/deployment of an enveloping between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ or else folding the ‘outside’ into the ‘inside,’ invaginating, forming a hollow, an echo chamber or column, a resonance chamber. (38)

The phenomenological line of inquiry articulates two areas of the study of sound and auditory cultures, as part of aesthetics, interested in art and its social and cultural forms, and as part of epistemology, interested in the questions of perception and understanding in the context of media technologies and their relationship to the body. The question of technology built into sound cultures in turn has its political implications; the media effects of sound in this context translate into the social distribution of senses, the body politic, subcultures, and global justice and resistance movements. The auditory, reconfigured in this way, interrogates new complex understandings and theories of the body in relation to the socius, engaging affect as the capacity of the body to experience and process, make sense, of sensations. Sense and sense, meaning and sensation, are inextricably tied up. It is interesting to note how difficult it is to separate sense (meaning) and sense (sensation) even despite the longstanding mind-body Cartesian bias still deeply embedded in collective ways of thinking, splitting the mind-consciousness-reason-meaning from the body-sensations-sense perceptions-experience.
In the field of literary studies, the auditory may seem to be most applicable in the areas of poetry and performance theory, where the relationship between the voice and the text remains most concrete and direct. However, the auditory is not limited to a specific genre or group of closely related genres revolving around performance poetry. The voice is recorded as text, captured in text, even if only in a hypothetical or virtual text, whenever one thinks of a possible text. The text, likewise, does not remain sealed in its visual form but is released into sound at all times, at multiple times in multiple acts of reading. Text, voice, and orality are inextricably connected in Walter Ong’s notion of ‘secondary orality.’ At this level, the relationship between text and voice applies to literature in general, be that reading, writing, composing, or performing. More interestingly, text is trapped in voice. Stewart’s notion of ‘phonotext’ conjures an image of a composite voice inside the head, like in sampling, which spins text into sound. In his Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext, Stewart explains the term by observing that “[r]eaders silently ventriloquize a text according to the linguistic conventions of their time” (38). And so, this phonotextual, auditory aspect of text is not limited to sound/performance poetry, rap or hip-hop, but it resides in any narrative where, in reading of a character speaking with a lisp or in a whispering voice or stuttering, one consciously wants to hear imagination-enhancing cues pertaining to how the character speaks — the timbre and pitch of their voice, the accented speed of speech, the loudness or softness in how they talk — all of these being examples of how a reader hears text in an auditory way. Reading is not a silent affair, even when it may lapse into a momentary silence that resembles that of John Cage’s 4’33”: filled with ambient noise, unintentional and undirected.

I should acknowledge at this point the recent systematic critique of Ong’a ‘secondary orality’ conducted by Jonathan Sterne in his “The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality.”
In the article, Sterne tackles specifically the theological underpinnings of Ong’s study of orality, showing them on closer look related less to the electric implosion of the new media technology as McLuhan would wish than to the old master narratives of “the Christian spiritual tradition,” which Sterne claims deeply involve Ong in his research. Sterne’s methodical dismantling takes the shape of archaeological investigations of lines and connecting tissue linking together a group of Canadian scholars in the 1950s and 60s invested in the study of orality. This line of orality, postulating oral consciousness as a sonic consciousness embedded in a long-standing mythical tradition of the voice of god and its earthly modalities, Sterne dismisses as not anthropological enough, advancing his anthropology project in the area of sound studies closer in orientation to Harold Innis’s spirit of social sciences. Though not interested in the Christian tradition, which in the context of my studies plays no part, I find Ong’s terminology, even his reliance on the polarity between the ear and eye, useful. The Christian tradition doesn’t seem out of place in the wrestling with the metaphysics of the understanding as interrogated in the ‘auditory turn’ toward sound and listening. This tradition is mockingly and seriously present in the prose of Beckett and musical cartoons of Zappa, who delights in retelling the stories of creation of ‘man’ and the universe. Ong’s theory of “a new electronic oral-aural consciousness consisting of a new kind of immediate presence,” as Sterne himself puts it, remains for me a relevant tool in the toolbox to examine the sounds and auditory tactics of the avant-garde modernity.

The premise and framework of my thesis concern text as auditory, examining the ways — technologies, practices, cultures and subcultures — in which the word becomes audible and haptic, a tactile, multi-sensorial phenomenon constitutive of sense as both perception and understanding. The thesis engages a sensory evolution occurring alongside the conceptual
reorientation of aesthetics of the multi-media systems. The word becomes audible, esemplastic and synaesthetic, glowing with aroma, smelling with color, speaking through its shape directly into the eye, rippling through the all-at-oneness. It returns audible, the way Ong’s ‘secondary orality’ returns to retribalize McLuhan’s ‘global village.’ Deterritorialized from the page as its primary medium of sensory orientation, deterritorialized — detached, departed — from the eye, it reterritorializes it in turn. The auditory here puts forth a certain social theory of sound, drawing attention to a sonic ecology. The range of sonic intensities — from Cage’s 4’33”, comprising three movements of silence punctuated by the opening and closing of the piano, to the 24 tracks of diverse and randomly spliced sounds forming the sonic landscape of Roaratorio — provide a virtual radar that helps register a series of textual-visual-sonoric events that exemplify the multi-sensory reorientation of the body and text.

With an ear for auditory cultures and sound studies, I pursue the now-moment of modernity stretching and condensing time to a convenient conceptual unit loosely referred to as the Twentieth Century. Yet the goal of my investigations is to avoid the linearity of time and history, to avoid being arrested by subtle questions of historical precedence and development, the familiar stories of the maturation of a period viewed retrospectively in the rear-view mirror of the expert-scholar’s critical gaze into its ideal form and set of characteristics. Rather, I want to compose a mosaic or collage of the interrelated and discontinuous lines of the period as itself having no particular beginning or end but beginning “again and again” as in Stein and Beckett, as a duration possessive of a certain extension in the space it occupies where all things are interrelated, as in a Deleuzeuguattarian rhizome. Though there is a certain timely progression from Stein, born 1874, to Zappa, born 1940, with Beckett and Cage, born in 1906 and 1912 respectively, sandwiched in between, all four artists
flourishing during the Twentieth-Century and departed before its end, the purpose of my investigations is not to trace a historical maturation or the development of a trend or movement, but to compose the now-moment of modernity as a thematic copresence and coexistence referred to as the auditory avant-garde of the century.

In line with this ahistorical methodology, the literary and sound works discussed here programmatically evade history both thematically and formally in their organization and content. It is no accident that the thematic logic of the thesis takes the reader from Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and “Composition as Explanation” through Beckett’s *How It Is*, to Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” and Zappa’s *Lumpy Gravy* as they all manifest the same type of mosaic-like arrangement and direction, the same auditory consciousness, the same moment of entrance into sound, the same coming into sound-words of the print and text, the same present-continuous of modernity exploding into the mediatized sound-word. In the sense of copresence, Stein’s 1918 radio-like text, *An Exercise in Analysis*, has its avatar in Zappa’s 1968 album *Lumpy Gravy*. There is no necessity to discuss historical consciousness in relation with these events; rather, it’s a matter of resonances and the ability to hear similarities, differences, pulsations, and rhythmicizations within a system of interconnecting lines and points, harmonies and disharmonies, chords that sound together and apart; it’s a question of the art of reading music and collages, of piecing together disparate and fragmented parts into melodic streaks of joyful understanding. The abrupt sound of the gramophone needle dropped and scratching across the record on the side two of Zappa’s 1968 *We’re Only In It For The Money* LP would not have been possible without Stockhausen’s 1960s experimental recordings using magnetic tape, and it enters the scene of rock carefully selected as a historical-aesthetic referent and marker of the emerging aesthetics of sound in rock cultures;
but then it is no different from the sounds of Varèse and the dada experiments of the early century. It’s the very sound of the gramophone cartridge rubbed with different objects on Cage’s 1952 *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*, and the staccato of parts and acts of Stein’s 1918 *An Exercise in Analysis*, which dramatize the idea of the auditory montage. In a mosaic, all these moments occur simultaneously in relation to one another; the mosaic is a way of constructing the Deleuzoguattarian ‘plane of immanence’ or consistency, a way of making sense of immanence.

The selected representatives of the interface of sound and text exemplify the auditoriness of the age, the auditory paradigm, as virtual, imagined, and as the real voices of it. These voices are copresent in a sense that there is no relevant history separating them in time or space; for all that matters, everything is happening at once, in a wild jam involving Stein, Beckett, Cage, and Zappa speaking at the same time, but not necessarily to one another. My theoretical interest in McLuhan and Nancy is also an inspiration to avoid historicism, to be able to put aside modernity textbooks and theories. Stein, technically the only modernist in the group, is not examined here in relation to the literary modernism of London, Paris or New York; nor are Beckett, Cage, and Zappa linked with postmodernity, as what emerges out of modernism or in relation to it. None of the historical distinctions and subtleties regarding the meaning of ‘post’ and the divisions and segmentations of time enter the frame here, simply because the thesis has a different set of goals and methods, to postulate a continuity, a simultaneity of the auditory paradigm of the century; to examine the auditory essence of the age manifested as a sound orientation of writing and sound art. In this spirit, no particular progression is argued in relation to Zappa as a closing frame, the curtain of this theoretical opera; rather, Zappa marks the return of the modernism of Varèse and Stravinsky, who are
taken for a ride on the rock stage, with all due accolades and fervency, and so marking the persistence of now as a lasting melodic presence.

What explodes in between Stein and Zappa as the opening and closing frames of my investigations, between the 1914 release of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and the 1993 posthumous release of Zappa’s *Civilization Phaze III*, is of course the explosion of new media technology, the gramophone, the radio, television, amplifiers, synthesizers, and digital recording technology, sweeping the world and marking the mediatization of the word, its shift away from print to sound and related regimes of inscription in the auditory. Accepting the basic history of the period from 1914 and 1993 as marking the historical development of the recording technologies from the gramophone to the digital recording of the late 20th Century, no additional insights are offered to aid a media historiographer. Inspired by Stein’s playful rejection of storytelling as a tactics of composing a play, by tapping instead into the essences of what happened, the thesis turns to essences in the form of related auditory concepts that find their literary and sound makers as representative practitioners in the art of the auditory.

The thesis does not deny the importance of historical investigations; nor does it deny the importance of cognitive research on aspects of visual and auditory processing, but neither of these directions is taken up here. A different composition is intended from the beginning: to capture performatively the explosion of sound in Twentieth-Century experimental writing, the all-at-onceness of McLuhan, as a meeting of resonant copresences on the same plane of conceptual consistency.

The term ‘megaphone’ symbolizes the presence and impact of media on the technologies of reading and writing during the period, and is taken as a figuration, a metaphor that helps to group a cluster of related concepts, positions, and theories representing current
discourse on sound; the ‘megaphone’ is here to animate a conversation regarding the various dependencies and connections taking place, which particularly affect our understanding of the sound-text relationship in a literary text. And so the ‘megaphone’ serves as a metaphor of the voice, the voice broadcast into the crowd, and so the voice on the one hand in its mediated form, and on the other, in its political, affective, social, aesthetic, and performative aspects, the voice imaging the social as a certain sonic ecology, an environment into which it is uttered and within which it has its place. The ‘megaphone’ symbolizes a new dimension of intimacy, an extension of the mouth and the word into crowds and city spaces, stretching across space. 

The word of the media system as a particular modality, the ‘secondary orality’ of Ong, collides with print, merges with it, and consequently returns as a space-time oriented medium, a sonic ecology, no longer restricted in time thanks to the recording technologies capable of archiving, multiplying, and transporting the sound-word and its voice indefinitely. The auditory, in that sense, is a move toward a new conceptualization of time and space, along the lines of a space-time continuum of relativity and particle physics as scientific paradigms of modernity.

I emphasize that the auditory is not homogenous, not uniformly just sound oriented. A sonic ecology is not just what can be heard, a total ‘soundscape’, but also the ways — tactics, positions, politics, and technologies — of hearing, listening, understanding, archiving, and inscribing sounds in both collective and individual memory. The voice and the sonic ecology are stitched together in the sense that there is no voice outside a social/auditory environment where sounds actually coexist, in the very same way as that there is no silence as a blank sonic space empty of sounds; thus abstracted concept of silence doesn’t exist; neither does it correspond to the experience of hearing, nor to the understanding of silence itself. Cage’s
4’33” shows a continuity of sounds existing at all times, even in the echo chamber where the listener hears their own pulse and heartbeat in a polyrhythmic drum-a-thon. The score to 4’33” also reveals that silence, as concept even to be imagined, has to be given in some ways, as a command, a stage direction, a written order. A blank page with Tacit written on it is not silence but a word, already populated with its own multilingual murmur.

Further, the ‘megaphone’ is a symbol of the social othering of the voice, its departure from a singular localizable body and entrance into the virtual-global collective, the resonant space of the century, at which level the materiality of the voice ceases to depend on vocal chords and is subsumed under the machinic operations of a recording-broadcasting plant. As a figuration — in the sense of Donna Haraway’s model of alternative representation — that brings together sound and voice, pointing to their public/social embodiment, the ‘megaphone’ helps to theorize cultural, social, and technological facts concerning the voice as a phenomenon. There is a certain comical megaphonicity in Stein’s writings, which we could imagine being read through a ‘megaphone’ for no particular reason other than the sound effect this kind of reading would produce, liberating the words from syntactical dependencies into the pure space of resonance where they would become sound-words, the suprasegmental assemblages of value added to mere lexical signs as discussed in Scott Pounds’s article on sound in Stein’s writing in chapter one. For the very same reason, Beckett’s How It Is could be read thus, to emphasize the timbre, tone, and pace of voice in its multiplications across the auditory sheets of writing.

The voice resonates through the literary ethos at multiple frequencies, as a material sonoric presence, a narrative point of view, a formal device for grouping certain discourses, a subject position, a philosophical persona (Deleuze and Guattari), and a concept of self. The
voice sits at the crossroads of multiple disciplines and variously related fields, from anthropology and sociology, through political studies, history, and geography, through urban studies, literature, and philosophy, to acoustic communication studies and theories of music. The figure of the ‘megaphone’ helps symbolically to bring together different disciplines to aid my auditory investigations.

To exemplify my line of enquiry, placing it specifically within a field of literary studies, I take the ‘megaphone’ further as a frame that frames each particular author/persona taken up in the analysis. And so Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, and Frank Zappa, posited as ‘megaphonic figurations,’ metaphorize the ways of making voice audible. This mediated/outered voice of writing, the listening and talking at the same time as the playful definition of genius in Stein, is the megaphonic voice of the auditory text. Each instance of the megaphonic outering of text as voice offers a range of problems that illustrate a more specific sonic aspect of the relationship between literature and sound. To capture these specifics, the selected authors each have their own media figuration inspired by McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, in the form of the radio-Stein, the televisual-Beckett, the gramophone-Cage, and the cartoon-Zappa, the first three literally and the last metaphorically containing the megaphone-speaker. The choice of these media figurations as specific variants of the ‘megaphone’ is a playful application of the influential media effects studies of McLuhan more than a sustained argument showing actual connections of each author with his/her figure/medium.

Radio applies to Stein more along symbolic lines, though it’s mesmerizing to hear Stein’s actual radio voice and imagine it as part of the chorus of voices performing her plays. Stein’s writing inscribes the voices that project a certain “vision” of radio as a social
intersubjective space; it anticipates the kind of radio that actually happens by the time she travels to the United States and appears on the radio. Radio spirits the word on a page, lifting it off the page. The voice, released and displaced from its only locus of coherence of the socio-physical presence of the speaking body, takes the spectral dimension of a media system, and is distributed in waves across a time-space geography as part of the sonic ecology of social life. ‘The televisual’ applies to Beckett literally and directly, as his work in television, video, and radio in conjunction with his work in theatre, testifies to the engagement of their effects in relation to writing and text and their auditory dimensions. Beckett exemplifies a type of writing and text that literally and materially exit the page in the act of performance; this dimension of Beckett’s writing belongs equally to works intended for staging and strictly literary texts like How It Is and Company discussed in this thesis. The gramophone applies provocatively or even comically to Cage, who opposed the gramophone so vehemently urging people to destroy gramophone records, as in his opinion they hailed the mechanization and commoditization of music and sound cultures, hindering and muting listening as an important social and aesthetic practice. Interestingly, Cage is one of the first users of the gramophone and radio in musical compositions. His first uses of the amplified phonograph cartridge rubbed with various objects date back to the 1940s and early 1950s, in Credo In Us and Imaginary Landscape. Finally, the cartoon applies metaphorically and interpretively to Zappa, as a figuration that captures his style and humor of musical expression, his public performances, his statements and views, his writings as featured in the liner notes of Freak Out!, Uncle Meat, The Grand Wazoo and You Are What You Is albums, his autobiography The Real Frank Zappa Book and his satirical social commentary Them or Us (the Book). Zappa’s masterpiece “Greggary Peccary,” from the Studio Tan album, as well as albums like
Overnight Sensation and Apostrophe (’), in addition to his repeated visualizations of music-related scenes in his video work (200 Motels and Baby Snakes), show the use of cartoon as a mode of expressing/representing.

My aim, then, is to consider the symbiosis, symbioses, among sound, text, and image treated as an expanded episteme, the leading dynamic of writing/print culture, where the concept of writing and text are broadened to include music and images both still and moving, since in the digital age everything is coded. The thesis engages situated technologies of sound, though it places less emphasis on technology itself and more on the question of the mediation of text, of text as a prosthetic extension of the body, postulating it to be a socially-oriented prosthesis, a mass or public with its ethics, politics, aesthetics, and epistemology, its nomadic/transversal subjectivities (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Rosi Braidotti), its technologies and forms of biopower, and its ecology (Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway).

Ultimately, my thesis project addresses the ‘auditory turn’ and the fate of the auditory through its diverse resonating cultures, with fate understood not as speculations about the future of sound but as a collective intentionality — a set of social practices — of hearing, listening, sounding out, a system of thought, operating as a conceptual cluster that enables fluid readings of/within culture, readings that can move between different forms of sound-oriented/auditory textual production.

On a metalevel of larger conceptual planes, the central theme of my investigations of the auditory concerns the notion and practice of composition, and its extension into voice and multitude as a collective/non-individual voice of the media system. What does the Twentieth-Century bring into composition? What are the characteristics of a Twentieth-Century composition? How is composition theorized? What kinds of structural challenges does the
Twentieth-Century composition respond to? Is there something that structurally defines an avant-garde or otherwise experimental work? To what extent and in what sense does Twentieth-Century composition draw its inspiration and model from music, from jazz and the music of cinema, from improvised music, as well as from the recording/broadcasting technologies of radio, the gramophone, and magnetic tape? To what extent does the painterly musicking of Picasso and Braque in the early collages of experimental cubism influence writing, the technologies of the word, and the forms of literacy? Does this painterly musicking collapse the regime of the eye, perspective, and the point of view the way McLuhan imagines in his ‘scandal of cubism’ statement? How do composition and writing take readers into the resonating interval where the action takes place, as McLuhan puts it? Also, how is composition related to language, in both the syntax/grammar and logic/meaning of it? How is composition related to the structure of the mind, thought, and of understanding? How do these in turn, in the act of composition, relate to the question of subjectivity and the self, in the sense of the individual or self-individuating and collective discourses that speaks the self?

In taking up these questions, I want to stress that, increasingly, as a characteristic feature of Twentieth-Century writing and modes of literacy, the term ‘composition’ refers to a musical resonance or harmony of parts; it’s a chordal thing in essence, whether it refers to the musical pastiche of Zappa, the textual plays of Stein, the textual/vocal performances of Cage, or the melodic abstract expressivist paintings of Pollock and jazz collages of Matisse. Simply put, the ear and musical understanding increasingly play more important roles in a literary composition, filled with the din of the modern city and its media systems.

In relation to composition as itself a structure composed of parts, I propose that the question of composition be related with the question of voice. It’s the voice, the vocalizations
of a multiple and/or virtual body that are ultimately compositional; compositions are vocalizations in a literary sense, as performatives sustaining the play by sounding it out and so sustaining the inherent soundness of the text, words, and statements.

Aside from the voice — at the edges of it — even a strictly musical composition poses problems of expression and can be ‘read’ as verbalization. In this sense, sounds are textual, and have a certain compositional potential. The imaging of sound into text signals a peculiar doubling, opening up a resonating gap between the text and this other sensation of it, a material kind of voice ‘inscribed’ between the lines, which has to be listened to. This somewhat synaesthetic splitting, this ‘phonotext,’ captures a certain audial — and ghostly — character of text manifested in the virtual voice that invariably sounds out the lexical component in writing, surrounding text with its auditory other.

And so composition is imbricated with voice; it involves voice and its parts. Here I ask: How is voice constituted? What are its components? To what extent is voice a textual thing, a sound thing or a hybrid? Whose voice is it? To what extent is it a personal voice assigned to a particular author, character, or persona? Is voice primarily the marker of subjectivity and how are the discourses of subjectivities in turn grounded in the examination of voice? To what extent are Twentieth-Century philosophical investigations concerning the question of subjectivity and self inspired by media technologies that enable the archiving, mirroring, recording, and instant playback of the self? And to what extent can we take the mediated construction of the auditory sense of subjectivity as a sound imprint to complement the typographic fingerprint?

With regard to the voice, the ‘auditory turn’ as a critical direction points to the voice’s complex mediations and to the disembodied voice in its radio, magnetic tape, or digital
manifestations. For no matter how we think of the voice, we think of its distribution, its resonant existence that echoes through time, suspended in a time of its own, a time of oscillations and presences, of resonating intervals. Insofar as the resonating voice is the voice of resonating bodies in the form of the social outside, as a population or multitude, the language contagion of the innumerable multitude of Stein’s plays, Beckett’s soliloquies, Cage’s and Zappa’s texts and musical compositions, the question of voice is the question of the multitude as the resonant social space of the voice. Here McLuhan’s ‘acoustic space’ points to the complex politics of the socius, to the ethnographics of socializations, pop cultures, and critical masses.

In that regard, we may ask: What is the popular voice? How is it constituted? How does it manifest? Who speaks and hears such a voice, and on behalf of whom? And further, borrowing from Michel Foucault, does it matter who speaks? Here I argue that the popular voice resides in the multitude with noise as its modality. To trace its manifestations and ponder its vocalizations, I propose that, brought to the level of text, a literary text as the subject of literary investigations of the multitude — as elaborated in social and political philosophy, grasped empirically in history and the social sciences as peoples, social movements, migrations, exiles, and critical masses — must correspond to a certain spectral multitude that also mobilizes the literary text, however loosely we define the boundary of text separating it from life. This critical multiplicity is not a question of attention paid to the masses populating stories or the mass as a possible character formation — as, for example, in the celebrated novels of Don DeLillo — but of the inherent teeming plurality of a literary text, a Bakhtinian multivocality, built into the text which can reinvigorate the study of literature by shifting attention away from the formal elements like characters, narrative positions, style,
and the author function, toward an aural dimension of text considered along with its ghostly presences of voice and its attendant sounds and noises.

As one in a triad of conceptual meta dimensions of this thesis, a plane or plateau that corresponds with composition and voice, multitude must not be tied to a particular work or theory. The way I use the term is not the multitude of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s influential *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of the Empire*, though I certainly point in their direction, recognizing likewise the legacy of Deleuze and Guattari’s multiplicity and schizoanalysis in influencing their social-political line of thinking. Multitude must not have a singular referent but to serve as a larger term used to name what at bottom remains unnamable in the spirit of Beckett: the population, the mass, the multitude, the plural along with its social noise and energy, its sounds and voices.

My investigations begin with the late works of Gertrude Stein, focusing attention on her landscape plays, operas and experimental writing. In the following chapters, I examine two short prose texts of Samuel Beckett, and turn to John Cage’s lectures, essays, and musical events. These ‘texts’ serve to exemplify themes such as the expressivity of sound patterns; the compositionality of sound; the scripted character of a recording; and texts aspiring to the condition of music and/or becoming music. The works of Stein, Beckett, and Cage serve as relevant probes into the auditory dimensions of literature offering a critical grounding to venture beyond the literary text *per se*. Deep down, the aim of my project is to open a line of inquiry that allows a figure like Frank Zappa to enter the field of literary analysis and critical theory. In contrast to the various bards and balladiers — Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan, who exemplify the category and who naturally belong in the studies of literature on account of their poetry — Zappa belongs to language and literary studies as dramatizing language and
text through his use of the raw materials, as an expressive lump containing the various matters, particles and waves, sonic and lexical elements, diverse musical styles and idioms, composed together. What interests me is Zappa as the amplifier of the acoustic dimension of the voice that resonates deeply through the literary ethos of the 20th Century, from Stein to Cage. In this sense, I hear Zappa’s works as an experimental machine, a model that enables the probing of the aesthetic, political, ethical and ideological dimensions of sound and its relation to language, text, and image. Turning to Zappa offers an opportunity to think of verbalization outside strictly literary genres, as an arena where the spectacle takes the form of verbal action and where disparate milieus (raw sonorities and non-verbal expression) organize themselves into expressive wholes that narrate and communicate. This social-narrative dimension of sound and music is what some critics (Marshall McLuhan, Dick Hebdige) call a return to the tribal that characterizes contemporary Western popular culture, and it is what others (Simon Frith) believe to open up spaces for radical thinking. Zappa’s rock opera, Joe’s Garage as well as a series of shorter works (Lumpy Gravy, We’re Only In It For the Money, Apostrophe (’)) are excellent examples of avant-garde rock compositions that deal with the voice, expression, and the limits of speech.

In my thesis, Zappa serves as a key case study placed contextually in the experiments and theory originating with Stein and Beckett, and zigzagging into Cage. Attention to Zappa helps to clarify my focus on the uses of the voice and as a field of resonating bodies in Stein’s landscape theatre, of the voice as detached from the body, operating on its own in Beckett, and of the entire field of composition and expression as open to a range of different auditory materials, non-deterministic and non-homogeneous, in Cage. Tracing this legacy of the break into the auditory, I analyze the effects of the ‘auditory turn’, this complex relationship of
sound, text, and image, on Twentieth-Century literature and culture, claiming that these effects articulate as composition, voice, and population (the structuring of the resonating social field where sounds give rise to social groupings). The three articulations are meant to help systematize better the abstract relationship among sound, text, and image, operating here as three larger areas that exemplify the synergy of these media. In the culture of modernity, of the modern era stretching from the late renaissance to now, coming to a definitive peak during the 20th Century, print and aurality/orality amount to more than just media: they are the two leading epistemic orientations, the two leading epistemes, of the ear and the eye with their attending technologies of shaping the social ways of understanding the world. (My intention is not to stress the competition between the ear and the eye but rather their symbiosis, indeed a longstanding symbiosis that, nonetheless, is periodically lost track of within cultures privileging just one orientation. Here, more than anything else, I simply acknowledge McLuhan’s argument that the so-called Gutenberg Galaxy orientation of print amplifies the eye as a dominating organ of perception to the detriment of other senses.)

Composition, voice, and multitude/population: the four chapters of the thesis each in turn examine these modalities or articulations as they surface in the works of Stein, Beckett, Cage, and Zappa. The three articulations of the auditory, of what it means to hear the ‘acoustic space’, serve as structural devices more so than as argument. Each chapter to a degree engages in a similar set of investigations concerning the practice and theory of composition, the uses of the voice, and the vocalizations of the population/multitude. While on some level I do intend to demonstrate that sound, text, and image operate in conjunction, ‘producing’ in turn composition, voice, and multiplicity (understood as peopling), the main purpose of the project is to adopt hermeneutic models with which to probe/study/experiment
with different types of cultural production involving sound and text, offering in turn a method of analysis that enables the examination of the image-like, composable, voicing and ‘peopling’ dimension of the word. A series of authors, texts, auditory representations/positions serve as representative auditory works of literature of the 20th Century, marking and hailing the return of the oral, animated word, animated in the sense of anima, as a sensory arousal. The overall argument concerns the reading of a series of literary themes in aural terms, as auditory phenomena, hybrid events involving multi-mediations and multi-voicings. And so, one of the aims is to extend the notion of discourse, for example as used by Foucault, from inherently privileging print culture and its dependence on text, textual-orientation, to consider the Twentieth-Century analogous system of regularities within auditory discourses where text and sound imbricate. This shift of text into the auditory triggers a set of interpretive approaches grouped under the designation of media studies, adopted here as a theoretical toolbox to navigate the multimedia environment of electric/computer oriented literacies.
CHAPTER 1: GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE POETICS OF AURALITY

1.1. Toward a Sensory Arousal

In this chapter, I claim that the essence of Gertrude Stein’s project, insofar as the notion of ‘essence’ makes sense in this context, lies in a sensory arousal. This arousal manifests in the use and practice of language and its attendant knowledge formations as a proprioceptive apparatus, a kind of situated, embodied cognition. Stein paves the way toward affective art where affects are understood not as emotions in opposition to reason and thought but as a multiplicitous synaesthesia of kinetic, interactive aesthetics, a coming together of the senses in the auditory complex of writing, language, sound, and voice. After the monumental *The Making of Americans* Stein’s writing transforms the novel into a poem, play, and opera as genres closer to modern day media systems, affected by the cultures of the telegraph, telephone, gramophone, and radio. This shift in style of writing and in approach to language intensifies and further disembodies language into resonant sounds, resulting in Stein’s experimental poetics which stretch some twenty-odd years, from 1914 to 1938, from *Tender Buttons* to the opera play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. The works representative of this period and the set of auditory considerations taken up in them are examined in this chapter.

Tracing the auditory-sound dimension of writing in Stein offers listeners a journey into the auditory oracle of modernism, the connecting tissue that situates Stein in the specific historical moment of a certain populist ideal of the emerging media, notably radio and cinema, as a projection and/or construction of the public space. In contrast to the newspaper as a prototype and analogue of the novel, the modern day broadcasting media systems animate
words, rendering them audiovisual and oral. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan claims that, in contrast to print,

\[
\text{radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal times and antique drums. (331)}
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The immediacy of radio in constructing a sense of intimacy at the public level is particularly worth notice here. For McLuhan, radio, by emphasizing intimacy, blurs the line dividing the public and the private self. Radio hails the return to tribal times of collective drumming and chants, the ‘secondary orality’ of McLuhan’s student and scholar friend, Walter Ong.

Radio is spectrally present in Stein’s works; even though she didn’t work with radio or write radio plays, the style of her discourse, the use of language in its immediate oral form, the tribal times of her continuous present and repetition-insistence, are suggestive of radio as a medium, as a certain energy field presencing itself in her performative writing. But Stein’s relationship with radio is not purely symbolic. Stein scholars such as Sarah Wilson uncover a history of Stein’s interest in the radio following her celebrated US tour in the 1930s. Using as an example one of Stein’s last plays, *Willie and Brewsie*, Wilson shows that the bulk of Stein’s late work was inspired by broadcasting media:

Broadcasting provides a suggestive means of connecting Stein’s early aural experimentalism (as in the multiple echoing voices of “Bon Marche Weather”) with her later more popular, idiom. Resolutely oral, dialogic, and changeable, Stein’s artistic project finally finds its formal corollary in mid-century radio ... Through the 1930s and 1940s, Stein wrestles with the idea of radio as a kind of
public sphere — a forum in which self, other, and community can be constituted through talk. Her aurality must thus be understood as being as profoundly public in its orientations as it is private. (261)

Radio in the 1930s and 40s, as Wilson points out, was invested in promoting social connections, which Stein takes up as also an intellectual problem:

The radio broadcast conveys a sense of an immediate and concentrated present; it begins again and again, as Stein’s characteristically insisted phrasings indicate to us ... A distinct kind of knowledge, knowing “by what you felt.” That is, the appeal of the radio is not exclusively informational, but it stands intellectually, just as it does physically, into more intimate and emotional territory. (263)

Particularly useful for my project in Wilson’s reading of Stein is the notion of immediacy of presence, Stein’s present continuous, as that which has no fixed origin point and offers no particular resolution or closure but is a series of beginnings, a series of resonant repetitions graspable by intuition as fluid ways of rendering and synthesizing sense perceptions. Stein senses the tragedy of historicity, the tragic sense of time and destruction, and responds with art that frames the presence and continuity of people, thinking and sensing, and words, as ‘social energy’ cut off from the baggage of history and political geography, from having to deal with the founding fathers, Civil War, the relations between South and North, the bedrock of American history and lineage, free to sense around, see, hear, and feel, understand by understanding it, with the joy of immediacy as Stein did in her practice of meditating and writing. The aural/auditory writing of Stein captures this elusive immediacy of presence. Cinema, radio and jazz music provide models of composition, voice, and the grammar of meaning.
In “The Difference Sound Makes: Gertrude Stein and the Poetics of Intonation,” Scott Pound shows “how Stein’s work discloses a different difference than the one typically thought to structure meaning in language, a difference that registers aurally as intonation” (27). Pound’s emphasis on the rhythmic organization and treatment of words in Stein, “the rise and fall of their intonation” as a strategy that “structures meaning textually in the mode of speech by foregrounding intonation” (28) supports my claim that Stein’s writing operates as an auditory text that adheres to the logic of sound and music rather than conventional semantics. The relationship between sound and text is not just alluded to but explicitly engaged in Stein. In the opening of his article, Pounds points to a passage from another Stein lecture-essay, “The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans” where Stein discusses the role of drawing on sound in description, of sound as a synthesizer, as that which yields a complete picture/representation, the essence of a thing or person, as opposed to a myriad of atomic fragments that represent it analytically, by breaking it apart. Sound, more specifically and more technically, “the complete rhythm of a personality that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience” (qt. in Pound 28) was the one time, intuitive synthesis of elements and senses into one meaning, dislodged from mere logic and reason, brought back to the balanced sensorium of listening, seeing, feeling... The rhythm of a person or thing provided a complete inventory and distribution of lines, pixels, and points pertaining to it, a score as it were, and orchestrated them into one compositional unit of music, a melody, riff or refrain.

Pound’s ‘critical ingenuity’ lies in designing a method of analysis that shifts from the study of the lexical meanings of words toward the study of sounds yet without regard for metrics as a limiting type of study, too entangled in the textuality of words, and focusing
instead on the ‘suprasegmentals’, as Pound refers to pitch, stress, and duration of word-sounds. Attention to ‘suprasegmentals’ as an area of study means in the first place attention to what supplies them, the ‘auditory imagination’ of the reader, in short the reading process. This necessarily multiple voice of readership obviously impacts the orientation of the work itself. “Factoring the material voice into literary reading” radically reformulates the question of “the ontological status of the poem” (31), positing the poem as a certain condition of possibility for meaning residing within vocalization or intonation, or to use Stein’s own term insistence, typically on the use of the same words within a paragraph, the repetition of words itself creating a difference, a distributional difference of sounds or insistencies as a melodic way of sustaining coherence.

To contribute to this discussion of aurality in Stein, I propose that the radical engagement with the auditory, by which I intend to stress Stein’s radical understanding of the role of voice in the reading and writing processes, resonates with McLuhan’s decisively more theoretical ‘explicitations’ of the ‘auditory text/acoustic space’ complex as inflected by the cubist figuration of the early Twentieth-Century experiments of Picasso and Braque. In that sense and in relation to the televised statement of McLuhan regarding the scandal of cubism quoted earlier, Stein is a cubist scandalist par excellence, dismissing the visual regime of language with its syntax and coded writing, turning to the audio-tactile model of speech and discourse as embodied and shared among a multiplicity of participants, an open-ended system of resonances among the particles — particulars of a larger structure.

The audio tactility of speech as sound, the tone and intonation of voice, the interplay of different voices through syncopation and counterpoint, and increasingly the mediated nature of voice as in radio and other media systems, are what give a certain radio megaphonic
resonance to Stein that invites and forges a participatory readership in the form of an aural/auditory reading. In line with McLuhan’s insights into the operations of media as extensions of human perception and cognition, and so embodied and situated, and along his emphasis on orality and ‘acoustic space’, the writings of Stein exemplify textual performance as a commentary on the sound literacy of the word and language. Read alongside McLuhan, a media theorist invested in the politics and poetics of late modernity, Stein’s writings are a literary manifestation of the poetics of statement that captures the fragmentation and displacement of voice as its Twentieth-Century ethos. What Stein achieves through poetics and experimentation while wandering the countrysides of France and Spain — a deindividuated audiovisual perception of the digital media systems — McLuhan discovers some forty years later in Canada through the methodical rhetorical analysis of media as social communication, by examining the messages of radio, television, advertising, and popular music.

Thanks to the poetic arousal of language to sound and sense-oriented literacy and meaning, Stein is indeed the mother of experimental poetics, dispersing the word spatially and acoustically, evoking the suspended sounds of text, the murmur and laughter of words in the form of snippets of overheard conversations, the timbre, tone, and intonation of spoken language, the pulsating audio life of a word filling the modern city and country. She brings about awareness that the mechanical age of the Twentieth-Century features not just a remarkable increase in the production and reproduction of images, as Walter Benjamin reminds us in his influential essay on the mechanical reproduction and the aura of the arts, but is the age of intense reproduction and transmission of the word in its auditory form, maximizing the capacity of language to distribute itself beyond grammar and semantics, as
well as norms and values hiding there, toward new forms of intimacy, the intimacy of contagion, into the numerosness of a modern city populated by crowds and packs, structured and orchestrated through a plethora of communication systems broadcasting simultaneously, claiming the same immediacy for all communicative pulses of audio-intensified city scapes. The ‘now’ moment of modernity, stretching and condensing time to the continuous present of Stein, is the simultaneous pulsing of multiple nows.

The now moment of modernity and its peculiar organization in terms of the coming together of multiple forces constitutive of it, this simultaneity of multiple presences reminiscent of the radio offers a probe into Stein’s texts and writing, a probe into the nature of composition of the work of art as a poetic-aesthetic-theoretical consideration-theme taken up by Stein in her poetics. Through a range of different textual experiments, Stein meditates upon the notion of composition as a set of organizational principles, and questions the traditional model of the coherence of a work of art in terms of its beginning, middle, and end. Here I ask myself: what is Stein’s contribution to the deepening of the understanding of the notion and practice of composition as that which frames an artistic process? The uniqueness, I want to argue, lies in the interest in her idea of a series, as well as in her explorations of repetition as a resonating type of presence freed from a fixed origin and generative ground, a fluid becoming and distribution of heterogeneous differences. Through her poetics, as in Tender Buttons, and more explicitly in the lecture on “Composition as Explanation,” at a philosophical level as it were, Stein demonstrates that the relation of similitude and difference is itself relational, that the relations obtain amongst the relative units of the same system, coexisting and mutually constitutive parts of the same immanent assemblage of coherence, as in Deleuzoguattarian ‘plane of immanence’. Stein’s poetic insights throughout Tender
*Buttons*, “Composition as Explanation,” and *The Geographical History of America* pave the way toward immediacy-immanence as a model of composition, postulating thought as a systemic grasping of heterogeneous units as part of the same immanence, co-presence, akin to McLuhan’s mosaic and Deleuzoguattarian rhizome as a model of the plane of immanence.

My explorations of Stein begin with geography, portraits of things, and the mapping of *Tender Buttons* as manners of composing, and move on to the germinal essay “Composition as Explanation,” which explores issues of timing and temporality as creative maneuvers at work on a compositional field, and in a performative way — as an actual lecture — theorizes the idea of composition. What interests me in particular, with regard to the notion of composition as implying the sense of structure, consistency, coherence, and boundaries, is Stein’s attention to the cadence of the spoken language — the melody and insistence or intonation of it, as Pound suggests — as itself compositional, as opposed to the idea of composition as a container. I argue that in contrast to this traditional idea of composition, Stein advances a series of experiments-statements aiming at the possibility of an immediate-immanent type of organization which spontaneously structures itself rather than being formed from the outside. This performative reorientation of text as immanent structure and as compositional field marks the new discursive possibilities of text and speech in the semantically open systems of the emerging electric media.

Turning to Stein’s plays, I am interested in the ways in which the relationships among writing, sound, and orality shape themselves in the genre of dramatic writing, and the vision of drama anticipated in Stein’s mode of theatre, exploring the possibility of a non-mediated auditory text, that renders the voice and text simultaneous. As Johanna Frank shows in her “Resonating Bodies and the Poetics of Aurality; Or, Gertrude Stein’s Theatre,” Stein’s
dramatic writing “anticipates a theatre of sounds” where the viewer no longer faces the visual dimension of drama but rather witnesses an aural spectacle, the resonating play of language as “the sounds of words” (501). In Frank’s reading, Stein’s drama differs significantly from other text-bound dramatic writing. This difference is traceable back to her use of deterritorialized language, words freed from their syntactical roles, as in the sonic portraiture of *Tender Buttons*, explorations of the relationship between voice and composition in her landscape theatre, specifically the 1918 *An Exercise in Analysis*, where I argue that the nature of composition is revealed as a spatialization and serialisation or permutation of sounds and voices, in the spirit of the ‘acoustic space’ of McLuhan. Stein’s shift from the single voice of the lecture to the multiple and disembodied voices of the plays resonates with the electrification of the voice in the radio and the increasing interest in public voice as a series of synchronous and simultaneous intonations or insistencies freed from a single coherent site of agency, as in some sort of contagion of radio waves.

*Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, the play discussed in the last section of this chapter, illustrates a shift toward issues of the mediation of voice, self, writing, with a question of the relationship between knowledge and public visibility entering Stein’s thinking following her celebrated tour of the United States and various radio engagements and publicity stunts. Attentive to the question concerning the ethos of the voice in media system, I read this play in the context of indeterminacy, polysemy, and the logic of contradiction and difference that emerge earlier in Stein’s writings around the linguistic turn of the *Tender Buttons* period and which continue experiments with text as performance. Drawing on McLuhan’s analysis of print oriented literacies, and the way they shape human perception by emphasizing the sense of sight, I argue that *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* thematically embodies the rift between
sight and sound as two competing figurations of knowledge, imaging a playful — operatic —
vision of knowledge that fuses the ear and the eye into a meditational/auditory cluster of
voices, visible subject positions, and resonant doublings. In considering the nature of
knowledge in relation to the body and biopower, Stein opts for an affective knowledge freed
from the logos of print, knowledge that is not informational but affective/intuitive. The opera
exemplifies what Ong’s ‘secondary orality’, a return to the oral world, the world of integrated
sensoria, offering an opportunity to examine the new perceptual and social positions of sound
and/or voice emerging alongside the electric technology of radio, cinema, and telephone.

1. 2. The Geography of Text: Composition Decomposed

As a thinker, Stein constructs an elaborate philosophy of knowledge and
understanding in poetic form, in a series of works continuously overlapping and resonating
with one another, ranging from poetic radical experiments to the investigative prose of her
‘theoretical works,’ such as her lectures; in discourse excited with music, tonality, intonations,
sounds and orality, Stein dressed up as a thinker, somewhat ironically and mockingly yet
seriously presenting herself as a genius, partakes in exciting investigations on the nature of
composition, of world, matter, language, social structures, the mind, and art works; intricate
questions at the time of concern to physicists, philosophers of language, anthropologists,
psychologists, sociologists, and artists. She is experimental in her methodology, guided by
intuition, quirky, poetic, sketchy, avoiding easy solutions, rather piling up problems and
questions. For example in the Geographical History of America, Stein, a thinker immersed in
ideas and a writer immersed in immediate words is concerned with composition as matter and
understanding; as organization and relationships between individual elements; as an
immanent system of elements and relations translatable into other media or systems,
immanent in the sense of not extending over and beyond the totality of relationships among its elements. In her plays, as I will demonstrate in the subsequent section, Stein is investigating and practicing writing as landscape as an immanent formation, immanent presence without outside, structured in the process of its own composition; and in connection, is concerned with the relationship between space, in the most fundamental sense of the landspace as an immediately present presence, simply in the form of spatiality, and on the other hand, geography and history as human impositions scripted on top; as well she explores questions concerning the compositionality of voice as embodying this kind of immediate presence. Stein’s philosophical investigations regarding the concept of ‘composition’ are taken up as it were through composition itself, by composing and musicking her various writings.

As a philosophical concept, composition refers to a series of autonomous lines of research that Stein brings musically together. Composition and composition, as on the one hand structure or organization of matters and, on the other, a social political system, and, in the context of writing, as syntax, the structure of the sentence, of the sentence structure in contrast to the paragraph structure, of an essay in terms of its organizational elements and stages of thought, and in a larger sense a structure of the mind, consciousness, the brain in terms of the capacity and categories of thought, and cognitive emotive linguistic processes; micro and macro thematic streaks reappear in Stein, in the form of theoretical and literary texts, following several continuity lines. One line of relevance takes the reader from composition as explanation to composition as a type of meditation, specifically in the sense of writing as a form of meditation. Meditation in Stein, as Ulla Dydo explains in “Gertrude Stein: Composition as Meditation,” does not concern a particular subject matter; it is not a question of a consciousness directed at an object of perception, but a process of conscious
composing, and specifically “the verbal process” as Dydo calls it, drawing attention to that obvious other side of it in the form of the extant text. It is this extant text that ‘witnesses’ the meditative process in the first place, but the meditative process, as a technique of structuring thought in writing as well as the thematic consideration of the text, prepared in advance of the release of the text as text, is already there beforehand.

Dydo explains Stein’s process of meditative composing in the following description: “Words and word patterns shaped themselves in her mind in the process of rigorous concentration that allowed no interference from outside. This process of realizing perception is the Stein meditation. What Stein called a composition is the written process of meditation. Meditating does not precede composing but is composing” (42). This emphasis on the relationship between writing and meditating suggests a non-mimetic model of writing where words are free to be and interact amongst themselves rather than being chained to their referents as names naming objects and states. Language frees itself from syntax, however momentarily, to become a sound, a system of sounds, a music. Words are not narrative links but intensifiers, entities, events; they are autonomous, not bound by the rules of grammar and logic. Grammar and logic remain the immediate context of language, but dislodged, comically and dramatically, they begin to communicate at a different frequency or channel. Words are sounds, though not necessarily pure sounds or sounds only. They carry lexical meanings, sometimes very strongly, through emphasis and repetition, what Stein calls “insistence.” They carry meaning as intensifiers through slips and nuances and chordal vocalizations, for example in the way in Stein’s “Photograph” a sudden meditative thought balloon appears out of the blue, at the intersection of something best described as disembodied internal monologue and a list of characters: “A language tires. / A language tries to be. / A language
tries to be free” (153). In this languid yawn of a punctuated line there is a slip opening language to freedom of self-expression, language as a self-generating system. The line insists on language and words as free in the very act of postulating that freedom, as performatives and not by virtue of a legislative contract guiding the operations of words from outside themselves.

This postulation regarding words and language bears no resemblance to the infamous and confusing Derridean zinger in Of Grammatology: ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (158). Indeed, everything is outside the text, even the text itself, in the sense that there is no need to postulate logos/text/language as a transcendent legislative presence guiding discursive operations. In the description of Stein’s meditative writing mentioned above, there is no text interruption as an outside element of text; a piece of paper is the only adequate surface of writing and anything can happen on that page at any given moment; there is no pre-established grid of coordinates to coordinate in the process of writing. The process of writing is its own process of composition. This process of micro-composition, composition at the level of individual words and phrases, resonates with the compositional nature of language at its macro or meta sphere. In that regard, one could say that language and its grammar are internal immanent phenomena; they form from within complex social interactions through sedimentation. Stein’s performative captures the very process of this formation, beginning with a slip between “tires” and “tries,” gradually arriving at the seeming completion of the statement with its postulate of freedom as the horizon of language in the virtual arch of marching thoughts: words as a Deleuzoguattarian line of flight, in relation to the sounds, the auditory ecology surrounding them. The same set of words can condemn a person to death, liberate another, form a nonsense poem, be a line in a skit or part of an advertising poster.
This is because social material realities in whatever presence they manifest — verbal or non-verbal — reside outside texts and signification, merely passing through them. Nietzsche knows all about the signifier; how beautiful, seductive, deceptive, hegemonic, idiotic, empty, and dangerous it is, all at the same time; this is where his Dionysus laughs his best, heartiest laughter. They understand that the signifier is always subject to change without text-notice, even within the law.

Dydo’s emphasis on the form of concentration that allows “no interference from outside” is telling in another respect. In Stein, the outside is not contrasted with inside along a demarcating line that would offer a clear boundary between the world and self, but postulates a oneness in the form of a continuous intensity, an event of being mapped in the way the objects and states of Tender Buttons are portrayed-articulated. It’s a way of looking out in meditation, contemplating the world rather than one’s own feelings, a form of what I would call ‘outrospection,’ compositional mediative directing at the world out there. There is a hint of such outrospection in Dydo’s further comment: “She looked at the world and she described literally what she saw. Her meditative literalism is the literalism of saints who contemplate in their exercises what there is to see” (43). Saints are figurations of the ground and world, a part of social geography, populating it with the invisible presence and bringing the divine logos/signifier down to the earth and the material social relations, away from vertical orthodoxies of institutionalized religions. In his Martyrology series, Canadian bpNichol offers a fantastical commentary and extension of this project, creating a whole social cosmology of sainthood as a grid of ordinary streets, conversations, and poetic encounters ultimately arising out of words beginning with St, with Saint Ein/St.Ein/Stein as one of the presiding presences of this living social materiality of the world.
Dydo connects meditation with composition in its two senses, as organization of matters and social system, but she likewise links meditation with voice as its carrier: “What carries the meditation along is voice” (44). Voice offers itself as a medium, collective rather than personal, though ‘collective’ should not be understood in terms of totality or commonality. (The problem of common sense is haunting contemporary theory with regard to the issue of subjectivity: is common sense a rate of production, a ratio of productivity of the popular/common subject or a threshold by which or a screen on which this non-existing subject is projected so that it can be claimed/appropriated by those powers invested in appealing to it? Powers who can speak on behalf of the people, addressing the people?). The key paradox of the popular revolves precisely around the forces and ghosts constitutive of subjectivity. It could very well be a fragmented, partial subjectivity speaking but it is nonetheless a population, a multitude.

A composition in the sense of a constructed — premeditated and executed — meditation aims not at generating a paraphrasable insight but at “a pure voice” (Dydo): the movement of articulation, expression itself, a speech — as a sounding out, a direct way of releasing words. Here lies the paradox of the voice and speech in their general function transcending an individual, yet requiring it ever anew as a medium to speak the voice: speech passing through particulars but essentially detached from the subject in the form of an already preexisting discourse — a discursive paradigm, as in Deleuze and Guattari’s postulates regarding language and the collective forms of enunciation. The question of consciousness as a multiplicity becomes particularly relevant in the last section in which I discuss Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights.
The question of composition in Stein is also linked with geography, taken up in different works over the years. Stein’s growing interest in geography throughout the 1920s (her collection of texts *Geography and Plays* appears in 1922) is connected with her actual travels, her joy of observing the moving landscape, her excitement of staying in farms and country houses. The theme of geography further extends through the 1930s with the tour of the United States and resulting in *The Geographical History of America* where Stein becomes fascinated with the flatness of America, refusing to acknowledge much of its history and politics, taking a detached, geographical point of view that emphasizes continuity or a series of continuities rather than geographical and historical divisions and boundaries between north and south or a pre or post civil war as foundational moments in American history. For Stein, this kind of history would be merely a vertical listing of data of the so-called important historical moments or events, culled from history books; it would not be an understanding, but a listing of information. In contrast, the theme of geography in Stein’s writing is shaped in relation to the various geographies/spaces/places/locales/transitions experienced and lived through during her sojourns into Spain, the move into the French countryside, frequent automobile journeys far and wide, and in the 30s what we may call the radio tour of America, as radio was the unique and new medium of presentation engaged by Stein, presenting her voice and text as at last embodied in the radio voice, on the ‘megaphone’ broadcasting to America.

The theme of geography is likewise connected with Stein’s interest in visual art, her substantial collection of modernist paintings and considerable expertise in the field of modern visual art sealed with several close friendships. Stein produced a number of portraits of influential painters, with the most influential being Picasso and Cézanne. Cézanne,
particularly regarding his geography, as depictions of a landscape or cityscape as systematically etched in the canvas with his endless brushstrokes, influences Stein on the idea of the distribution of landscape itself, of landscape constituted by a cluster of brushstrokes, pixilated into a myriad of splotches each of the same importance as the others, each resonating at all times with all others, in relation to all as one system, or ‘plane of immanence’. Following that line, Stein’s fascination with the revolutionary transformation of the tools, objects, and strategies of pictorial representation taking place at the time is taken up critically as the problem of creative writing and thinking, of re-presenting and imagining through words, of inventing a way of ‘seeing’ and hearing of the text, of the living presence of the language of text in its auditory, typographic, and semantic complexity.

Inspired by cubism, Stein experiments with writing as a multi-perspectival optic that captures movement, in the sense of not only the kinetics of the objects and states of things, but also of the process of taking them in, blurring the boundary between subjective and objective perception and representation. These ‘optical’ experiments evolve alongside her preoccupation with the problem of time, of how to act — as a writer — in and out of step with time, compressing a whole era to a sentence here and then stretching a miniscule moment of time to pages of text there, of capturing the moment and the passage of time as something inherently out of line with syntax and so inventing a syntax and ways of thought matching the task of enjoyable knowledge: daily peregrinations and meditations, ululations and chanting, that become part of performances aimed at creating and understanding the complex auditory optics of places, mapping out places as plays. The movement of landscape as observed from a car, the problem of the visual representation of objects, people and relationships between things, and the kinetic/auditory dimension of writing all interlace.
In her landscape theatre, taken up in the following section — a transparent map of Stein’s wrestling with geography — she simultaneously negotiates between understanding as a cognitive process of grasping reality, description as a tactical and analytic procedure of focusing on a particular thing or detail, and being present in the act of writing as expression, speech, and voice, a performative ekstasis. Geography in this context of a moving landscape becomes a dynamic category that comprises complex spatial and temporal interrelationships of things by contemplating, uttering, and recreating the ordinary “relations of one thing to the other thing,” highlighting the simultaneity of these relations rather than seeing them as a sequence requiring a temporal order. Brought to the level of the page as a form of canvas, a space of inscription, geography transforms into a figure and objective of a compositional process. As Dydo puts it in *The Language that Rises* drawing on Stein’s notebooks, “‘[g]eographically to place’ is not about stable location on a map but about movement in compositional space by shifts in rhythms, resonance, and point of view. Geography explores volume in auditory construction or in a swelling sheaf of writing” (72). Dydo’s poetic line performs the very blending enacted by Stein where the perception of the world and the perception of the act of writing or inner state coexist as ‘naturally’ belonging together.

Geography for Stein is akin to Deleuzoguattarian mapping, in the sense of experimentation and creation rather than a replication or repetition of what exists. Reality indeed cannot be the starting axiom or fact but the objective of a creatively pictorial process, an imaging and approximation that reveal, leaf by leaf, the layers of the possible, populating it with percepts, affects, and functives. The map itself, as an innovative construct, a cartography, adds a new and unique dimension to the existing system of spatial relations, which exist insofar as they are framed in a particular way, as a composition (always already a relation of
one thing to the other thing with all relations possible, with all things ultimately connected, like in a Deleuzoguattarian rhizome). Mapping in this sense breaks away from the established taxonomies that normalize relationships among elements, and opens up new taxonomizations, new ways of arranging and naming, and along with that new ways of thinking and conceptualizing objects, things, people, encounters, concepts, as for example practiced in Tender Buttons.

As an example of mapping, in the opening lines of Tender Buttons Stein constructs an image of a carafe as one of the objects in a series that constitutes the first section of the long poem. “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading” (461). The carafe is described in a series of striking phrases not having too much to do with carafes, particularly in the phrase “an arrangement in a system to pointing,” which may strike one as related to structuralism. What remains of the carafe in this ‘description’ is a clustering rather than a clear essence to match a specific idea. The impression of the carafe is no longer a commonly expected likeness of the object but a compositional construct that maps both the essence of the thing carefully abstracted from its empirical content and a series of possible appearances, a virtuality that unhinges it from a fixed way of viewing things, allowing multiple points of view to enter the image simultaneously.

Part of arranging has to do with abstracting; in the process of abstracting, the sensible content of an actual carafe being painted or described has to be translated into another medium, an image on a canvas or a group of words on a page. This compositionality reflects the nature of carafes as ordinary things, which happen to be both aesthetic objects and
containers. At the level of language, in challenging traditional ways of describing things by compiling a set of effective adjectives to describe an object, Stein postulates and demonstrates, requires us figuratively to empty it of adjectives habitually used in producing descriptions and to focus on the thing or state, the ‘thisness’ of things to use a scholastic philosophical tool, in a way, to bypass language as natural/cultural obstacle in seeing-perceiving the world around.

In affective, observable reality, a carafe cannot be emptied. It is never an object empty of empirical content, because even if emptied of liquid, and particularly when empty, it remains full of light, reflections, and resemblances confusing the observing eye and mind. Therein lies the difference that denies the possibility of similitude in the first place. Even though the mind can technically propose an idea of a carafe in itself, at the level of the immediacy of affective experience the proposition seems absurd. In real life carafes make sense only in relation to other things, furniture, people, houses, drinks, activities, practices — the impatient hand reaching for it, erasing in the act the purely intelligible content — in short the whole context. The carafe is compositional in the sense of being composed and of being a part of a larger composition, as notes, chords, and riffs of the vibrating world. Is the carafe half full or half empty, one may ask. This question shifts the whole discussion, now directed at the viewer and their habitual attitude of seeing things rather than the object itself; it tests not the object but the mood of the viewer. The carafe transforms momentarily into a gauge for a different phenomenon.

The constructed nature of the carafe enacted by the phrasing of “an arrangement,” a kind of composition, marks a departure point of a compositional process for a painter working on the still image of a carafe, which requires a way of arranging lines and points on a canvas
or paper, but also the arriving point, the complete work, which is a geometrical figure constructed of dots and splotches of color, offering depth, shape, volume, dimension, intensity, all the multiple aspects of the sensible in the object of perception. The final product then is a compositional arrangement of lines and colors, a map that does not replicate — is not a tracing of — an actual carafe, but literally points to it. “Literally points to what exactly,” one may rightly ask. Does the image of a carafe on a canvas point to the original carafe as real object and representational model for the aesthetic figuration, a symbolic object? This question implies a somewhat naive model of mimesis not seemingly applicable to Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. The mimetic simplicity here lies in an epistemic reductionism that delimits a thing in terms of its two universal co-components, appearance and reality, rendered in aesthetic terms as the relationship between the original object and its symbolic representation. Yet, for Stein, the unique being of a carafe as revealed in the process of mapping proposes that both actual and constructed carafes are technically speaking systems — composites — of particles or points.

The idea of an original as naturally fixed and constituting a metaphysical first in a series of resemblances is out of place. What emerges is a series of constructs that articulate the thing in a dynamic relationship to other things. In this regard, the very name “carafe” is already a form of simulacrum naturalized by the system of language with its established ways of taxonomizing and naming things. Not only are adjectives are an obstacle at getting at the essence of the thing, but so too are nouns: the name itself. At the outset of the project, Stein has to undo this naming part of the carafe, its logos, by renaming the object. Although technically a noun phrase retains a name-like quality, it departs from the signifier-noun as single entity towards a statement as a multiplicity model of naming.
Stein’s ‘description’ ends with the manifesto-like “[t]he difference is spreading” (461). The spreading difference, itself a form of arrangement, here ushers in a whole series of mappings that follow the carafe, each offering a radical reconfiguration of the objects in terms of their unordered non-resemblance in both observing and thinking as well as descriptive techniques of mapping them onto a page. A carafe is literally a distributor of various liquids into various smaller containers, such as glasses, cups, and mugs. This literal meaning of a carafe indeed coincides with its absolute or universal dimension, of a composite, temporal, and particulate multiplicity in the expanding universe where it remains to be part of the continuous flux of matter. It is in this spirit that Tender Buttons proceeds to sing the glory of common foodstuff and related domestic activities as a way of being, thinking, expressing, a model of tender poetic communication. Stein hears the multiplicitous playfulness and life at the level of small sounds and objects in the way a nuclear physicist does thinking of their subatomic particles and strange forms of matter.

The feminist vision of working away from the centre, of dismantling and decentring the authoritarian logocentrism, is part of the project initiated in Tender Buttons, which explicitly addresses in the famous opening lines of “Rooms” the call to act against a centre, “so that there is no use in a centre” (498). The imperative used by Stein, and frequently employed throughout the poem, indexes a subversive heteroglossia at work here, reclaiming the authoritarian command while radically shifting its epistemic and discursive grounds, giving the command over to a polysemic manipulation, spreading the difference.

The language of Tender Buttons suggests a high level of displacement with word formations radically removed from their word functions and systems of grammar and meaning. The words are on the move, particularly the nouns, as Tender Buttons was,
according to Stein herself, an attempt to write against nouns and names — to take command over and reinvent/reconfigure them — and toward movement and transformation: writing as a Deleuzoguattarian line of flight. This ‘deterritorialization’ of language, to use a Deleuzoguattarian term, mimics the way in which the very objects that proliferate throughout the poem behave: no longer stable beings that remain in a fixed relation to one grammar and typology but dynamic becomings, words dissociated from their grammatical functions, set free outside syntactical rules, out of bounds and wild, tactile, auditory, expressive, and vibrating with possible meanings. The opening of the section titled “Food” is one of the many examples of Stein’s use of words as dynamic becomings. Here we have a portrait of Roastbeef, clearly offering no resemblance to the object described, postponing the image to arrive rather at its other side, finding its other dimension, its sound, its own peculiar rhythm, style of breathing and living, and vibratory intensity, manifested through subtle sexual innuendo: “In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling” (477).

“Discourse in Tender Buttons,” writes Marguerite Murphy, “has a double direction: literally toward the referential object as she ‘describes’ the world around her, refreshing the ‘words’ ordinarily attached to that world, and toward others’ speech in her mimicry of other sorts of discourse” (393). In a move away from referentiality toward an interplay of meaning units foregrounded as kinetic-expressive planes, Stein’s experimental poem operates as a self-contained system that is integrated, simultaneous, as well as both static and moving continuously, a whole that consists entirely of its parts, does not invite transcendence, offers little outside reference beyond the ordinary meanings of words, and presents no easy escape into theory. As DeKoven suggests, “the meanings the writing articulates have nothing to do
with an anterior theme or subject: there is nothing we can say the writing is about” (221). The long poem composed of fluid portraits and sketches of things and states of things can rather be theorized as a compositional field, a field of immanence in a Deleuzoguattarian sense, enfolding from within its own self, by the power of its own vocalization, a system or container that ultimately refers to itself, hence Stein’s teaser “an arrangement in a system to pointing” (461).

We can picture *Tender Buttons* to be the name of a box containing diverse objects and relationships, but it also is the naming itself of things and their different — epistemic, aesthetic, social — functions, and could be a hidden referent known only to the initiates. The challenge in *Tender Buttons*, both for Stein as an architect or sculptress of the new vision and for the reader invited actively to participate in the construction and deployment of it, lies in comprehending the audiovisual scope of the new — analogously to the way cubist paintings require the cooperation of the eye unaccustomed to navigating new perspectives where the intelligible, ideas and concepts, meet the strictly sensible, perceptions and feelings. A method of perceiving, naming, and interacting with things is the subject proper here, the only proper description of what the poem is about. Not without irony, evoking Cartesian meditations in *Discourse on Method*, one could say that *Tender Buttons* is a prose-poem about method, both a poetic statement and a manifesto about the way of seeing, hearing, and recording objects and things, referred to in the title as “buttons,” about tenderly taking them in. As Peter Quartermain suggests in *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*, the meaning of the poem lies in “language, the voices, the play in and of language” (19); it’s about the method of language, inquiring into the rules and irregularities of poetic syntax. This interpretive take explains why Stein often gives herself over to
extravagance and excess in pushing the boundaries of conventional speech in order to develop her own unconventional new language.

Language is at the core of this shift in writing toward experiments, toward constructing immanent presents. Language, Stein observes performatively, is what works against the centre, displacing the authoritative discourse, striving toward semantically open systems, toying with indeterminacy, multiplicity, polysemy, and contradiction. Stein’s is language splintering through the syntactic and semantic crust and exiting onto some unreal or otherwise impossible, yet concrete, other or outside, orbiting and glowing fantastically there, with a visionary/auditory glow.

The linguistic turn in Stein happens alongside her preoccupation with composition and marks a new line of investigations concerning wholeness, taking up the notion of landscape and landscape writing as paradigmatic of an open-ended, albeit integrated, coordinated and controlled, immanent system that embraces a range of oppositions and categorizations of language, speech, and writing, for example encompassing both stability and movement, sameness and change. The portraiture of Tender Buttons is crucial in the way Stein begins to construct portraits outside of persons proper, aiming at scenes and dramatizations, targeting objects and things, capturing the relations of one thing to the other thing in a dramatic sonic movement of landscape/place. Tender Buttons projects and embodies a new model of totality or the presence of being: without outside boundaries or closure, and without a centre, becoming a ‘plane of immanence’, an immanent presence of things, durations, states, objects, working the mind into thinking of immanence as distribution. Stein’s prose poem, according to Murphy, “seems to connote incompleteness — a faltering of stability, anxiety over the changes made, or her own dallying on the edge of the unsayable” (393).
The line of thought in *Tender Buttons* is linked with the idea of composition as a structure that in turn structures thought, as a space or plane that provides boundaries, the bounds of a thing, in the sense of a context or environment that the things possess or are associated with. There is a cognitive aspect of Stein’s investigations, at times mocking cognition, at other times trying a radically unique and creative approach to it, yet at other times trying diligently to make sense of things and thinking, that reappears throughout different works. The dimension of thinking and thought is always comically or seriously present in Stein’s writing. No matter what she writes, Stein writes as a thinker, impersonating a philosopher whose goal is to understand something intricate, difficult, escaping the grasp, always on the verge of a new discovery. Some of the titles, like *An Exercise in Analysis*, *An Elucidation*, *Composition as Explanation*, *Useful Knowledge*, *Lectures in America*, and *The Geographical History of America or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, make more or less explicit references to thinking, at times in marked contrast to the content. Ultimately, the thought, ‘tender thinking’, in *Tender Buttons* points toward a compositional plane or field, a composition, as an exposition or explanation of that very field, its structuring, ideas, depths: an idea Stein tackled in her more ‘theoretical’ works.

In its fascination with distribution, arrangement, organization, structuring, and mapping, *Tender Buttons* sets up a precedent of investigative thinking that erupts in a series of ‘theoretical’ works. “An Elucidation” may be the first in a series of explanatory texts/lectures Stein produced at the time in preparation for a short lecture tour of England. This experimental text tackles the idea of structure as in itself explanatory, investigating the anatomy of explanation, of its own particular shape. Exactly how to understand this text remains a puzzle. Dydo calls it “an immensely difficult work” while describing it as
“discontinuous reading, a loose assemblage of bits and pieces” (47). On the surface, the essay blends two distinct types of writing, one a descriptive landscape that aims at elucidating the arrangement and meaning of geographical markers as they enter the view; the other a series of sentimental and childish love verses. These love verses, referred to in the text as a “Baby’s type writing” (qt. in Dydo 50), interrupt the flow of the other, elucidatory discourse, contributing their own outpouring throughout the ‘essay’ in elucidation. This unexpected eruption of private language initially loses the reader not intended to witness the piece dedicated to Stein’s lover and partner Alice Toklas. Only after digging through letters and other papers did Stein scholars discover that the text is peppered with coded language, offering sexual connotations known only to the two women, but at the same time serving as an apt description of the writing style, grammar and diction of the babbling text.

The deeper clue with regard to the concept of elucidation as the one taken up in this ‘essay’ lies exactly there, on the surface, in the babbling itself, which embraces love, openly and explicitly, as a necessary component of a philosophical enquiry. Here Stein embraces the affect as a path toward deeper understanding, also relating the pursuit of knowledge with pleasure, as a form of gaiety, gay science. Elucidation, Stein claims, concerns lucid writing and thinking not in the sense of being transparent to all, but as a deeply meditative and affective — loving — engagement with the actual world available at a given moment of the continuous present. One might say here Stein advances her philosophy. Philosophy after all is by definition a love of wisdom; it cannot proceed — or begin — without affections. In a sense, it cannot proceed without beginning over and over again with an affective, emotional gesture, as a renewed continuity of thought. As for wisdom as insight versus knowing by acquaintance, it lies for Stein anywhere around, in any given object, concept, perception, or
phenomenon as truly given. Truly given signifies here any object, person or aspect of reality that appears in their unconcealed being and as such can be taken up in a poetic philosophical enquiry in contrast to the givens of logical or scholarly explanations that only pretend to be given in actuality replicating a particular step of a systematically worked out proof presented to the student for memorization.

In “Composition as Explanation,” as I am to demonstrate, Stein addresses the idea of explanation, and so a quest for truth, wisdom, and knowledge in ‘geographical’ terms, as a space or field of relations, including temporal relations though recomposed or reimagined in a mosaic form of continuous presence, as a continuous melodic lasting of elements rather than a passing of them, which would involve issues of memory, recollection, and reflection that Stein is not interested in. In “An Elucidation” Stein turns to geography as immediate presence, a hybrid interpenetration of landscape, affect, and language/thought.

Stein begins the elucidation puzzlingly with harbours and rivers, and having and halving them, transforming the very words, making them dance, in order to confront the reader — indeed confront herself as reader and writer of her own text — with something not yet known and requiring immediate elucidatory attention. As it unfolds in the process of meditative writing, harbours and rivers are likewise geographical markers, drawing attention within the text to the actual elements of landscape, observed and registered in the act of writing, seeing, and contemplating. In the concluding section of her close reading of “An Elucidation,” Dydo with graceful simplicity elucidates the mystery of rivers and harbours, as well as having and halving. Both pairs can be read in many ways, both as contrasted — two nouns versus two verbs — and interconnected — for example halve and harbour connected through the French for harbour, havre. To the American ear, she offers, having and halving
are homophones. The exact number of possible readings is likely uncertain but the exact placing of the four words in relation to one another suggests a hermeneutic systematicity that would exhaust the possible readings and arrive at the interpretive closure by some form of approximation. This formal analysis outlines a theory of reading pertinent to the case of simplistically babbling text unexpectedly turned complex. Less formally, this hermeneutic offers a straightforward reading in line with the dynamic of the simple text, and so avoids complex signifiers. Here Dydo offers that the love context provides the effective way to elucidate the geographical markers of the elucidation: rivers flow into harbours as symbolic destination points, offering unities. Having and halving are likewise markers of love, of having and sharing, breaking in half to share. Having and halving are connected in multiple ways. Following Dydo’s reading, one observes that the participle “having” is repeated in “halving” with the insertion of the ‘L’ word. In other words, there is a level of signification that makes sense deeply in a hermeneutic way to please a reader interested in interpretive depths and convolutions of significations, but that’s not what the passage or essay is about. The essay is, rather, about quickness, the quickness of the mind to utilize and compute its critical thinking skills, without the need to dwell on the comprehensible. To put it cryptically, the essay is about the melody of understanding.

Written in 1923, “An Elucidation” is a puzzling philosophical/poetic preamble to a subsequent explanatory text, Stein’s extraordinary 1926 Oxford and Cambridge address, “Composition as Explanation.” The lecture intended for a specific audience takes up the theme of geography as a dynamic compositional space in the context of explanation as process. It is this spirit of happy geography — time-space social geography — and of happy thought that mobilizes the lecture and its key objective — explaining to university students
what explanation consists of both in its essence and its relation to the time of explanation as a common denominator of the understanding for all present: modernity.

In “Gertrude Stein’s ‘Composition as Explanation’,” Bruce Bassoff proposes what I would call a resonant reading of the lecture by suggesting that it is best interpretable or readable through “juxtaposing its elements with similar elements of other works” (76), other works, let us add, not immediately related to the lecture, but in the air so to speak.

Specifically, Bassoff wants to show how Stein’s thematic concerns in the lecture resonate with “some of the salient principles of semiotic analysis” (76). This resonant reading is, in Bassoff’s view, justified by the fact that Stein’s lecture is inherently resisting meaning and sense in a traditional understanding of these terms, indeed as explicit expectations of readers.

In his relational reading of the lecture, Bassoff shows that Stein’s discourse resonates with semiotics and structuralism. “This relational emphasis [of Stein’s lecture] is fundamental to French structuralism, inspired as it is by the linguists’ discovery of the phoneme, which has only a relative reality and is never experienced concretely” (76). What for Stein counts as composition is a space of relations that Bassoff finds analogous to “the dialectical possibilities of Levi-Strauss’s view of culture ... [and] his analysis of myth” (79). In particular, Stein’s emphasis on time as an internal component of composition, as one of the composing elements, is reminiscent of Levi-Strauss’s “musical analysis of myths” (79), his discounting of the original myth as a foundational mythic reality or original story in favor of a simultaneity of related myths, as a series of variations without the original theme, “a kind of continuous present - a synchronic construction out of the debris of history” (79). For Bassoff, Stein’s repetitions of “beginning again and again” and “using everything” (literally Levi-Strauss’s bricolage, and distribution (the spreading difference) are the activating
compositional forces that compose its internal coherence resonating through the various levels of resemblance, similitude, resonance, and likeness with other systems, by virtue of these intersystemic discontinuities and leaps.

In that regard, one may ask, whether Stein intends to launch here a fascinatingly impossible project of considering everything in relation to everything (see ahead to Cage’s “all answers answer all questions”) as a self-composing and self-referential mechanism or domain, a continuous enfolding, an entropy distributing itself. This entropic theme is important for understanding how Stein as a thinker deals with the traditional expectations of coherence in a character and story line, each of which demarcates the outline of destiny as well as the horizon of meaning and coherence (Bassoff 80). Stein recognizes that these expectations are no longer available to a thinker and artist aware of the fragmentation of the world, the character, and the absolute systems of coherence.

Indeed “Composition as Explanation” leaves the reader with the impression that it explains little or nothing. It is perhaps a little more clear with regards to the critical issues it wants to engage, repetition and insistence in particular, though these can be best explained in poetic terms, like in a writing that has “a constant recurring and beginning... a marked direction in the direction of being in the present... composition forming around... [as] a prolonged presence” (25); in a composition as “the using of everything” (25); and in “an inevitable beginning of beginning again and again and again” (26) as signaled half way through the lecture. The lecture can be divided into two parts. The first addresses the theme of composition in general, situating it in relation to its time — its social and historical context — as a marker of its specificity, what Stein refers to as the time-sense of the composition. In this section, she explains characteristics of a classic and what makes it beautiful. The second part
discusses Stein’s own works — specifically two of them, *Three Lives* and *The Making of the Americans* — examples of another sense of time, of the writer in this case working toward developing a unified conception of time within their work, here referred to as the time-sense in the composition. In this first section Stein offers a distinction between the prolonged present and the continuous present as two models of narrative time, failing to clarify, however, the difference between them.

On the surface, it may seem like the lecture provides two sets of valuable insights, pertaining to the understanding of an epoch as a special sense of presence experienced and shared by a larger collective, and offering intimate comments on her own works. The relative redundancy of the terminology and the performative idiosyncrasy of the discourse itself, however, suggest something else. According to Dydo, the lecture “speaks of an idea central to all Stein’s work — that compositions are complete only if they are self-explanatory, requiring no interpretations beyond what they are” (78). As a compositional field, a system or structure sustained by repetitions and oscillations of a group of related concepts, in melodic relations of one thing to the other thing, the lecture is ultimately a composition in its own right rather than a set of insights explaining something outside itself. In response to the present moment as a kind of ecology, a contemporaneity, Stein offers an exemplary modernist composition articulated from within its own presence, through its own tempo, rhythm, ambience, and voices.

The opening contention of the text of the lecture, namely that all is the same except for composition, accords compositionality a special status, defining it as a differential rather than a fixed concept. This rhetorical move delimits the actual practice of seeing and doing things within a period of time, which ultimately must remain open-ended, as possible to theorize
from inside, captured in the moment before its end and by the same token enabling the moment to stretch the present into a relatively lasting period. Here Stein gives the present moment its epochal dimensions, its critical depth against the fragmentation of insignificant seconds and details of life: “The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything” (21). This statement reappears several times throughout the opening of the lecture, though always with a subtle difference that renders it different in itself, as in “[n]othing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition” (21) several lines down. Stein proposes here that the duration of time alone, the length of seconds and minutes adding up to form lasting periods, does not make a composition, because a composition is an arrangement, “a thing seen,” a thing and aggregates of things perceived, which is to say available for a form of reflective-collective viewing. Stein’s emphasis is on viewing, but the implication of this whole series of statements extends beyond the eye of the viewer into the whole technology of perceiving under specific conditions particular to the moment and thanks to a system of amplifications that prosthetically extends perception into a bio-technology. This ocular metaphor, the exploding eye, which shatters one kind of perspective and enables other kinds of viewing, is at the bottom of this transformation, setting up the explosion within the methods and technologies of perception. Perception becomes more attuned to vibrations and resonances; it becomes auditory. All this makes composition differential — “it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it is as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen” (21) — as a set of specific differences as well as a method of registering affectively the presence and duration of the present, what Stein further refers to as the “time-sense.”
In this explosive spirit, Stein mentions war, offering a distinction between two kinds of processes — things as they are called in the text: those made by being made and those made by being prepared. In the same breath, art is compared to war: both are “a thing prepared.” This comparison suggests that “a thing prepared” differs from things “made by being made” by the intention toward change, an intention not free from creative violence, of destroying one thing in order to create another. The notion of preparing has special significance for Stein though it is unlikely that the word means always exactly the same thing, nor is the meaning immediately clear. It may be partly a ‘private’ word, loaded in a special way known only to both women. For example, in the love verses of “An Elucidation,” Stein expressly promises her lover Alice Toklas that she will refrain from preparing. She promises that she will give her orgasms and keep writing her masterpieces and that there will be no burden of preparing between them. In that context, preparing is bad; it is a nuisance that spoils the purity of unconditional affection by introducing an intentional distance to the action itself. Love cannot be premeditated or otherwise mediated by thought; it has to be filled entirely with itself as an all encompassing undifferentiated excess. Self-reflexivity is the enemy of love.

Although Stein doesn’t offer the exact meaning of being prepared, the distinction between “made as made” and “made as prepared” applied in the context of what follows makes it relatively clear. Stein’s intention here is to explain what “creating a modern composition authentically” is all about. Given that compositionality is a differential concept and not a general term, it can be meaningfully discussed only in the context of specific practice, not as a set of formal characteristics. Yet the lecture programmatically refuses details of modernity, offering just two examples of Stein’s own work, themselves rather out of step
with her actual practice of writing, taking up ‘ancient’ cases or ‘classics’ of her own oeuvre. The reason for this refusal lies in Stein’s positioning herself as a kind of philosopher aiming at providing the students with epochal insights and not empirical details. Stein’s performative lecture effectively produces a composition in response to the question of what composition is, advancing composition theory as practice rather than a theoretical way of knowing. For “[n]aturally one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning happening” (24). In this regard, Stein is saying that ultimately theory makes sense only insofar as it is itself unfixed, open to registering and analyzing specific situations as significant variations of the recurrent pattern of use. It is this framing of theory as unfixed that enables the study of language as a marker of social change.

The field of ‘social situatedness’ has no clear boundaries, not even a fixed methodology. Social situations are neither innovative nor non-innovative. The category of originality hardly applies. They are phenomena of a different kind, describing operations and doings of groups and the subtle changes that occur under constant or sudden social exigencies. In this sense, ‘social situatedness’ is a perfect example of what Stein means when she says that “no one is ahead of his time” (22). The problem of time is ecological, of breathing the same air, so to speak. Nobody ‘naturally’ steps outside their environment for a breath of a different air. Yet, an awareness of one’s environment is not so simply a natural thing to know or do. When it comes to awareness, it is almost exactly the opposite of just being or doing: nobody is ‘naturally’ in step with their contemporaries. Rather, everybody acts at all times in some form of critical distance to what they are or do as well as a different length of distance to the awareness of their others. This part of practice, then, has to come from somewhere other than the already established ways of doing things, and so from outside the established
knowledge of social situations, even though it is after all part and parcel of social situations themselves. The problem may seem exceedingly abstract, but at bottom it poses the dramatically important question of how social change is produced.

The suggestion that social change is produced in the act of war, which in turn resembles art as reconfiguration rather than an aesthetic pleaser characteristic of established canons, referred to by Stein in the lecture as classics, resonates with Heraclitus’s philosophy of radical flux or becoming. Considered deep, obscure, oracular, Heraclitus postulates that war is the progenitor and ruler of all, a universal — metaphysical — principle that explains the constant flux of all reality, and a legal and ethical gauge of justice within the domain of social relations. War, fire, change, and becoming signify a sense of movement, in a way the same movement as applied across different scales of human activities, from politics, to physics, to poetics, to metaphysics.

Stein’s repetition — with notable variations — of “beginning again and again [as] a natural thing even when there is a series” (23) explains composition as an organic entity, something living and teeming with reality and not an abstract, artificially imposed narrative frame or transcendent container. Such an organic composition, Stein implies, has to have its own time-sense, own method of structuring elements, pores through which it connects with the world at once surrounding and constituting it, the world with its shifts and changes of which it is a continuously enfolding expression; it has to be immanent to itself, abolishing distinctions between matters and subjects, bodies and minds, objects and experiences, inner and outer selves. At stake is the elaboration of the ‘present continuous,’ a way of writing which enables a convincing capturing of human nature as a living time-continuum that consists of heterogeneous elements — multiplicities. The continuous present of Stein is not a
snapshot of reality, a still frozen in time, but a pulsating presence which in itself constitutes an extension — extending as far as the system of interconnected affective lines that reveal the character — the ethos of the age — in its complex being. The notion of the continuous present is not reducible to language, to the grammatical form and sentence structure, even to narrative style. Which explains the peculiarity of the language of the lecture — oracular in a Heraclitean way — full of repetitions, awkward syntax, odd juxtapositions of parts of speech, and purely melodic/sound oriented elements; these are manners of overcoming language itself, showing its own operations and dynamic as a way of reaching in the words of Deleuze and Guattari’s opening section of *A Thousand Plateaus*, “the Abstract Machine that connects a language to the semantic and pragmatic contents of statements, to collective assemblages of enunciation, to a whole micropolitics of the social field” (7).

Stein’s own *Lecture on Nothing*, “Composition as Explanation,” predating John Cage’s anti-lecture manifesto by thirty odd years, but clearly anticipating its aims and goals, renders the genre of lecture — with its stress on the coherence of exposition as a *modus operandi* and standard of evaluation — incoherent. The lecture becomes an auditory performance of a musical text, operating through syntactical distortions, repetitions, and resonances, to produce a meditation on the passage of time and its multiplication into parallel streams of continuity. Cage employs formal means of scripting his lecture that affect directly its rhythm and pulsation along with the voice necessary to release it from its print form. Even though non-lineated, Stein’s text yields itself to auditory readings in the same way, the durations and pulsations of her phrasing aimed at creating threads, clusters, and melodic chords of words.
“Composition as Explanation” shows that it is never the subject matter that is of relevance, but the manner, medium or form in which the subject and its matters are exposed, thought through, elucidated, constructed, composed. The composition is predominantly sound oriented, aural and auditory, though this dimension is not scripted anywhere on the page nor is it available in any other form than the multiple acts of reading, puzzling, stumbling, and flying through Stein’s texts as supplied by the reader.

1. 3. Radio Aurality: Voice Meditating Immediacy in Landscape Theatre

Following Dydo’s suggestion to think of Stein’s approach to writing as a form of meditation, a line of thinking, I propose that Stein’s landscape as play, a movement of the ground along with its landmarks and people, is a form of meditative outrospection directed at the essence of landmarks and people as interconnecting lines of the system of relations; as such, landscape theatre points to the idea of composition as a musically meditated, auditory, living presence: a live geography. Landscape as something viewed from within, and not just viewed but also felt, sensed, heard, while being a part of it, immanently, in relation to its own movements and changes, is a compositional entity, and further, somewhat awkwardly, a case of meditating around the notion of structure and organizational principles guiding the processes of composition. (Inasmuch as meditating could be directed at a particular figuration.) This figuration of landscape in resonant relation to sound has direct implications for the question of voice in Stein, as voice is the main articulator and carrier of sound in Stein’s writing. Here I ask myself: What are the forms of voice in Stein, and where is the voice located? How many voices are there? (As in Stein’s chorus throughout Four Saints in Three Acts: “how many saints are there?”) The question of voice reappears as examined in connection with the question of self or subjectivity, particularly in the context of
divided/multiplied personalization of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights. In its further extension, the question of voice is related to the problem of multitude or multiplicity in search of its vocalization and agency. And so on one hand, I ask: How does voice correspond to self? On the other, I ask: What kind of identity does the voice imply, represent, call for?

Clearly, landscape theatre and drama in Stein provide a fertile ground of investigations into the musicality and compositionality of voice. In contrast to her lecture on composition, and the essay on elucidation or even Tender Buttons, where the musicality and orality of the voice upsets ‘natural’ expectations of coherence in the poetic performance involving presumably a single voice, in landscape theatre the voice is distributed, decentered from a particular locus and logic of identity, splintered into a myriad of resonating voices and sounds; the voice rises in proportion to its own decentering and disembodying, in the manner of its own taking spectral forms. The multiplication of the voice is spectral in the sense of not being recorded or otherwise instructed through the text. No aural or sound clues are provided, and yet the text in its entirety seems nothing but the bubbling of sounds, a radio.

This auditory nature of composition aimed at a larger auditory ecology of language-speech as sound has nothing to do with the visual appearance of text in print, as Stein does not experiment with typesetting. Rather, the auditory nature of composition is composed as a modality of reading, a dramatic reading one could be inclined to call it, which the text projects, calling for multiple voices, timbres, intonations, and pitches to sound out the text, to render it a musical event involving a group of voices as instruments, in the way of radio and cinema. Landscape theatre, though offering texts of plays otherwise not intended for performance and so apparently ensconced in their textuality, is the least visually oriented form of textuality, calling for a musical rendering, immersed in and celebrating the sounds of
language, the sounds of text. Following Sarah Wilson’s radio readings of Stein, Johanna
Frank’s excellent essay on landscape theatre and, and drawing on McLuhan’s insights into the
medium of radio, I want to show how through her constant attention to the auditory voice in
her writing, Stein embeds in her texts music, sound, and orality reminiscent of the radio, and
in some ways anticipating its future developments.

In her “Gertrude Stein and the Radio,” Wilson argues that Stein’s fascination with
broadcasting ties in with her ongoing preoccupation with “the feeling of everybody,” more
specifically with the feeling of everybody listening; she says that for Stein, “radio creates the
everybody by creating the audience... The radio broadcast conveys a sense of an immediate
and concentrated present; it begins again and again, as Stein’s characteristically insisted
phrasings indicate to us [offering] a distinct kind of knowledge, knowing ‘by what you felt.’
That is, the appeal of the radio is not exclusively informational, but it stands intellectually,
just as it does physically, into more intimate and emotional territory” (263)

As a figuration, an interpretive frame, radio amplifies the auditory dimension of
Stein’s writing, its participatory character calling for multiple voices (“participatory radio ... recouples emotional and intellectual engagement just as Stein’s writing does” (265)) and
resisting realistic reading (267). “[T]he formal and representational possibilities of radio arose
from the fact that the medium was less tethered to straightforward realism (and thus possibly
more open to alternate ‘realities’) than were other popular media” (268). Stein’s commitment
to the multiple and the figurative likewise finds the aurality of radio as fertile ground of
experimentation with texts and forms of knowing that actively resist theorization.

In her radio reading of Stein, Wilson proposes that at the outset of Stein’s wrestling
with the radio is the idea of voice not as a site of fixed agency, not a particular person, but a
musical vocalization, a melodic peopling, a ‘soundscape’ and, by extension, a nation.

Wilson’s article shows the subtlety of Stein’s position on the radio as a medium of the formation of national identity: not taking the relationship between radio and nation naively, yet emphasizing how Stein’s improvisational radio and performances inspired improvisational communities to come into being through the force of radio. Wilson’s concluding point that Stein’s work in the 1930s and 40s employed radio as a form, through this medium enabling her to explore different identities, changing subject positions, and multiple voices, takes us on a trajectory to McLuhan’s image of radio as a medium that obsolesces print, replacing its visual orientation with the auditory soundness of non-locatable words.

For McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, radio breaks away from the visual domination of print, which historically aligns print-oriented literacy with the mechanical industrialization and fragmentation of modern ‘man.’ Radio, however, involves people differently: directly. “Radio provided the first massive experience of electronic implosion - that reversal of the entire direction and meaning of literate Western civilization” (332). And a few pages further, McLuhan adds: “The power of radio to retribalize mankind, its almost instant reversal of individualism into collectivism” (337). Let us stress that unlike in print, which preserves speech in its timeless exactitude, nothing is preserved or archived in the radio, nothing recorded; the radio enacts the flow of discourse, the spreading of discourse as a resonant presence of the language and world one is immersed in, a distribution of currencies, the always changing weather and traffic reports demanding constant updates being the essence of radio: its liveness. Radio captures and broadcasts back to the reflecting collective ear the constant flow of the social real, its propagation and spreading in the form of radio waves, which in their operations mimic the light, teasing the listener/auditor with the potential of
instantaneity, of the present moment and presence stretching in time, of the duration within
the present moment, momentous and eternal at once. It’s no accident that most intense
experiences of listening to the radio tend to occur late at night and in the early morning hours
when everything else freezes, when social life with its constant prattle is at a standstill and the
self is exposed in its nakedness to the cosmos. Cosmos indeed, and no less, as an expression
of existence in its essential abstract form of the self intensified to the polyrhythmia of the
body against the vast open space out there, untethered from the world, deeply aware of that
predicament, caught in the moment of deep awareness of that very untetheredness: the
moment of its existential loneliness.

Radio propagates the subatomic, catching the human ear with the fragmented
trembling of particles issuing from that transistor box placed next to the ear, which replaces
human contact, dazzling one with the virtual presence of the social, the virtual speech. For
McLuhan, the analytic and fragmenting qualities of print with its emphasis on discreet digits,
sequences, letters in print, and the myopic line blindingly and obediently tracing their
curvatures and capitalizations, all are relieved by the ear in the radio with its uncentered,
decentered close listening, catching the murmur of the world before it gets attached to a
particular set of lips, in the state of material distribution, as a shimmer of signifiers and
particles of air displaced by the movement of excited molecules of sound. The radio exposes
one to the cosmos and in that exposure tethers one back to the earth and its communications.

In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante, writing about his descent to hell, envisages for the
reader the radio experience:

Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries
were echoing across the starless air,
so that soon as I set out, I wept.
Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,
accents of anger, words of suffering,
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—
all went to make a tumult that will whirl
forever through the turbid, timeless air,
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls. (21)

Two corresponding elements in this description are in the poet’s view constitutive of hell. On one hand, there is the whirling “tumult,” signifying the cacophony of voices coming from all possible directions at once, without any order or hierarchy, all equally important, depersonalized, and strange. Speech, which elevates the human above the animal, here turns into noise, the noise of the marketplace where everything happens at once and no meaningful conversation can take place, as likely inspired this representation. In a way, it’s the materiality of the voice that appears to be hellish, the voice reduced to the swirling molecules of air, no longer attached to the mind and reason, the mind’s eye with its neat organization of ideas, embodied in the Renaissance perspective. On the other hand, not immediately apparent, there is a worse terror, and for a Christian the absolute terror, of being trapped forever on the earth, buried in the hellish bowels of it. Even more than the cacophony of voices, what terrorizes the poet is the claustrophobic immanence of “starless air” and “timeless air,” signifying the impossibility of ascent to heaven as the ultimate penalty, which nonetheless fascinates him, inspiring these amazing lines. Like Milton some four hundred years later, Dante’s most convincing lines and most interesting characters, including the guiding mind of Virgil, are devoted to hell.
Even the Talking Heads know that “heaven/heaven is a place/place where nothing/nothing ever happens,” but hell is exceedingly entertaining. What makes hell entertaining is its social, multiplicitous, interactive, interpersonal nature, and insofar as the persons occupying this dimension take on beastly forms or behave in beastly ways, the interpersonal transcends the human, marking the horizon of the depersonalized individual of the post-human kind. The eventness of the radio, its momentous particularity, what Deleuze and Guattari call haecceity, consists in the coming together of self and not just others, but everybody: the multiplicity of particulars in the plural, dazzling the self exposed to its existential loneliness by the very opposite of that predicament, a society or nation as a radical expression/articulation of deindividuation, the impossibility of the self. Radio is the first venture into the articulation of that sense of fragmented multiplied self; for a medium, radio captures the nature of speech; it extends the medium of speech across space.

In calling Stein’s landscape plays radio plays, one does not take radio as referring to actual radio playability but a description of spectrality or virtuality of sorts, as a text emulating radio, indeed anticipating it, a radio-text. An aural geography and a moving geography, as in film, which also, as Stein herself acknowledges, influenced her writing, radio is a guiding medium to take us through the question of aurality in Stein’s landscape theatre.

In her essay “Plays,” Stein explains the process of becoming interested in landscape:

I lived in a landscape that made itself its own landscape. I slowly came to feel that since the landscape was the thing, I had tried to write it down in Lucy Church Amiably and I did but I wanted it even more really, in short I found that since the landscape was the thing, a play was a thing (77).
Here, her experience of landscape is related to her practice of playful writing, to the ideas of organization and structure of text in ways resonating with geography as a system, an organization of lines and points, a distribution of differences, the spreading difference of voices. Through the blurring of difference between abstract and concrete vocalizations, the relationship between form and content, influenced by the turning upside down and sideways of the notion of figure and ground in visual art, Stein’s landscape theatre takes the reader into the geography of landscape in relation to the form and texture of a literary (dramatic) work. As Stein explains:

The landscape has its formation and as after all a play has to have formation and be in relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway (78),

opting for a writing with a voice stripped of its history, with the immediacy of sound coming through obvious melodies and melodic patterns of repetition that constantly give relations of one thing to the other thing as they sit or they stand, as a field of relations, rather than coherent stories and linear plot lines. In her theatre she offers the reader auditory performances that fire up perceptions and understandings of multiple sets of elements at work as forces of a dramatic staging of words and sounds. The multiple sounds of this radio resonate emerging in fragmented, resonating, and playful ways.

Treating Stein’s landscape plays as a drama of perception and proprioception presents an opportunity to consider the observation/meditation model of writing as situated in a
peculiar social geography, filtered through the movement of possible personalization, the rise and fall of emotions, and the transfusional immediacy/immanence of the always shifting presence characterizing Stein’s theatrical experience/practice. This aspect of writing, inspired by William James’s empiricism of perception, explains Stein’s paratactic strategies of the musical voice speaking through the script and turning to the image of cubist figuration as a model of a multi-perspectival, multi-dimensional system of observing/recording/inventing. Through the essence of what happened as an organizational and epistemic platform for the plays, Stein invites us to inquire about the location and locatability of text in relation to its voices, proposing the topos of language-text, its social space and voices, as materially interrelated, and further, a reconfiguration of the self and the identity paradigm Stein further explores in Everybody’s Autobiography and The Geographical History of America. By experimenting with the compositional field, Stein’s landscape plays/writings project a dimension of writing characterized by a blending of script with sound and with oralities that do away with the concept of a stable self, and explores the possibility of the public, mass, collective, and assembly. This sound-orientation of writing gesturing in the direction of the multiple self of postmodernity forges a writing uncontained, freed from grammatical constraints, open to experiment and, in the words of one of John Cage’s manifestos, “The Future of Music: Credo,” open to “the entire field of sound” (4), to the richness of the composing, meditating sound-voice.

The multiple self of resonating bodies suspended in the vocalization of a possible persona comes to the fore in Johanna Frank’s article on Stein’s landscape theatre, “Resonating Bodies and the Poetics of Aurality; Or, Gertrude Stein’s Theatre.” At the beginning of the article, Frank stresses the connection between portraits and plays. Both are a form of dramatic
writing using “visual and aural registers” (501) to capture an individual or character as mental images resulting from “linguistic or performative presentation” (501). Yet the character as subject of both plays and portraits, Frank argues, “cannot reside merely in a presentation reflective of mental images elicited in the narrator as speaker or authorial voice” (501) insofar as a dramatic representation relies on a vocalization of two kinds, “the bodies uttering sounds to perform voice...and the bodies of auditors receiving the sounds of that voice” (502). At stake in Stein’s dramatic writing then is a question of the embodiment of physically absent bodies, a spectral kind of embodiment. In Frank’s view, Stein’s plays aim at “redefin[ing] the relationship among audience expectation of embodiment, corporeal resonance, and the stage” (502). This eagerness to redefine the dynamic of dramatic work makes her plays unique, in particular with regard to the concept of identity as constituted by a series of “word sounds” not easily locatable and “elid[ing] referential signification” (504). Stein’s dramatic writing, Frank argues, enables her “to separate language from bodies, speech from language and voice from speech and make them all ephemeral” (504). Her theater of sounds engages equally the speaking bodies and/or the virtual speech in writing and the bodies of readers receiving sounds, in both cases the language of sounds transcending the lexical meaning and the actual body and their limitations (505). In that connection, Frank evokes Barthes’s concept of geno-song, a seducer-siren tempting the reader with its jouissance of language inviting one into its sing-song.

As Frank demonstrates, Stein’s venture into geno-song and radio sounds date back to her experiments with sonic portraiture. Inspired by visual arts and the challenges of representation, Stein ‘draws’ her own pictures, sonic portraiture of friends that catches the essence of the person, their nature, rather than the mimetic likeness. The sonic portraiture of
Stein brings to mind the Deleuzoguattarian distinction between tracing and mapping. The essence of a thing or person is not immediately given; it’s not contained in a series of lines and shading; nor is it reducible to a technique of drawing or writing. While the likeness is contained in the lines, and directly paraphrasable or translatable into a different set of lines and dots, the essence lies somewhere between the lines, and has often to do with a more holistic ‘representation’ of a person than their visual image or likeness, a melodic refrain or riff; it’s cinematic and auditory, in the sense of combining in its picturing sound, words, syntax/grammar, images, movement, time, framing, as well as the vocalizations and personalizations into a particular character or set of characters/voices, a set of situations. The melodic intonational and otherwise aural aspects of persons and things emerge from Stein’s sonic portraiture through the style of discourse as personality.

Stein’s sonic portraits, including portraits of objects in *Tender Buttons*, are paradigmatic experiments in constructing her audio-vision of landscape theatre. They are essentially auditory sonic portraiture, descriptive in the manner of Picasso and Braque’s cubist experiments, multi-sensorial ways — waves — of hearing sound. Their goal is not to describe what somebody looks like or how they behave, but to capture the essence of their personality. Her portraits are not descriptive but projective. They refuse to observe a person from a defined vantage point, stretching the moment of time that allowed this set of impressions to create a continuous auditory presence, a series of intersubjective approximations of what happened.

“If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” famously exemplifies the idea of sonic portraiture, not by accident chosen by Stein herself to be recorded and remaining one of the few extant audio recordings of her works in her own voice. The portrait begins with a
conditional clause disintegrating into a fragmented “if Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon” (230), grammar too gradually deconstructed into a musical phrase, “If I told him would he like it” repeated and inverted musically. As we know, the voice in the poem, presumably of Stein herself, considers whether or not to object to Picasso with regard to his frequent changes of lovers. Slowly, the problem question becomes clear with “would he like it if I told him” though only after six or seven lines of fragmented text. The voice mimicking a searching thought mulls over the problem without having to articulate it fully. Repetitions at the opening provide the space for thought to articulate itself, emerging from the sounds and noise of its own workings. Stein reveals the operations of thought as operations of resonances and musical phrasing/rhythm rather than through a semantic/syntactic apparatus of meaning, implying that the meaning is a sound concept in the sense of auditory sound, however textual and imaginary that sound may be in the context of text. The syntax of thought may resemble at times the grammar of language, but on the whole, as Stein seems to be demonstrating, it is free from the constraints and the bias of print.

*Tender Buttons* inaugurates Stein’s experimental phase of writing, lasting with different intensities till the end of her life. Questions regarding identity as well as the nature of experience and composition remain at the centre of her philosophical preoccupations throughout these works, but in addition there emerges a problematic of expression and articulation, taking the form of a shift of attention toward language, its syntax and semantics, and by extension voice, medium, and figuration, in turn focusing on the epistemic of the auditory as a language/landscape complex. This shift of attention concerning spatial relationships and the question of place produces a series of playfully experimental texts.
known as landscape plays, yet with the idea of landscape reshaped through a system of writing as a syntactical-semantic complex of *Tender Buttons*.

Stein’s landscape plays extend the experiment initiated in *Tender Buttons*, of enacting through paratactic strategies the indeterminate spaces that aim at recording and processing multiple versions of experience, and, in the spirit of the radical empiricism of William James, allow everything to come within a perceiving scheme. Writing plays enables Stein to further work against the unified perspective and single vision of a fixed point of view toward a multiplicity of cubist figuration, a multiplicity that operates as an interplay of planes and a dramatic conflict of patterns and textures, and requires a total awareness and involvement of viewers (McLuhan 13).

In Stein’s landscape writing, comprising particularly the plays of the late 1910s and 20s, the aim often is to attain some form of unity, as a projection or feeling of an integrated whole with all individual parts dynamically interrelated (DeKoven 223), a totality which nonetheless remains open-ended and teeming with possibilities. Another feature of landscape writing according to DeKoven is a certain harmony between organizational and thematic considerations, such that the structure of a play corresponds to its thematic centre, as if both were equally capable of expressing the same vision, perhaps as if the vision needed to be articulated in this twofold way. In DeKoven’s view this is part of Stein’s feminist critique of major philosophical tropes, notably a critique of the dualism between mind and body, yielding to what she calls “a female vision” that brings the two together into “a polymorphous continuity” (224).

Landscape plays capture the image-event of a particulate moment; they are a sound-image imprint, as if paper were a sufficient medium for the recording of sound, revealing the
inherent soundness of words. For example, consider a chance line in the third Act One, Scene 2 of *Paisieu*, a line appearing in a long sequence of unrelated lines reading as if separate sounds and chords in a John Cage composition: “Having seen. Having seen. Having not scented seen” (157). The repetition of “having seen” in the second instant of it is no repetition but a change, a slight increase in “having seen,” if one can put it that way, caused by what Stein would insist is insistence. About repetition, she says in “Portraits and Repetition”:

> what one repeats is the scene in which one is acting, the days in which one is living, the coming and going which one is doing, anything one is remembering is a repetition, but existing as a human being, that is being listening and hearing is never repetition. (107)

The visual reading of the line “Having seen. Having seen” (but is there a line to begin with? And who says there is?), what is called silent reading, may or may not be sufficiently attentive to the change, but it’s likely to be inattentive, for the visual bias more naturally opposes redundancies.

The redundancy contained in the repetition of line is no redundancy but insistence; Scott Pound identifies it as intonation. Redundancy and/or repetition appear in relation to media; they are part of or are emerging from. In print, the repetition is more redundant than in speech. A discreet bit of information is taken in by the eye and is digested in the mind, where it is multiplied, sorted out, associated with, and contrasted to other bits of information, and so on; such is the process of the mind processing information. The mind-eye, then, has no need to take in redundant pieces of information for it manipulates information in its own way anyway. The ear has no such bias. Quite the contrary, the ear delights in repetitions and redundancies. They are the markers of the resonant outside out there with no particular
direction or perspective, landmarks of what otherwise is no space or landscape but becomes one in the process of making sense, which to an extent is the process of translation, transposition, of aural into spatial perceptions. Repetition as well as other sound devices is how navigation through listening is done, as an echolocation, by sending out and receiving a series of ‘repeated’ signals, which gradually, by processing durations, timing, and the strength of the signal, its rhythm and rhyme, constructs a sense of depth, distance, and direction.

Researchers in sound studies claim that no sound can be repeated by a human the same way twice, not even the pronunciation of one’s own name (Waldrop 60). From the sound reading ‘point of view,’ the repetition of the line is not, and cannot be, a repetition. The voice of the reader left to its own devices will echolocate through the text by the use of pitches, durations, inflections, timbres, tempo, attacks, by increasing/decreasing, shortening and elongating the phrase, by employing what a musician would call phrasing. (Phrasing in music is a skill that requires a fair amount of practice. A non-skilled or poorly skilled performer will first and foremost want to play the notes accurately, nose and eyes glued to the page: “Having seen. Having seen.” They will delight in the fact that the ‘chords’ repeat, that the piece is simple to play, for they can’t get them quite right anyway, so the opportunity to play them twice is always welcome. But they will be likewise annoyed by the repetition, thinking the piece is not moving forward sufficiently or that they, as performers, aren’t playing interesting enough material, just the same thing twice.)

Multiple possibilities are associated with a circularity of thought. However, in the ‘line-not line’ from Stein quoted above, there are multiple interpretive possibilities that have nothing to do with circularity, but are the result of rendering the line spatially-acoustic where a series of juxtapositions can be observed and contemplated. For example, the increase of
“having seen” may be heard as further increased or resolved with “having not.” The juxtaposition of the first and second “seen” with “scent” is based on an odd similarity between the sounds of “seen” and “scent.” Seen and scent bring to mind a sensorial confusion of synaesthesia, melodiously navigating sight and smell, but they also invent an imaginary, twisted grammar where “scent” may be heard as the past participle form of the verb “seen,” if there were such a verb, the way the present form of ‘mean’ migrates to ‘meant.’ A melodic reading, a reading with at least an imaginary keyboard at hand and/or in mind, is almost a must if one wants to make any sense of the line. Having seen this line with just the eye of silent reading, the reader remains in the proverbial dark as to the sense and place of the line.

Similarly in *Paisieu* we could single out the line: “A do be a do be a do be a do be a do be at all” (156) as an example of a purely sound intervention into the flow of “action,” the plotting zone where words project things and drama. The combination of “do” and “be” is clearly melodic, mimicking jazz singing, specifically scat, more correctly anticipating scat. Stein, who in her essay “Lectures and Repetition” mentions being influenced by jazz and cinema, is doing her be-bop swing, splicing two notoriously overdone verbs, so worn out nobody cares, and creating a peculiar noun phrase, a make-shift house, adobe house, to house the sound of words, the sound of the line. She’s at it, “at at,” caught singing in the text but then really not at all, for the text-line equally expresses a doubt, a vacillation between doing and being that activates the thought on the page through the oscillation between the active and inactive “do” and “be,” a “be” unresolved through the addition of “a”, dwindling at the end of the “a do be,” which to many an ear may sound like a ‘do re mi.’ A silent eye is stuck in the phrase too dizzying to read through coherently, but the phrase erases itself from the page into a voice afar as soon as the eye gives up its analytic cogitations. These are random examples of
Stein’s turning to a melodic turn of phrase to disrupt the pattern of common sense expectations presumed by the reader.

Stein’s landscape writing aims at creating all-inclusive spaces of immanence: auditory, audible, involving all sense perceptions. In that regard, Stein responds to the problem inherent to theatre as a type of both figuration (the spectacle) and mediation (transfer of information), the problem characterized as a state of being inherently out of joint, to borrow from Hamlet — Stein herself borrows and deliberately misquotes Hamlet in her lecture “Plays” — as a rift between the time of one’s emotion and the scene represented (59-60). The curtain as an important prop and trope of theatre already symbolizes for Stein the rampant fragmentation at the core of dramatic performance and drama in general, resulting in the separation and specialization of the spatial, temporal, affective, conceptual, and narrative threads, like in an assembly line.

In the first place at the theatre there is the curtain and the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain. The emotion of you on one side of the curtain and what is on the other side are not going to be going on together. One will always be behind or in front of the other. (60)

“To Stein,” Dydo reminds us in her The Language That Rises, “the trouble with plays is that they are apprehended piecemeal, in successive scenes, acts, moments, sections... At no time is there total dramatic presence and intensity” (265). In contrast, landscape is a kind of presence to itself, something that can be entered and manipulated yet doesn’t exist in a fixed relation to the viewer or spectator. Consider the following passage/scene of A List:
MARTHA: If four are sitting at a table and one of them is lying upon it it does not make any difference. If bread and pomegranates are on a table and four are sitting at the table and one of them is leaning upon it it does not make any difference.

MARTHA: It does not make any difference if four are sitting at a table and one is leaning upon it.

MARYAS: If five are sitting at a table and there is bread on it and there are pomegranates on it and one of the five is leaning on the table it does not make any difference. (246)

This all-at-once simultaneity is obvious in the description of the scene at the table with Martha and Maryas and in how Stein wants to describe at once both the busyness and the placidity of the nuns.

It is no accident that Stein’s early plays are written without regard for possible staging though not precluding it in any way; written away from the city, they take the countryside as an extraordinary model of complex dramas going on at all times, a model of an all-at-once wholeness that captures the essence of theatre as oriented around drama (movement, dramatic action) rather than articulating any specific content or story: “in my early plays I tried to tell what happened without telling stories so that the essence of what happened would be like the essence of the portraits, what made what happened be what it was” (75).

By claiming that the essence of what happened is the initial goal of her theatre, Stein shifts attention from dramatic happenings represented and reenacted in a standardized, sequenced form of dramatic writing, as stories, toward poetic syntheses and intensifications of social interpersonal events and occurrences as experienced during her perambulations through the French countryside. Landscape plays as analogous to portraits in the same way a painter may arbitrarily direct their attention towards a person, object or a system of lines and markers,
a certain geography — be that of land, still life, or human face. They are not ocular but oral. They break away from realistic representation; they are cubist narratives, dialogic-dramatic, using a series of shifting perspectives. One could say they are intensely subjective except there is no singular subject that views, feels, knows, acts, and senses the surrounding environment in a consistent manner, only a momentary authorial creation evacuated from it, which operates through a resonant multiplication of personas, a scriptural swarm of narrative I’s dancing and singing at shifting distances from the author herself.

As a landscape, a slice or scape of life, a play would no longer distinguish between the emotion of the person looking and of the action of the play itself; both would happen simultaneously, in direct textual relation to one another, along the same dramatic axis constituted by the movement of the text itself. Landscape is a metaphor rife with possibilities, visionary and utopian; as a utopian projection, it consists in returning to the topos, to place and site and a sheet of paper, their internal dynamic and harmony, their movement and stasis, a composition based on a formation and “a relation one thing to the other thing and as the story is not the thing as any one is always telling something then the landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail, the story is only of importance if you like to tell or like to hear a story but the relation is there anyway” (78).

Dydo’s chapter 5 of Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, in a section titled “The Grammar of Landscape,” takes up Paisieu, “a play that aspires to the condition of landscape” (265), as representative of the striving toward capturing both the materiality as well as the abstract figuration of drama, a synthesis Stein herself refers to as an essence. Paisieu defies our expectations already in the subtitle, “A Work of Pure Imagination in Which No
Reminiscences Intrude,” which robs it of characters, dialogues and action, leaving on some projected imaginary stage only mediational procedures and confusing frames that hold it abstractly together. A work of pure imagination aims at nothing in particular but pure forms of imagining, and yet pure forms, necessary as they may be as conditions that situate a thing in a logical or conceptual framework, are not something that can be properly encountered; especially not where in place of characters, settings, plot development, dialogues and conflicts, there is just the place itself, a no particular place but a placeness, a framing device and nothing else. Stein’s contention is to build a model for a play, to conceive of a pure dramatic action, and in order to arrive there to make the reader think not of action, not of what transpires on the stage, not even of the stage itself, but of something like the conditions of staging, in some sense, the conditions of playability of a page of writing. At play is a conceptual framework involving and implicating the audience, which is what produces the landscape effect. For landscape is not only the manner of organization on the page of textual matter but also a way of reading and assembling the text of the play. Landscape is also a type of thinking for the audience and reader, his or her way of constructing a ‘plane of immanence’, a moment of a continuous now, for landscape embodies immanence and continuity, symbolizing the becoming of a permanent present continuous. Such a landscape as an immediate perceptual given is auditory in the way defined in the introductory section, as a multi-media polyvocality of sense perceptions copresent. Landscape as a scene/seen implied in the bringing together of the dramatic-action-stage scene with the experienced/perceived seen, as immediacy, a moment/slice of time in its pure happening, represents an event, a happening on the way somewhere, an action itself.
In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asks himself a question: What is still left in imagination after all empirical content is taken out of it? There are categories, for instance causal relationships, but they too depend on the materials related. And then there are the pure forms of perception, pure forms of sensibility as Kant terms them, time and space, which are the absolute conditions of any object to appear within any perception. Hence there’s a certain positionality, a frame that situates all perception, and this is ultimately how perception and imagination work. The subtitle of *Paisieu* signals not only a certain impossibility of the play itself — for instance, the impossibility of staging it in an actual theatre — but also as a methodology of reading and making sense of it. That “no reminiscences intrude” suggests a type of possible world without time as a reliable marker of its unfolding, where there is no place for time or memories. As Dydo puts it, the subtitle offers us to think of the play as “a work freed from time, reference, representation. Reminiscences have to do with histories and identities outside the playscape before us that names alone do not have, and memory is about the logic of developing plots, which Stein shuns” (276). In a move toward a total theatre, Stein constructs a playscape of synchronous time, of multiple occurrences happening simultaneously and flattened onto a surface, forming a system of spatial relationships. The total theatre of *Paisieu* is like the composition described in “Composition as Explanation,” an immanent thing that grows from within itself without one centre of coherence or point of view, through multiple points, as seen from all angles at once as a system of relations of seeing-living-presence, relations of auditory copresence:

The composition is the thing seen by everyone living in the living that they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living. (24)
Stein’s plays are not abstractions, and the conceptual and/or the imaginary content of the mind as evoked through Kant are merely attempts to articulate the possibility of thought and extension, the mind and the body, returning to their ‘natural’ state, blending together, becoming the continuous flow of the actual verifying at any moment an experience. At the heart of Stein’s auditory vision of the theatre lies the question of “the continuity of human intellect and spirit with the natural world” (DeKoven 229). What makes it a feminist vision, according to DeKoven, is the affirmation of the union of the human and the physical, the coming together of the body and the mind, of the immanent and the transcendent, their triumph over the tragic sense of separation, fragmentation, and the single, analytic vision that separates. For Stein, plays are arenas, sites or locales where she can experiment with and extend the boundaries of language toward tactile melodic vocalizations, inviting the reader to engage in an interplay of linguistic possibilities whose meaning, as DeKoven argues, has to be often supplied by the reader (232).

The task of writing a play is a complex one, since it already must think of the theatre as an alternative kind of space, a different set of relationships that require a radical reconfiguration of all the senses and their involvement in perception. As Dydo reminds us in her commentary on *Paisieu*, Stein’s landscape is not an actual place one can visit; its characters — if this is how we can think of names woven into the text — are not people one can encounter. Here life and place interpenetrate, forming a kind of self-contained environment, self-contained precisely in the sense of having no clear boundaries. Occurrences, events, bits of dialogue and stage directions are all mixed, producing an assemblage, a theatrical machine where “everything was actual and I went on writing” (82). “All these compose the play as they compose the landscape, always there and always
changing, filled with sounds and sights that make everyday life go on” (Dydo 271). The materiality of theatre and of landscape and life meet on a projected stage, somewhere in space, perhaps at every point of the space already constituted as a system of relations, in the continuous enfolding of the actual.

In her essay on theatre Stein emphasizes the confusion between the play as text — the knowledge or understanding of it — and the play as theatrical experience — the sight and sound actuality. The confusion stems not from the actual gap between the two; after all, reality has many dimensions; but rather from the spectator’s conscious dwelling on the gap, his/her attempts to remove it, his/her attempts to control the flow of time, to give it a transcendent presence in the form of a timeless understanding of what’s going on. In effect, a real time witnessing refuses to witness, afraid to lose itself in the play of presences, and demands its rational other, removed from the perceptual experience into a cognitive distance of thought. Here Stein anticipates the problematic of improvisation as real time composition, specifically the tension between compositional control and actual participation in performance, suggesting that the ‘error’ of a spectator in theatre consists in usurping this compositional control over the spectacle and refusing to enjoy fully the confusion of senses at work in witnessing the play.

The 1918 play, *An Exercise in Analysis*, in an exemplary fashion and with great performative gusto takes up the notion of the structure of drama by playing around its divisions into acts and parts, multiplying them beyond count. The play likewise engages head-on the playful confusion of senses, affects, and rationalization characteristic of radio or cinema. In the way the play elicits some form of interpretation, it dazzles the reader with a plethora of interpretive possibilities, as the play is replete with possible signifiers. One notable
characteristic in line with the model of analysis explicated in the title is its division into acts and parts that constitute its important constant, the grid of lines with all manners of colors, chords, vocalizations, amplifications, silent text, and other sounds. The structural appearance of the play seems to match and explain its title, at least if we consider that the concept of analysis implies divisibility into the minutest smallest parts. The relative simplicity at the level of structure may seem promising; one feels that the essence of the play lies in its patterning, in the dynamic relationships amongst the sections/slices of dramatic life, that one could comprehend the play without reading. These are indeed the hopes of an analyst, dreaming of transparencies and clarity. But the repetition in the structure, at times highly patterned and at others disruptive and incoherent, is likewise refraining musically, forming refrains and musical phrases that sustain the play through its tribal drumming as it were. The visual rhythm of visual interventions in the form of parts and acts mercilessly listed line after line are like the bars of music that the play is about, a piece of jazz music with a constantly shifting time signature and an undetermined number of instruments/voices. And so, inserted within that grid of acts and parts there is the distributive, active, aural element in the form of a whole reverberating multiplicity, emergent subjectivization, collective formations, disembodied affects, embodied depersonalization, and thought; a system of constant relations of difference between heterogeneous parts/particles at play, glued together to form a radio collage of voices suspended within some kind of extension-space of the page, recording studio, and/or magnetic tape akin to Frank Zappa’s *Lumpy Gravy*.

*An Exercise in Analysis* at first comes to the reader entirely as text, more specifically as seemingly random fragmentation of some text, no longer or not yet accessible. Each strip or statement comes alive for a brief moment, bringing about various possibilities of action in
the form of monologue, dialogue, stream of consciousness, description, stage directions, reflections, proverbs, sayings, thoughts, and conflicts; none of the lines, however, proceed to anything beyond a possibility, a virtuality. Though there are continuities and sequences, as in the opening frame announcing in the first person the giving up of analysis, adding one line further “I have paid my debt to society” (119), nothing prevents the reader from imagining a different personalization emerging even from the opening three lines of this possible dialogue, though likely a dialogue taken apart to be analyzed one line at a time, one by one as in analysis. The first person statement in the opening frame and the first person of the third line may be the same or may very well represent different voices of a group now emerging as parts of an exercise in analysis. The play as text transposes into a different register, that of sound, of spoken word fragments voiding text, but constantly teasing the reader with hermeneutics, appearing like a charade or mind game to be figured out, taken apart in analysis to arrive at its message or meaning, the meta meaning of the mere appearances of text-events on a page.

Though a number of characters are mentioned, periodically suggesting sustained relationships and conflicts, there is not enough continuity between the segments of the play fragmented to the point where the logic must necessarily collapse under the weight of multiple resonant and discordant possibilities, forming a series of postcards or vignettes where language is pictured in aural resonant representations. The cinematic element of montage, transposed outside theatre with its clumsy division into stage and audience, becomes a synthetic-synaesthetic oneness, more specifically a synthetic-synaesthetic arrangement or clustering not preventing further multiplications, of sounds and images coinciding.

What emerges through the print-reading of the play, if I may put it this way, is a serialization on two simultaneous planes, as a system toward the pointing of acts and parts at
times manifesting a crystalline precision in patterning, at other times fracturing into shattered glass-like splinters and noise; but the continuous staccato of the conceptual framing of acts and parts reemerging is what releases the unique individuality, albeit at times purely absurd, of each splinter, amplifying its voice, its possible vocalization as in a megaphonic reading-broadcasting that accords each line the dimension of a media message. Serialization likewise emerges at the level of dramatic action, as strips of action-drama appearing in this sound collage of possible personas, possible personalization. Who’s the first person voice in the opening frame, actually outside the grid of acts and parts, framing as it were the entire exercise? Is it the authorial voice proclaiming an analysis exercise in giving up analysis? Who are Mrs. Turner and the mother arrested for a moment in the discussion of duty and its divisions? Who is he who doesn’t like the poor in Barcelona, forming a club of “they” who don’t either and dissolving into a she emerging in the next line/section watching men swim? What’s at play is a fluid musical shifting between instrument-vocalizations, the emergence, the thisness and singularity, as analytic principles performatively enacted, dissected on the operating table of the playwright.

“Examples and examples. All examples of children. Now to ask guns. Now to ask colors” (121): the play is predicated upon the possibility and practice of a slicing up of life across all spectra into thin strips of magnetic tape for a composition by John Cage, montaging these slices randomly and through other procedures, of authorship, emotion, fleeting voice, fleeting cloud, a random sound. The principle of analysis, of taking apart to examine how the parts fit together, is at play, performatively applied as a model of performing and reading, as a method of composing from parts, composing the parts, composing apart.
“I want to know something and Miss Douglass won’t tell me” (121): the exercise is an exercise in piecing together, discerning and arranging patterns of repetition, intonation, vocalization, aural clues. Lines like “Now I understand” (121) emerge as momentary coherizations within the movement and flux of sounds, naturally emerging through the chaos of daily contact, toying with the mood of reading, testing the reader’s capacity to immerse themself in the joy of words, sounds, speech. There is a radio-cinematic feel throughout the lines stupidly printed yet emerging resonantly into the sound and action of a cinematic kind where a simultaneous personalization, the calculus of minute similarities and differences amongst visual psychological voids greeting the viewer from the screen is here a constant possibility of movement of the image, the image still remaining the building block of cinematic representation. At times the cinematic moments coalesce into crystalline movement-representation, expressing a momentary continuity. The closing lines of “call me” and “call me Ellen” return to the opening “I”, returning the reader to the problem of the noun, word, the signifier.

“What we hear in the meditations is the process of consciousness constructing speech” (Dydo 44). Not to confuse it with the person or indeed personal pronoun. Pronouns proliferate giving rise to seemingly stable, functional subject positions as in An Exercise in Analysis that stages a plethora of possible persons, a crowd of virtual selves as virtual voicings. The consciousness constructed by virtue of words and perceiving in/through words is not equivalent (does not amount to) a functional social being but is a virtual subject position capable of expressing such a social subject, a subject to come. The virtual here indexes a capacity of being constructed. The virtual is not a projection of the real, corresponding to it along specific lines, but a different dimension. We know that in some way that real people
compose Stein’s actual plays, at times amounting to a couple of lines reporting a snippet of a conversation; offering ‘imagist’ snapshots of situations, events and collisions happening in real time, but the ultimate and actually aesthetic purpose of the plays is not to represent but to construct a narrative/play/landscape reality of its own from certain human materials, human understood in a broad sense to comprise emotions, positions, relationships, speech acts, uncertainties, speculations, innuendos and allusions, attributes not organized into any particular logic or system, but surfacing rather haphazardly. This aleatory surfacing in response to affective clues from the auditory/visual shifting environment is what makes Stein’s plays virtual rather than realist. The subjects make their way into Stein’s plays as virtuals. Dydo calls them “abstractions divested of identifiable personal reference” (44).

This lack of personal sentimentalism suggests that personal identity is of little importance to Stein; something else, however, remains constantly at stake which even certain titles of Stein’s works capture explicitly: *The Making of Americans* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*. What remains at stake is a collective in its various guises. Dydo’s analysis focuses on *Stanzas* thus mostly examining the depersonalized quality of meditative writing as pertaining to this work, but the depersonalized/deterritorialized self has its initial appearance long before in the landscape plays. “There are the words, always the words that lead us on in stark and abstract constructions,” writes Dydo about *Stanzas*. “Freed of personal life and personal subject matter, the words speak with a disembodied voice that is no longer the voice of Gertrude Stein but the voice of words becoming constructions” (45). Pointing out further toward a system of words as embodied virtually in its quest “to compose exactitude, intensity and movement in words” (45).
Although the question of identity and character may be central to Stein’s writing, or maybe because of it, characters are not prefigured in terms of stable entities that populate a narrative, but they are forces, visible or not, that shape the being of the social in its emerging forms in relation to objects, knowledges, cognitions, the play of language, the movement of words and landscape. In order to retain its relevance and depth, the question of identity is engaged with a psychological, scientific, and philosophical intention, even if seemingly yielding childish disorganized scribbles. The childish indeed retains a freshness of perception of the meditative medium at work, not interested in sentiment, speculation or associative language, but actively and directly engaged with “first-hand observation in words” (Dydo 47). As a method of writing, this meditative observation through words of the buzzing world around explains the seeming simplicity in diction such that Stein’s language actively and performatively refuses to be reified into masterfully crafted poetic lines choosing instead to operate by striking the reader, at times baffling or putting them outright to sleep. To some this may seem like un-literature, but this marginalization already suggests that at stake here is more than writing; here is a writing that concerns life, not a personal life of Gertrude Stein but life as a system of sensing, experiencing, knowing, expressing.

In Dydo’s reading of Stanzas, consciousness is not the consciousness of an object of perception but a certain peopling, a place — which for Stein already suggests a dramatic staging where a multiplicity occurs. The formula to act against the centre calls for dislodging the centre of gravity from its centralizing fixed place in order to liberate individual particles — particulars — rendering their shifting configurations audible and visible — rendering them as auditory particulars, each moment of the play creating a slice of the virtual immediacy of life. Stein’s sentiment with regard to particulars anticipates the emerging ethos of the age of
immanence, theorized under different critical guises as the aesthetics of montage and mechanical production in Benjamin, the mosaic approach of McLuhan, and the rhizome model of Deleuze and Guattari, to mention three compelling images of representation.

Pages, chapters, parts, acts, and scenes, actual and merely designated as partitions or segments of a work, are virtual units; they serve the purpose of providing a sequencing, and become actual material for variations. Stein’s verbal actions are a composition or a composing in progress akin to musical units, and the process of writing resembles musical composition where text/notation is a transcript or blueprint of the auditory. Text as auditory is no longer a text or writing, though insofar as considered in its printed form, the analogies are difficult to overlook. Herein lies the mystery of nonsense in Stein, in that the verbalization only resembles textual production, though it finds its way out precisely in that form, and so finds text as an actualization of fragmented speech; Stein’s texts are exemplary spoken performance events rendered as scripted text, and when treated as text/writing alone must baffle the reader as ungrammatical, unedited, and strange.

The writing with its odd divisions into often incompatible units of text dramatizes divisibility itself, emphasizing the need, even the absolute desire, and the joy of dividing/segmenting and problematizing this very desire at the same time, as if mocking the value attached to measure, and the analysis that can presumably catch it. To be out of syntax is to be out of the filing line/toe line, and at times it demands an absolute precision of the measure/rhythm of the spoken line, as if there was nothing else there that counted there, nothing there to keep, just the melody of the line escaping its syntactical alignment, blasting its way through semantics to this constant other of meaning that resides in music.
People, characters, individuals, entities, groups, designated as personal pronouns and proper names or merely alluded to as orientations/directions of speech, mentioned though never actually encountered, are themselves peopled. To each belongs its own but at the same time different, distinct population that constitutes its selfsameness. Because of this dynamic quality that resides in people as characters populating Stein’s works (many of whom are actual people on Stein’s mind at the time of writing), characters cannot be treated as formal narrative elements, as there is no narrative outside the variegated movement of characters/personas/personalities. The same applies to Stein’s use of landscape as a peculiar take on the narrative/dramatic setting. In its presentation (description) and deployment (operations), landscape cannot be detached from character, plot or theme as standard analytical constants of narratives or drama. It’s because they are dynamic aspects of the meditative composition, intensifiers or tensors that populate the field of statement/page with their energy lines; they are forces directly involved in the production/staging of the piece at hand, voices of the text.

Useful Knowledge and Geographical History of America continue Stein’s interest in landscape writing as a form of material presence — immediacy — of language, perception, thought, “systematically smashing every connotation that words have ever had” (as William Carlos Williams put it in his 1931 essay) and opting for a panoramic, simultaneous, kinetic, and ahistorical description of place (Vanskike). The standpoint of “sight and sound,” Stein’s explicit description of her interest in theater, is applied to the representation of the world rendered synthetically and synaesthetically in “its whole extension” (Alfandary) as drama in the real sense of action, and so phenomenologically rather than tragically, or “postdramatically” as Andrzej Wirth proposes in his reading of Stein’s plays, arguing that the
key conceit of Stein’s theatre lies in dissolving the notion of figure as an ‘imagist’ic rendering of an object or thing. Put another way, this “postdramatic” approach to theatre breaks down the model of figure-ground as the essence of dramatic representation or staging, and can be understood as a manifestation of ‘the scandal of cubism.’

In her ‘theoretical’ essay “Plays,” Stein formulates her theory of the medium of theatre as potential space for textual experiment with voices, as poetics of word and its acoustic formation, as an auditory statement. The peculiar segmenting tactic used in her theatre creates a radical break from the established taxonomy of the social world around, imposing a particular understanding of this world in terms of its patterns of coherence, and offering the representational resonance of the world of people and things in its immediate presentation. Stein’s landscape plays are audio-visual documents, documenting the essence of what happened, the essence of events as immediate resonant presences, and at the same time as something recorded and filmed, spliced and edited into a complex audio-visual composition. They read like Jean-Luc Godard’s experimental films, through a speeding up and slowing down of images and voices, demonstrating a relative independence but also the interpenetration of media of sound and sight, sometimes coinciding and sometimes splitting apart.

What is particularly useful in thinking about Stein in relationship to cubism is that the essence of cubism came from trying to show various viewpoints or various times in a scene simultaneously. In her landscape plays this multiple point of view relates to cubism in the way it shows the essence of things and positions them in a landscape while showing more than one aspect at once. She explains citing the example of the *Four Saints* opera:
Anyway I did write *Four Saints* an Opera to be Sung and I think it did almost what I wanted, it made a landscape and the movement in it was like movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep in time. I also wanted it to have the movement of nuns very busy and in continuous movement but as placid as a landscape has to be because after all the life in a convent is the life of a landscape, it may look excited as a landscape does sometimes look excited but its quality is that a landscape if it ever did go away would have to go away to stay. (82)

The landscape plays are cinematic portraits of movement, dramatic media renditions of slices of life. This is the writing of difference, recording the audio-visual displacement of word and self as center, creating audio-visual statements by intensifying and fragmenting dramatic writing. Stein employs here her own kind of alienation effect, alienating the readers from the text, forcing them to turn on the radio and gramophone to accompany the reading process, the way Glenn Gould would practice his Bach, with a radio on while singing to himself to deliberately disrupt his sight reading. Sound collages of social geography as virtual readings of life take centre stage providing readings from, or as Cage would call it, writing through the book of life, the market, the parlor, the street, the kitchen, and the bedroom as resonant spaces where words and language are recorded, returning via texts to their pulsating radio-audio-visual life.

The reconfiguration of the figure as conveniently contrasted with ground is a well-known theme of modernist painting initiated by impressionism and radically advanced by cubist, surrealist, and abstract expressionist experiments. The innovation of Stein consists in applying this problematic to literary representations whose obvious surface materials are printed words, words supplanted, and in a sense voided, by the system of language as the ground of coherence of a merely typographic image. The meaning of a text resides in a
continuous copresence or interplay of the immanence of the word on a page and the transcendent system of its decoding. This interplay is what makes reading become something other than just an act of reading, for example an aesthetic or cognitive process. Stein’s ‘sight and sound’ approach, however, stresses the perceptual immediacy of theatrical experience, the actual experience of text, as at the same time an audible word, a figure/character, and a staging. Sight and sound are simultaneous elements of a performance. Stein insists on this simultaneity in a literal sense as the only reality of text available, and so removes the invisible/inaudible dimension of performance, its blueprint, as a presumed reality behind the experiential appearance of it.

1.4. From Landscape to Luminescence in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*

Stein’s 1938 opera-play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* can be read as an exemplary text in the feminist visionary poetics project. In this section, I extend this line of reading offering a media analysis that aims at a gender-media hybrid interpretation of the text where issues concerning the politics of gender as personal and legal body meet the spectral embodiments of a mediated self. My take is in line with the overall goal of the thesis to examine the interface of sound and text, bending the ear to the multiple performative auditoriness — the voice — of the text itself.

In *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* the medium of the word as text-print and as ultimate communiqué of landscape plays goes through another level of mediation in need of a multiple embodied form, as a multivocality of a dialogic readership somewhat characteristic of opera librettos. In the context of this problematization, the opera dramatizes the contest between a singular vision of the eye-centre of the typographic superman, engaging the question of artificial light as a philosophical problem of the mind via audio and visual
operations of the media system, a cinematext/operatext creating multiple vocalizations of the
voice and the pleasures of cinematic, kinetic oral performance and understanding. Through its
inherent audio rituality, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* as exemplary auditory text lifts off
the page, sounding out as a virtual multiplex of simultaneous vocalizations.

In “Would a viper…” Shirley Neuman offers valuable comments on Stein’s opera and
its theme, reminding us that as both character and a type/theme, Faust represents the angst of
knowledge, power and mastery. In the context of the Faustian theme, light symbolizes a
theatrical artifice, and as such is a part of staging. The premise of the play is a careful
reworking of the Faustian myth, being essentially consistent with the Faustian tradition,
though playing around with it. Neuman claims that Stein’s take on the theme is a hybrid blend
of two unrelated works, on one hand Ferruccio Busoni’s last unfinished opera *Doktor Faust,*
and on the other Oliver Wendell Holmes’s horror tale, *Elsie Venner: A Romance of Destiny,*
offering that “Busoni’s suggestion that Faustus, however damned, could by an act of will be
life-giving, particularly when combined with her associations of snakebite with Holmes’s
earlier revision of the doctrine of Original Sin in *Elsie Venner,* is crucial to Stein’s libretto”
(175). Although a detailed comparative analysis of these three texts is beyond the purview of
my argument here, I begin by summarizing notable points of Neuman’s article.

The article addresses the problem of identity, questioning Faustus’s entity (*what am I*)
versus Marguerite Ida’s identity (*who am I*): “the serious debate about knowing that Stein’s
characters are about to enact in their struggle with one another” (176). Stein’s turn to Faustus,
according to Neuman, represents concerns over the divided personhood of a public persona
following Stein’s tour of the U.S. Neuman brings up evidence of Stein’s struggle with the
identity of her central female character and counterpart to Faustus, quoting her notebooks:
“indications of the growing importance of the twin in Stein’s conception of the novel [Ida] and of her linking of the twin’s creation to a moment of public recognition” (178). And so, the immediate context for the unrealized opera is the double identity of Ida from the novel with that title, a problem likewise addressed in two of her shorter works, “A Portrait of Daisy” and the play “Lucretia Borgia” (both written around 1938). Neuman reminds us in one of the footnotes that the early version of Ida appeared in the Boudoir Companion: Frivolous, Sometimes Venomous Thoughts on Men, Morals and Other Women (footnote 21). She argues in Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights the doubleness of Ida serves a different function than in the novel. It is not a split personality along the personal versus public self line, but a reinforcement of sorts: a double identity and a doubly protective layer protecting a new multiple entity: “two names are a character’s way of not losing her personality in the face of the public’s attempts to appropriate her and to assimilate her into the single public name” (181). This detailed biographical reading offers another relevant comment: “The double name has been playfully doubled as a result of the liberating surge of creativity in early May which led Stein to a means of characterizing a resistance to becoming a public ‘one’” (181).

With regard to the initial referencing of Holmes’s gothic tale, Neuman observes that Stein’s interest in the theological argument concerning the question of knowledge and the biblical snakebite shifts to Hollywood cinema’s publicity and the loss of self over to the public cult of celebrity, offering that “part of the theological argument of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights involves an extended allusion to matriarchal religion” (183). Indeed matriarchal iconography in the form of mother goddesses associated with snakes, symbolizing both creativity and destruction, power and poison, knowledge and death, are visibly featured in the opera.
The feminist aspect of the opera-play in Neuman’s view lies in inverting the story of Original Sin. She underscores that the doubling of the name of the heroine occurs at a time when she’s holding the viper. Here, she points out the rich symbolism of all four female names that make up the singular multiple agency/subjectivity of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. The theological theme is tied up with the theme of ritual sacrifice. In order to recover his soul, Faustus is advised by Mephisto to kill anything. He kills the boy and the dog to regain his human self, tired of and disappointed with his supernatural knowledge/power alienating him from the humans. Neuman concludes: “Her opera links technological knowledge, sexual knowledge and the knowledge of the crowd to ask what happens when the viper, symbol of the ‘temptation’ of all three and of their simultaneous healing and destructive capacities, changes hands” (190).

Turning to McLuhan as my media guide, here in particular with regard to the relationship between print and orality, his insights on print in contrast to auditory cultures of sound resonate through what Neuman calls “the mutual exclusiveness of their [Faustus versus Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel’s] two kinds of knowledge” (177). Revolving thematically around the female vision of continuity with nature in a world threatened by technology, Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights likewise offers a visual allegory and a dramatic staging of an epistemic rift between sight and sound as two paradigms of knowledge and cognition, two modes of perception — sensibility — coming to a clash as a dramatic element, the action, of the opera.

At stake in this gender-media reading is a battle between two competing figurations, two body organs and embodiments embraced in a utopian call for a transforming power that makes possible their epistemic synthesis. Stein’s play can be read alongside McLuhan’s claim
concerning the emergence of electric technology as a return to the world of integrated
sensoria, simultaneity and continuity, something McLuhan often refers to as the ‘acoustic
space’ characteristic of tribal, pre-print social organization. McLuhan’s argument proposes
that while a radical extension of sight produces specialized knowledge that detribalizes it
through print and print technologies, common sense, as sensus communis, retribalizes
knowledge by recovering and bringing other senses into the fold of knowledge practice. This
is a sort of Stein’s own Archeology of Knowledge in a dramatic opera staging. Specifically in
Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, a peculiarly disguised kind of special character, the electric
technology, exposes and literally brings to light the regime of print. Print, as McLuhan
reminds us in Understanding Media, operates by fragmenting and segmenting: “What had
begun with the alphabet as a separation of the multiple gestures and sights and sounds in the
spoken word, reached a new level of intensity, first with the woodcut and then with
typography. The alphabet left the visual component as supreme in the word” (160), thus
producing a culture where even spoken language operates primarily as a visual mode.

Stein’s opera dramatizes seeing as a perceptual-cognitive-communicational cluster:
‘seeing’ in its common uses as sense perception, understanding, and affirmation, all three
simultaneously and indissolubly. Seeing extends the actual eye, supplanting it with the whole
complex apparatus, but by the same token detaches itself from the eye as a proper or natural
organ of perception. Peeled off the face, the eye multiplies like in some surrealist image,
reterritorializing on other body parts and organs, unexpectedly and unpredictably, or leaving
the body altogether, to gape at it from a dollar bill or advertising poster. The eye of the
observant onlooker has been twisted by a cubist image and a collage artist along with their
proliferating avatars, which has forced it to come out of its socket to look at an object
simultaneously from different angles, questioning the thingness of a thing. In Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, Stein takes note of this social, cultural, and aesthetic fact, singing an opera about it. There is a meditative depth on the nature and complexity of the modern world at work here, penned in the style of a serious comedy of errors, with erring eyes, aiming gazes, gaping looks, crisscrossing glances, ailing views — full of watching, electrified by it: animated and shell-shocked. Her operatic panopticon offers no fixed point of view constituted by, and constitutive of, perspective, that could provide a legitimate character-person a comfortable vista of seeing, instead serving up to the listener-reader a plurality of points, a pixilated republic of watching as the staging for a particularity to occur and partake in the feast. The inward, as in taking an object of perception in for cognitive-readerly mastication and digestion, turns outward, onto the world.

Stein’s operatic take on Faustus coincides with the emergence of Heidegger’s philosophy of Dasein, which reconfigures the epochal vision of a phenomenologist to bracket off the world and peek into the essences of things, the essence of each particular thing as dissociated from another, in a dream of building a world of understanding out of individuated pixels of pure knowing. This particular coincidence signifies just that, a kind of synchrony in the evolving world rather than being a reflection of Stein’s interest in philosophical investigations. The world is already in the air, so to speak; Heidegger gestures in this direction courageously and resolutely with his poetic syntax and systematic philosophical sampling, far from being a discoverer of it. In a way, all he has to do is close his analytic-philosophical eye and open the poetic one to see this. For the world is not only a material multiple presence hosting Dasein — that being there whose mode of being resides in there, but an ongoing project and theme of a modernist. In this second sense, the world is born, no doubt among
other locations and circumstances, at that precisely indeterminate moment when a certain miss Brown makes a cameo appearance in Virginia Woolf’s essay on modernism, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” in the meditative pleasure of Woolf’s immaculate writerly conception. The twisted eye, in short, sings the other way around: the world comes first as the ten thousand things. Moreover, and still more complexly and comically, this particular coming of the world, a becoming of world as the always already preceding axiom of knowing, deconstructs the model of sequential understanding with its firsts, seconds, and thirds. The conceptualization of the world as the ground ecology of knowledge, as its possibility in the first place, interrogates the insequence behind the linear ordering of particles of understanding.

Stein’s tactic of clustering or compounding, as in acts and parts of An Exercise in Analysis, offers specific advantages; first, it relates to repetition as a unique trope of writing initially meant to comment on the lived reality of people during the time of working on her monumentally unreadable The Making of Americans. That ‘they repeat’ announces itself there as part of the narrative in progress reflected in its own reflectivity as a striking discovery concerning the psychological-social essence of people, animating her writing-research project and offering the readers Stein’s signature use of repetition. Repetition, Stein reminds us, does not mechanically reproduce the same but rather breaks apart the same into a diversity of different sames, a system of permutations which renders the same forever different, however minimally.

I stressed earlier Stein as a thinker. In that guise, Stein returns in Faustus to the theme of knowledge. As a figuration of knowledge, the central presence, Faustus represents the quest for knowledge at an abstract, metaphysical level, clashing with the mythical ground-
matrix; for Faust in particular, it is the quest for power and depth of insight associated with
power emanating from knowledge: a case of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. But insofar as
insight is what knowledge seeks, is there a clarity as to what this insight *insights* into? Into the
nature of matter, biological cell, linguistic code? This question remains comically in the dark,
outside the realm of articulatable statements. Faustian knowledge is ultimately of a
metaphysical orientation, emanating down to material things and daily practice, as evidenced
by his ability to treat the snakebite. But deep down the orientation and nature of this
knowledge is unknown, precisely insofar as it is power. Which makes Faustus an ambiguous
character, exhausted from the start by his own mastery, overwhelmed by his own
understanding, unable to keep up with it. Hence, the power/knowledge quest dramatized in
the play is also a quest for language as a technology — a technique — of information and
communication, a language that can articulate knowledge, give it a certain shape, make sense
of it, and so make it transparent and transferable to others. The hopeless operetta-style naïve
lines of the libretto dramatize this language orientation, coming visibly short of sophistication,
and yet yielding a strange branch of aphoristic insight through a simplicity that charms the
reader. What, given that knowledge/power is at the centre of gravity here, pulling all
characters towards its source, could be the proper language of knowledge? What kind of
statement expresses knowledge proper? Is it a nursery rhyme, a common expression, a poetic
line, or a mathematical formula? No matter how seemingly complex, particularly so with
regards to the unreadable statements of specialized jargon of science, language operates as a
cliché, a snapshot that registers back to/at the source or matrix from which it originated,
within a system of its specialized statements — discourse. As such, to borrow from McLuhan,
it cannot avoid revealing its sensory bias.
Let’s pause for a moment to clarify this metaphoric chaos. What I am talking about is synaesthesia, not as it applies to a person confused about his/her sense perceptions, however, but as it applies to knowledge. The question is: what is the sensory bias of knowledge? The question may strike one as unclear and confusing at first, but it makes perfect sense in the context of affect theory where knowledge can be theorized as a complex of percepts — various sensorial data encoded. In this sense, it is comprehensible to claim that the sensory bias of knowledge in the modern period dating back to Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes increasingly leans toward the statement. The drama of knowledge then takes place at the level of the statement and the drama of language has played across of a range of seemingly disconnected theories stretching from Rudolf Carnap’s logical investigations of the syntax of science, which evacuated words altogether as inadequate and replaced them by a system of ‘logical’ squiggles, to semi-intentional mock investigations of syntax of the so-called language poets who under their L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E banner, interrogated the word equally fervently.

The mythic biblical dimension of the play is lampooned, but this comic treatment doesn’t mean it is being dismissed out of hand as inadequate. The play after all treats inadequacies; the central inadequacy, as I demonstrate, concerns the self as a subject subjected — sentenced — to knowledge. The mythic is not dismissed but rather parodied, incorporated in order to be critically examined. And so, the play on the one hand concerns the shape of a statement that articulates knowledge proper, and likewise captures the sensory bias of the mythopoeic, as inadequate increasingly difficult to engage discursively as it is, and overcoded by the electric/radio/atomic paradigm entering the world scene where all characters are left at a loss as to how to negotiate their entities/identities.
Stein’s opera, which offers relevant insight into the destructive nature of technology at the break of World War II, resonates with Heidegger’s introspective take on the ravages of the war in response to the nuclear threat in his essay on the question of technology. Both embrace technology as at once menacing/threatening reality and a poetic phenomenon par excellence. In Stein, this clash between the menace and poetics results in an emphasis on visible phenomena, that otherwise fall outside the scope of experience and knowledge, here coming to the fore in a dramatic farce, comically insisting on the seriousness of its subject matter.

Right on the surface is the rift between the all-inclusive sensoria of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and the single vision of Faustus, who represents the striving for light and is in some way the source of it, at the centre of knowledge production. Yet Faustus is not only an exemplary figure of Enlightenment but also represents the ritual murder at the core of it. The play engages the new avenues of understanding and knowing emerging from the electric technologies of communication sweeping the world over, announcing a shift of paradigms in the larger, print-oriented master-narrative at work in conceptualizing the world. As a utopian vision of the end of patriarchy, phallogocentrism replaced by the model of inclusion grounded in a multitudinous community, it continues Stein’s earlier experiments with syntactically open systems where subjectivity, identity, and oneness are reconfigured. The electric light, not a real character but a kind of leading figuration, is a pictograph that blinds Faustus, its counterpart; together they are the embodied single vision of print and logic. The play projects this odd artifact of light, a blazing and blinding light in the centre with a glow around where shapes gradually emerge and a story takes place and where the logic and understanding represented by the centre are challenged.
My first reaction to Gertrude Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights was to recall the light bulb suspended in the midst of darkness and strangely illuminated by a Moebius glow on the front cover of the first McGraw-Hill paperback edition of Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media. The book treats media as extensions of the body, claiming that new technologies affect first and foremost the body, altering its sense ratios and patterns of perception, only gradually to involve concepts and beliefs. The cover offers a visual metaphor of knowledge, pointing toward technologies of vision and toward mediation. A light bulb on a black background also represents McLuhan’s interest in the concept of ground, itself a trope of his epistemological quest, but the two work together as figure and ground, which is to say as an image, as if forced into a cartoon representation. In his argument throughout Understanding Media, McLuhan is concerned with print as an extension of sight, and as such generating a particular form of cognition and knowledge, his mission having to do with “rous[ing] typographic man from his trance” and delivering him, in the words of William Blake, from “single vision and Newton’s sleep” (195).

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights must strike one as a rather lucid text by comparison with the more experimental landscape plays. Part of its lucidity has to do with Stein’s play inscribing itself within a story whose thematic considerations are well known to the reader so that its subtext can serve throughout as a model for her reworking of the myth; also because the dramatic material of the opera is organized in a fairly straightforward manner, with stage directions separated from the dialogues, and the dialogues clearly ascribed to individual characters; and finally because the language employed is simple, at times mimicking ordinary speech and throughout utilizing “an enormous inventory of primitive incantations, riddles, jingles, chants, and echoes of popular songs” (Dydo 596). In concert with Stein’s ongoing
preoccupation with identity, the play dramatizes the emergence of a new subjectivity: the embodied subject at the centre of rational control and power that characterizes the Enlightenment project from the early Renaissance to the peak of modernity that here is metamorphosed into a multiple, decentred, and nomadic self.

Faustus is a figure of rational abstraction and detachment, of the quest for abstract knowledge dissociated from its experience and the human environment, extending this environment in ways that threaten the essence of the human as part of nature. He embodies uneasily, aware of the limitations, the Cartesian subject who must claim knowledge, information, and understanding as ways of propelling him into being. His allegiance to reason, whose ultimate figuration is print as a technology of information, is what both alienates him from the social and confers upon him a great deal of power. “I am the only one who can know what I know” (598). At the same time, Faustus also represents the crisis of metaphysics, the coming to an end of the era of mythical involvement with forces of nature and the emergence of the scientific paradigm that favors specialized knowledge and mechanization over mythical-poetic depths of understanding. A Narcissus bending over a pool of electric light — “Bathe me / says Doctor Faustus / Bathe me / In the electric light” (599) — seduced by its speed and the promise of omniscience in the form of pure information, reason, and logic, he is the double of the electric speed that “reveals the lines of force operating from Western technology in the remotest areas of bush, savannah, and desert” (McLuhan 16). And yet the embodied nature of the modern subject marks at the same time the emergence of new discursive possibilities, of new knowledge formations and epistemes, never fully realized within the paradigm of mechanical production. Stein follows in the footsteps of another visionary, William Blake who, again in the words of McLuhan, “saw Newton and
Locke and others as hypnotized Narcissus types quite unable to meet the challenge of mechanism” (25). The electric technology at the tip of Faustus’s fingers — but never fully grasped — offers to bring back the mythical way of life, a sense of community, empathy and awareness represented in the play by a peculiar new subject, that of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. Through this new female subjectivity, Stein can also revisit the myth of origins that lies at the heart of Western civilization.

As an allegory, the play dramatizes the clash of the two paradigms, of mechanization with its fragmenting — detribalizing — agent of print, and the electric technology with its synthesizing — retribalizing — forces of speed and total involvement, or, in the words of McLuhan, “the ultimate conflict between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception and organization” (16). The Gutenberg technology (Gutenberg has his quarters just around the corner from Faustus) with its repeatability and irrelevant precision at the service of specialized knowledge, with its stress on visual information responsible for a three-dimensional world of perspective and fixed point of view, is a Cartesian dream of reducing philosophy and selfhood to precise mathematical form (161). In contrast, Stein turns on a kind of utopian glow, offering a forward projection and a visionary peek into the dark recesses of time and myth, and renouncing the false promise of Enlightenment. Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights is a battle over vision and its technologies, ultimately a battle over figuration where in contrast with the uniform space of perspective emerges a discontinuous space of tactile perception.

From the beginning of the play we encounter Faustus in agony, concerned about himself and the truth, about knowledge, deception, error, in pain over what he knows, what can be known, what is the source of knowledge and certainty and whether they are of any
importance. “What do I care there is no here nor there. What am I” (597). He invokes the devil and requires his presence, and yet he curses Mephisto and the fact that he had to offer his soul and sign the contract. Time is of the essence here. The pact with the devil, as Faustus is well aware, is about compressing time, of being able to do the work of God, that of creating light, within a human life time: “if I had not been in a hurry and if I had taken my time I would have known how to make white electric light and day-light and night-light and what did I do I saw you miserable devil I saw you and I was deceived and I believed miserable devil I thought I needed you” (597).

Whereas Faustus is introduced in the typical posture of a hero, “standing at the door of his room, with his arms up” (596), fixed in place and symbolically pointing to heaven, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel enters the scene only gradually, in a series of mediations, as a hearsay: “I hear her / he says” (601). She’s a distant murmur breaking into a song, invisible, immaterial, mysterious; she is what he said and what he imagined, what he anticipated and longed for, arriving to sing the glory of his prowess, “to sing a song / All about / every light” (601). She’s a chorus of voices singing in the distance, announced and announcing herself, coming into being in a glow of light, a multiplicity and a chora. She’s the one of whom the electric lights have spoken and told him so (602), and she already confuses him, makes him stutter, “and tell and tell and tell and tell and tell, oh hell” (602). She is cursed and denounced from the beginning, “She will not be says Doctor Faustus never never never” (602). Yet she is what might be, as a modality, at least for as long as the chorus insists. In an echo of the “a rose is a rose is a rose,” in the arousal and the rising of language that is her birth, “her name is her name is her name...” (602).
Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel has no fixed name and location. Her name throughout the play is a source of confusion. Difficult to pronounce with the fluidity expected, difficult to see and conceptualize, she forces into the text a grammatical error and so inserts herself into the system of social relations by omitting the name of her father/husband, thus spoiling the smooth text of patriarchy like an inkblot. Her location is likewise a source of confusion, producing an anxiety even to herself. For she cannot be located properly within the Cartesian system of coordinates but rather remains in the all-encompassing here, spilling over boundaries, in the wild woods where “animals wild animals are everywhere” (603). In contrast with the fixed positionality of Faustus, who is at home in both the public and the private world, she is simply here, in no particular place, outside civilization, a savage with no room, chair or carpet to her name, unable to grasp herself and undefined, a shimmer of shifting pronouns.

All this, however, is about to change, and all this gives her an extraordinary mobility; that she is not there in fact enables her to move, gives purpose to her being. Whereas Faustus is already immobilized, caught up in contractual obligations with the devil, fixed in his role of a patriarch, doctor, scientist, seduced by the light and blinded by it, blinded by his ego and unable to see, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel knows how to use her senses; she is in touch with her sensorium: a body learning to walk, see, experience. “She stands up with her hands at her sides she opens and closes her eyes and opens them again” (603). Stein gives us here a sort of poetic account of how the sense of sight works, the gist of which is what we already know: light is not equivalent to seeing. Light, as McLuhan will say only a few years later, is not the content of another medium; it is pure mediation where the external and internal merge and where the subject and object are no longer distinguishable. This inherent
multi-perceptual merging is what Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel can discover only from a distance, in the glow of light, so to speak, rather than at the heart of it, only at the margins where things can be perceived because only there, at the edges of official narratives, they are not obliterated by the blaze emanating from the centre. “She says / In the distance there is daylight and near to there is none” (603).

Visibility and information, seeing as a way of knowing, repeatedly referred to in the play with its “I see” may be correlated but they are not equivalent. The manners of seeing indeed come into conflict; they both need to be negotiated and both are social practices. Light is of no use at the centre or near it, something Faustus, claiming the centre for himself, is not able to see; the centre in fact endangers, perhaps even destroys both the object and the subject, as well as the eye that mediates between the two. None, in the line quoted above, can be taken to mean both nothing and no one, and so the line reads as there is no one/nothing near to there (at the centre where Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is not yet). Light, on the other hand, does work in the distance where she stands. By patiently opening and closing her eyes, she is able to realize that seeing a thing requires both looking and not looking at the same time; it’s a set of dancing steps, a complex technology that extends across an array of phenomena, from the optic nerve to social practices that already implicate individual bodies in the collective visual register, in social ways of looking and seeing. Thus she is able gradually to see everything: the green of the woods, the wild woods everywhere, the horror of her own position, of being here without a chair or carpet, and the fact that she has no social voice proper, no position from which she could speak: “it is not well that I could tell what there is to tell what there is to see” (603).
The task for Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is to get from here to there, something that looks easy in print but is far more complicated in reality. For here and there are not simply points in space that can be connected by a line but rather plateaus that represent different levels of organization of their signifying materials, different regimes of meaning. In order to arrive there, Stein suggests, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel has to fall into text and subsequently contain it by reclaiming and subverting the biblical myth of origin. This is an extraordinary moment in Stein, totally uncharacteristic of her writing so otherwise committed to non-referentiality. In Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, however, Stein herself, via the decentred, nomadic, and lesbian subject of her female double becomes a veritable trickster figure. This is Stein’s ploy — the play is the ploy — for a female character/figure/subject to be in patriarchy and not get incorporated. Hence she secures for herself a position of being permanently otherwise, both here and sort of there, in direct relation to phallogocentrism, yet dancing and singing through it. The initial “I hear her” of Faustus brings her in, but she is not of it, not until she can physically cross the threshold and enter the room occupied by Faustus by tricking him into believing that she too can now make the light and go to hell, and where she can be on display, seen by other women already approaching on the other side of a glass window. By unmasking the Bible and turning herself into the Virgin Mary, she is able to transit from the oral to the visual without getting blinded by the light. The snake that bit/stung her dies, and she brandishes it over her head and transforms it into Mr. Viper, which symbolically puts an end to the knowledge practice of Faustus, with the instrument of power and control, speculum, slipping out of Faustus’s hands. That knowledge practice of visuality is exposed as folly because it cannot deliver its promise of Enlightenment. What is delivered instead thanks to the Virgin Mary and immaculate
conception are babies/masterpieces, masterpieces that in a peculiarly Stein-like fashion are no longer distinguishable from laundry notes.

In the closing lines, the artificial viper, Mr. Viper, civilized and contained, stripped of all biblical horror, no more than a little plastic gadget or dildo, is called out by the little boy and the little girl, two meager voices seeping through the dark. The play ends in the dark with Faustus gone to hell and with him the Enlightenment, Cartesian fixed subject, as well as logocentrism and its attendant anxiety over deception, truth, and error. It’s a telling way of ending the play about the quest for light as a Cartesian trope of clarity, precision, and reason. In the end, we are able to hear the echo of Faustus’s own words from Act 1, “what after all is the use of light, you can see just as well without it, you can go around just as well without it you can get up and go to bed just as well without it” (597). Darkness brings back the night with its mystery and depth, but it also suggests that light could be of service, domesticated as it were, with its different degrees and spectra controlled by an electric switch.

In McLuhan’s terms, darkness is paradigmatic of ‘cool media,’ which require participation, involvement and a balanced sensorium, and produce a kind of cooling effect. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan writes, “intensity or high definition engenders specialism and fragmentation in living as in entertainment, which explains why any intense experience must be ‘forgotten,’ ‘censored,’ and reduced to a very cool state before it can be ‘learned’ or assimilated” (24). In her reworking of the legend of Faustus as the dominion of print-knowledge couched in the cloak of the biblical myth of original sin, Stein urges us to assimilate the myth and assimilate the medium. Stein’s ecstatic “feeling of everybody” of theatre erupts here into a resonant rejection of print and its fragmented, specialized knowledge, offering instead a multitude of voices, the voice of people, a population, a
spreading difference and a distribution of differences in the face of the growing interest in the
cult of leadership and individualism of the late 1930’s, where crucial media battles were
taking place alongside formative historical events.

In the course of her philosophical investigations as evidenced by a range of different
texts, from lectures to operas and plays for the purpose of production as well as experimental
texts not intended for staging, and other experimental writing, Stein adopts cubism as a
manner of bringing into her writing a practice of resonant simultaneous thinking akin to
meditation, which by means of different levels of associations, associative resonances in the
form of word play, insistence, repetition, and rhythm initiates her sound-texts, oral
performance scriptures, as vocalizations, or vocal auditory events: the auditory text.

I stressed earlier in the chapter the relations of the ordinary “one thing and the other
thing” in Stein. The innovative and experimental in Stein, what connects her deeply with the
most interesting avant-garde writing and thinking of modernity, is just one remove from a trite
sentimental personal art composed of domestic imagery and events, revolving around the
kitchen and vegetable patch, peppered with domestic joys and little daily dramas, what
Deleuze and Guattari refer to in the passage quoted earlier as a “micropolitics of the social
field.” But it’s not the subject matter that boxes Stein’s art into this or that school or style, as
such matters never determine the orientation of thought anyway. Reduced to mere subject
matters, art becomes a caricature of itself, a trivial and useless activity, failing to provide any
relevant insight into the real and turned into a fetish by collectors, art custodians and
corporate funding agencies who dissociate it from the flow of life and place it behind glass,
sancitfying it as a classic. On the other hand, the fuzzy line where ordinary life matters blend
with sophistication and style is where the populist potential of art lives to the fullest its social paradoxes and clichés.

This populist potential of art I further explore in conjunction with the claim about the auditory as a turn toward sound. The populist here does not refer to this or that content of literature or music, for example rock music versus classical, but rather as a form of attention given to words and language in their sound orientation, as auditory phenomena, as the clicks, beeps, scratches, and gurgles of Cage, the spastic belching of silences and speech in Beckett, the hiccup, snorkel, and burps of Zappa, eventually in a digital recording preserved for eternity. The populist, the ‘social energy’ of listening/hearing, has an ear for the sound of words. How this ear hears and understands manifests in the social ways of listening and hearing as ways of being in the world.
2. 1. Composition, Voice, and the Multitude in Beckett

In “The Exhausted,” his critical essay on Beckett’s television plays, Gilles Deleuze elaborates at length on the concept of exhaustion — in contrast to tiredness — as an intentional activity aiming at undoing, exhausting, or finishing something off, as an image of Beckett himself as the writer, thinker, and avant-garde experimenter. The title of the essay resonates with the spirit of the Deleuzian reading of Beckett’s late drama in terms of his undoing of language, self, and writing, by consistently exhausting them. “[O]ne remains active, but for nothing... one is exhausted by nothing” (153). In a way, Deleuze constructs his own Beckett, offering a critical reading that draws on the understanding of the essence of Beckett’s oeuvre: as testing the limits of language and aiming at creating a language purified, free of words, an image-language.

Following the Deleuzian reading of the concept of exhaustion in Beckett, I examine how in Beckett thematic considerations of exhaustion are related to language and writing, the subject and the social, and the voice and sense; and how they affect the concept, practice, and shape/form of Beckett’s composition, the nature of language employed to this purpose as well as the voices, the multitude, as parts or components of his writing. I think of Beckett’s model of composition as an ‘auditory textual discourse’ and take it, after Stein, as a distribution of points, lines, relationships, and differences on a ‘plane of immanence’. I stress the distributory and auditory aspect of Beckett’s composition-text as indeed manifesting an ‘audial’ dimension of writing, a writing of the degree zero, dramatized as a murmuring that approximates the void, nothing, and selflessness. With his auditory writing/text as a ‘plane of
immanence’ with a distribution of points and lines on it — as in the spreading difference of Stein — Beckett concerns himself with the aspects of language-discourse and attendant knowledge formations beyond the purview of rational language, such that boring holes through language (as Beckett proclaimed doing) might offer one a chance to get beyond propositional logic and the syntax of sentences, to create instead a flow of utterance as a non-hierarchized, non-vertical constant murmuring of innumerable selves, manifested poetically as a continuous presence or co-presence of sound, text, and voice.

Beckett engages with, and to some degree in fact influences a similar line of inquiry of Foucault’s concerning discourse, knowledge formations, and power as a cluster of related social historical developments. Applying Foucauldian terminology to an examination of Beckett’s texts allows one to discern that through the logic of the statement as a distribution of audial clues, Beckett creates a sound composition, a musical work scripted on the page but ultimately requiring an auditory reading, a reading that makes music, even if only a virtual-void music, and has sound and/or music as its subtext. This shift of paradigms toward the statement as an auditory co-presence has a direct impact on the shape of the composition and the understanding of composition as an immanent type of structure, a processual structure evolving through a sedimentation or unfolding from within its own flow. Such a composition is structured by auditory logic, the logic of embodied co-presence, the present continuous. Consequently affected are the compositional components, the forces constitutive of the composition, namely the voice and the multiple-schizo identity residing in its proliferations.

There are two musics in Beckett, ultimately merging into one. There are sounds as obviously indicating something though primarily providing noise, an excess of speech full of redundancies, circling, fragmented syntax, seemingly dissociated from a particular body; and
there are silences indicating nothing, though again bringing no respite to the noise, that is so much more amplified for the attempts to silence it. Silence certainly preoccupies Beckett; somehow, it embodies his desire to silence the mind as well as quiet the world at large, even when he’s already minimized it to the smallest possible amount of space, light, and agency. Yet his exhausted language, while removing the logic of propositions with its schematic calculus of truths, yields a different element of writing and language, something musical, with an affective and intelligible immediacy, with presence as its mode of operation. Music is here to be understood broadly as comprising a variety of musical styles as employed in Beckett’s plays, but also as sounds themselves, a language on the way to becoming music, even if through nothing and silence.

Beckett’s textual composing is an ongoing immanent presence of voice and expression ahead of logic and sense, a release of sound vibrations marking a self of sorts. This is a sort of language, a language as a possibility of thought and speech, a possibility of self, where there is an ear for a sonorous phenomenon in strange ways related to, though often physically detached from, its articulating body, a language that asserts its existential presence, and opens up complex interrelationships among sound, text, and the body. Silence is part of that language. Silence, then, is not just a negative space where nothing happens, where the voice has no place and does not exist; it’s a space of listening and of expression, a space that allows for having something to say, of struggling and failing to do so, and in the words of Beckett, of the obligation to express while having nothing to say, where silence erupts comically and critically, formulating a fascinating philosophical conundrum. As many critics (Mary Bryden, Deborah Weagel, Franz Maier, Chris Ackerley, Maria Kager) show, this tangle of interrelated lines of inquiry related to auditory writing is taken up by Beckett systematically and
consistently throughout his oeuvre. When Beckett declares in a letter to Alan Schneider in the 1970s that his work concerns fundamental sounds (leaving the overtones to readers, critics, and commentators), he implies that the metaphor of sound is fundamental to understanding the nature of the Beckett text, and that the problem of sound and voice does not simply emerge in his dramatic works but is key to understanding his textual project as a whole.

Regarding the problem of sound and the auditory dimension of text, Mary Bryden’s influential “Sounds and Silence: Beckett’s Music” focuses on Beckett’s interest in silence. The article begins by quoting Beckett himself, who explicitly compared writing to silence: “his own writing seemed to him ‘like an unnecessary stain on silence’” (279). Bryden begins by problematizing that quote: “isn’t that word ‘unnecessary’ itself staining the silence unnecessarily” (279), claiming that Beckett’s interest in silence, its materiality and preference over sound, are fundamental characteristics of his writing, that indeed bring it closer to music. Her essay examines “the peculiarly rich role allocated to silence in Beckett’s writing” (279). Bryden’s article outlines relevant lines of inquiry for exploring the auditory in Beckett, showing that sound and silence are inextricably connected; that the problem of silence and nothing concern writing and thought as applied to music and literature; that music and literature equally point to a domain where listening, voice, and presence come to the fore.

In the context of Twentieth-Century literary studies, of the ‘auditory turn’ as taken up in this thesis, the cluster of sound, voice, and listening is obviously related to the problem of media and technology. The question here is: couldn’t one reasonably approach Beckett’s writing in the context of the mediatization of language and of the voice split apart from the speaker as themes regularly examined in media studies with regard to radio, television, the phonograph, and telephony? This media connection signals at the outset that Beckett’s works
are not just iconic avant-garde artifacts confined to the museum, academy or literary scholarship. They resonate with the sounds and voices of the everyday, the here and now. They are part of the mythology of pop culture, accessible, profound in their simplicity, and teeming with life. (The idea of a voice with no name attached, nameless, “parler une voix sans nom” (7) as Foucault puts it in his inaugural speech at the French Academy, is inspired directly by Beckett. Over the years, the idea became a reality for Foucault whose public lectures drew larger and larger crowds, necessitating the use of a PA system that would carry the ‘nameless voice’ of the lecturer to rooms where he was no longer visible. This Foucauldian line of thinking proliferates further into contemporary art and communication forms involving texting, turntablism, information and communication technologies and mixed media environments.) The rift between the speaker and speech — and in the larger context of media, the split between sound and its source as the doubling lamented by Murray Schafer in his concept of ‘schizophonia’ — here dramatizes the coming together of the literary field and the recording media, indicating different forms of mediation — different technologies — of the spoken or otherwise sounded text entering the domain of literature and writing. Thanks to his schizo voices, Beckett effectively bores his holes through language, offering a perforated auditory tape, the ghost of language, its ill shadow, “ill seen ill said,” a language at the edge of writing, rendering writing, text, and voice ambient and televisual. The question here concerns the extent to which ‘the televisual’ language of Beckett is the McLuhan response to the media domination of the typographic man of modernity, effectively questioning the structure of domination of text as a print technology.

The case of ‘schizophonia’ is indirectly taken up in Katherine Hayles’s influential essay on Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, “Voices Out of Bodies, Bodies Out of Voices:
Audiotape and the Production of Subjectivity;” Hayles takes up a case of a voice separated from the body, shifted by means of a tape recorder used to substitute for the actual voice, becoming the artificat and its onstage simulacrum. It’s the magnetic tape, as she claims, that gives the voice paradoxically a quality at once of mutability and permanence, presenting this very play as Krapp’s unique drama. If Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape famously exemplifies the phenomenon of the voice disembodied, temporarily or permanently displaced from its own source or specific moment in time — as in Zappa’s xenochrony discussed in the last chapter — in his shorter prose texts Beckett both implicitly and explicitly proposes a language and expression that rely on stratification and the coexistence of simultaneous planes or sheets of the auditory, understood here as a disjunctive copresence of the spoken and written media.

Language-discourse shaped à la Foucault’s logic of statement is a heterogeneous system of particles, signs, sounds, intentions, affects, abstractions, and reasoning, which is why the concept of discourse at once passes through many registers, subsuming the flow of the spoken and the written, the oral and the visible. The notion of language as stratified, as itself a form of fragmentation but so too as a specialization and coding enabling new levels of synthesis or relative consistency, at the outset complicates the question of voice. Voice becomes estranged, the symptom of a deteriorating mind and body, a marker of derangement registering, with all its precision and clarity, a trajectory of madness; yet, by the same token, the voice gains autonomy; it no longer depends on the body but rises to a status of a substance, a thing in itself, possessive of its own volition. In this context, the questions to consider with regard to Beckett and sound concern the modalities of the voice, its ways of being, as ghostly fragments of the splintered reason in the virtual world of flickering signifiers of the Twentieth-Century media systems. In particular, the technologies of writing, as
technologies of the formation of voice and subjectivity, for example as studied by Foucault and in the polemic analysis of the typographic paradigm of print and writing in Michel de Certeau’s critique of “the scriptural economy” are salient lines of enquiry for understanding the relevance of Beckett’s auditory writing.

My Foucauldian and Deleuzoguattarian inspired readings of Beckett, specifically Deleuze’s idea of the deterritorialized televisual language of Beckett, are supplanted by McLuhan’s insights into television as a medium. In his *Understanding Media*, McLuhan devotes significant attention to television, the dominating medium in 1963 North America where his book was being published. Provocatively, television serves for McLuhan as his special weapon for dismantling the typographic man of print and the Gutenberg Galaxy, by “all involving sensory mandate” (308), that favors process over product, “promot[ing] depth structures in art and entertainment alike” (312), offering, in place of high resolution print, “the TV mosaic with technical control of the image [which] unconsciously reconfigures the dots into an abstract work of art on the pattern of a Seurat or Rouault” (313). Television does not abandon language, but rather it reconfigures or remediates it into an image-language, a syntactical logical void that strikes one as an affective auditory presence. In this connection, I propose ‘the televisual,’ a hybrid Deleuzoguattarian-McLuhanian media-language construct, to be the frame through which to situate Beckett in the mosaic of the Twentieth-Century auditory avant-garde. As a theoretical frame, ‘the televisual’ aids my investigations of the auditory in terms of the central theme of the thesis, composition in relation to voice and subjectivity, and the multiple subjectivity of voice as the postmodern paradigm or logic of textuality.
In television, space and place meet; the local and global are stitched together, the antenna/cable connection reconnecting one, as if through the umbilical cord of media, with the universe, the centre and periphery collapsing, the world and globality enfolded in the private world of a suburban living room. TV offers the lunar landing in the privacy of one’s room: the room with a view of the lunar landing. By insisting on television being ‘cool,’ participatory, visceral, bodily, McLuhan can present television as a true revolutionary medium in reconfiguring the essential dimensions and points of human understanding: the time-space continuum of abstract physics applied to ground and social related concerns like place, space, location, being in touch, playing by ear. “[T]he total involvement in all-inclusive nowness ... occurs in young lives via TV’s mosaic image” (335), McLuhan concludes the chapter on television of Understanding Media, for that’s what television is doing to one: playing by ear, scratching behind ear, massaging, locating and dislocating one, sending one into space as if on a drug-induced trip.

In contrast to film, television is not the high definition image; ‘the televisual’ is something else: a fuzzy image-sound-touch (atmoshere) cluster radiating out of a little box as black and white splotches of light, lines, wrinkles, and snow resembling people’s faces and torsos, impressions of cities and sporting events, the news and snippets of things. The aim of television is not to image but to “promote depth structures in art and entertainment alike and ... audience involvement in depth as well” (312). The liveness of television becomes the dreamland of a life suspended in the living room universe. Television radiates the constancy of altered states of consciousness by which one is transported into a world where everything literally metaphorizes, effectively erasing the difference between literal and metaphoric. The self becomes the metaphor, an extension of the universal global wave of the world teeming
with people, no longer the clearly defined movie stars, models, and exemplars of film but the mud, the multitude of televisual selves passing through one’s living room as a dramatic enfolding of the media life itself. This is the life that replaces, takes the place of, self, leaving self not alone but occupied, surrounded, massaged, on the receiving end of the massaging wand of the world.

Television perpetuates the imaginary where even the image becomes suspended, blurred. “The TV image is ... a mosaic mesh of light and dark spots which a movie shot never is” (313). This “mosaic mesh of light and dark spots” is the ultimate image-language of Beckett, seen not only in his plays or television plays where this mosaic manifests as faces, bodies, and mouths magnificently reduced to a series of flickering dots, but also in his texts where black and whites, lights and darks, as elements or features of logic and understanding, predominate. In contrast to cinema, television suspends the image in the suggestive play of grays, of lights and shadows and the mesmerizing voices woven into them, woven into the frame; it’s touch and ambience that come to the fore rather than the ocularity of the eye sharpened in perception of detail; the eye here becomes just one in the multiplicity of organs and sense perceptions dislocated in the room, opened up to the immediacy of the dreamscape radiation oozing from the TV set. Television likewise propagates the social, or better put the imaginary social: collectivity and togetherness, cooperation, exemplified with the news inserted between commercials, comedy shows, and series; it’s the extension of the novel and newsprint, transposing text into a void of lights and shadows, of flickering movement and electric static.

In the scheme of McLuhan media systems, television occupies a unique place as special transformational powers are accorded to it. At bottom is the idea of visuality and the
visual structure of print being effectively displaced by the mosaic model of presentation, which is simultaneous, esemplastic, nonlinear, discontinuous, and synaesthetic. “The mosaic... is not structured visually; nor is it an extension of the visual power” (334). Indeed, McLuhan finds the spirit of television “antithetic to literacy” (334), a return to iconographic art with the aim of an all-inclusive “tactual mode of perceiving” (334).

I am not arguing that actual television influenced Beckett or that there exists a special deep unexplored relationship between Beckett and television. Rather, by using the term ‘televisual,’ I refer to a certain understanding or vision of television particularly in relation to representation, imagery and description as corresponding to the visual aspects of writing and text in literature; literature, for example via the novel and newsprint-inspired news, is visualized, atmospherized, enlivened, and dreamified in a televisual representation. “The TV image has exerted a unifying synesthetic force on the sense-life of ... intense literate populations” (315). ‘The televisual’ is that thing in the background that removes the text from the page, electrifies it, sends it into a space of lights and shadows, suggestive of the perforated language that Beckett seeks, of exhausted speech, vision, voice, hope, an image bleeding into a void, dying on the screen.

With regard to the two representative primary texts taken up in the chapter, How It Is and Company as examples of auditory texts, I demonstrate that in his writing, Beckett plays with the idea that sound, as a recording/inscription, is both written and spoken at the same time, the auditory and print logics both preserved and transcended within their respective media. Immersed in the problem of writing, of the written text, inscription, the joys and pains of writing, the physicality/viscerality of writing, as in the grooving and chiseling articulations of How It Is, Beckett occupies a central place in the mosaic of the Twentieth-Century auditory
avant-garde. Turning to this pair of shorter post-trilogy texts, How It Is and Company offers an opportunity to capture and theorize the voice submerged in writing. Attentive to the concept of ‘surfaces of writing’ and ‘the continuous surface of inscription’ as images of immanence of expression, I examine these texts as stories of the voice in relation to writing, self, and the world.

To facilitate my reading, I begin the chapter with a section exploring the relationship between Beckett and the poststructuralist thought figuratively represented by Foucault, more specifically the Deleuzian reading of Foucault. The purpose of this section is to contextualize the experiments of Beckett and show synergies at work between the major tropes of philosophical inquiry, which in his work are at times distorted, intensified and magnified, as in a megaphonic rendition, thanks to the way his discourse is dramatically freed from the formal constraints of academic writing and theory. Beckett’s project of exhausting writing, language, and subjectivity resonates thematically with postmodern thinking, fertilizing this very thinking with radical images, personalities, and thought experiments. The key word here is madness, which, as a concept and subject position, comically enables Beckett to explore and implode the strains of the civilizational discourse of reason of the typographic paradigm, the Gutenberg galaxy of McLuhan. Beckett, to paraphrase McLuhan on the scandal of cubism, is the resonating interval where the literary action of the discourse of contemporary thought takes place. One can best hear and listen to Beckett’s prose in that context, dramatizing the difference between these respective genres as equally concerned and explicitly interrogating the boundaries of reason, logic, and the mind.

In the following section, I turn to Beckett’s 1961 How It Is. Here I emphasize Beckett’s attention to the composition of things in terms of connecting and/or interlocking
mechanisms, as a system of mechanical workings and waste abstracted into a probability series, offering an organizational plane inherently capable of capturing chaos within in its own flow. At this level, the text aids my investigation of Beckett’s composition as a structure that structures itself, albeit in the form akin to mud. This text likewise, importantly, invokes the notion of presence and present formulation (the problem of immediacy of expression) that resonates with Stein’s continuous present, offering insights into the deterritorialized language manifested through Beckett’s fragmented syntax. Writing as a technology, as a way of mechanically constructing or structuring, and as a ‘plane of immanence’ inscribing the possibility of the present moment, preoccupies Beckett critically here; with regards to both of these predicaments of writing, Beckett tests the limits of scriptural economy, to use a term from de Certeau, who, in one of his chapters in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*, gives a startling reading of the Gutenberg paradigm of print and the ocular cultures of the written logos, startling as an interpretive framework on Beckett’s trilogy and post-trilogy texts. Starting with *How It Is*, as one of the instrumental texts in mapping the tension between the aural and the scripted dimensions of the voice, I move on in the last section of the chapter to *Company* as representative of Beckett’s return to the personal identity problem of the trilogy marked by the relationship between the voice and the self, opening the voice onto the outside, though curiously secluded within the mind, rendering the voice multitudinous and collective.

As Beckett turns to sound in his radio and television plays, as well as live theatre, the performance practice obviously influences his writing. In his shorter prose pieces Beckett successfully employs the auditory text as a recording/inscription of the voice, a discursive multiplication of it, the murmur of the innumerable. Immersed in the problem of writing as a problem of composition and expression, Beckett addresses anew the problem of sound and
voice. Though in some sense Beckett’s experimental prose texts turn to voice and sound in an analogous way as the landscape plays of Stein do — as not intended for staging — it is not my intention explicitly to compare and contrast Beckett and Stein or to draw historical continuity lines. The scripted vocalizations of *How It Is* and *Company* engage the interrelated problematic of composition, voice, and the multitude, and the focus of this chapter is to explore how these concepts come into play in Beckett. As a more specific direction, I argue that *How It Is* and *Company*, through their own narrative strategies, paint the image of the voice as an articulatory space of utterance, the pulsating presence of the living word copresent with the flow of the sign-particle nature of language. Both texts present an aural dimension of subjectivity as a system of inner voices and vocalizations, disconnected from the logical centre of coherence in the form of a stable identity and operating instead through the murmur of words, the sounds and voices of the abstract body as part of the same flow of the real.

2. 2. Groping on the Auditory Field: The Discourses of Sense, Sound, and Self in Beckett and Contemporary Theory

I noted in the previous chapter the proclivity of Stein to engage in philosophical discourse, as is evidenced by her scholarly delving into questions of analysis, language, writing, grammar, the structure and orientation of knowledge, as well as her keen interest in the notion of composition as both an aesthetic practice and a philosophical investigation into the structure of matter and/or human nature. With writers like Samuel Beckett this philosophical trend continues ever so more visibly and explicitly. Beckett scholarship offers a plethora of philosophical investigations of Beckett’s art, from commentaries on medieval and modern philosophy demonstrating connections with St. Augustine and Boethius due to their related interest in the voice, to more current ties with Schopenhauer and Wittgenstein, related
to their common interest in music and language. And then there are the evident ties with
postmodern continental non-analytical philosophy represented by Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari,
de Certeau, and Nancy. My purpose here is to examine the analogies between Beckett’s poetic
and narrative structures — as compositions, or immanent planes of compositions formed by
sedimentation from within their own flow, and as voice or multiple voices, as auditory — and
the deconstructivist project of social philosophies, exemplified by Foucault’s
poststructuralism, emerging concurrently, particularly his theory of language and discourse,
which privileges the logic of the statement and his thoughts on the social evolution of the
concept and practice of subjectivity/self.

A number of recent investigative essays have engaged postmodern thought in
Michael Maier takes up a Deleuzian reading of Beckett’s television plays and, commenting at
length on the idea of the evolution of Beckett’s language, mounts a systematic analysis of his
use of music via Schopenhauer’s concept of music as an ideal art. According to Maier,
Beckett’s writing, inspired by Schopenhauer’s idea of music as an immediate and pure art
aspires to the condition of music indirectly or discursively by engaging numerous musical
themes and directly by treating language as an immediate melodic means and so consistently
designing it that way. In “Repetition and Difference in Beckett’s Works,” Nursel Içoz offers a
Deleuzian inspired analysis of identity and difference in Beckett, using examples of Waiting
for Godot and Endgame in particular, claiming that Beckett “dedicated himself to discovering
what is meant by being and identity” and “has used language to explore its possibilities to
convey the existential concept of the elusiveness of Being and the perpetual becoming of
human reality” (281). In “Who Speaks? Grammar, Memory, and Identity in Beckett’s
‘Company’,” Justin Beplate turns to “a commonplace of contemporary French theory: that the self is an effect of language and the interrelated problems of self-identity and consciousness are inescapably tied to the problem of language” (154) to offer a Deleuzoguattarian and Foucauldian reading of the problem of self, voice and language in Beckett’s trilogy and his subsequently produced autobiographical Company. For my part, in addition to the Deleuzoguattarian and McLuhanian streaks that belong to the theoretical framing of my investigations, I offer a Nancy-inspired analysis of the role of sound and the auditory/sound dimension of language, in the affective sense of the term, of the sounds of the voices in Beckett’s Company, and as a theoretical reading of the larger problem of sound, voice, and identity present throughout Beckett’s oeuvre.

Let me begin this philosophical overview with nothing, an important concept for both Beckett and Cage, in some ways resonating with the nothing of the early existentialism of Heidegger and Sartre. Important to take note of here, however, are the differences. Heidegger’s concept of nothing evolves as an ontological category serving the purpose of extended historical analysis, grounded in metaphysics and growing its roots into aesthetics, playing part of his critique of technology as a critique of the pragmatic instrumentalization and objectification of the human spirit. ‘Nothing’ serves as a tool to begin undoing the foundations of Western metaphysics insofar as these foundations are founded upon premises that need to be exposed to critical analysis. Independently of Heidegger, but in the spirit of his philosophy and in the spirit of the age, Beckett engages in his own nothing project, documented famously in the opening salvo of Waiting for Godot with “Nothing to be done.” Both Beckett and Cage, as I argue in the following chapter, carry out the nothing project in the arts, attentive to the new-wave post-existentialist continental philosophy and influencing it
to a degree in turn, as both were, from the late 1950s on, iconic representatives of the avant-garde, and thus were accompanied by a vast scholarship. In the case of Beckett, this took a very academic path in the form of the peer-reviewed *The Journal of Beckett Studies* and countless other book publications.

Cage’s nothing takes the listener into the subatomic flow of music, into the resonating gap where the action of Twentieth-Century music is: in the silences, random noises, small sounds, and the voice. Beckett’s nothing resonates with the critique of the rational ‘man’ exemplified in Foucault’s theoretical interest in madness and civilization; the concept of the self and the death of the author, again exemplified by Foucauldian investigations into the formations of subjectivity in relation to institutions, social structures, biopowers, specifically in the context of confinement, and his Barthesian commentaries on the birth and death of ‘man.’ Another line of continuity with the concept of nothing linking Beckett and Foucault centres on the question of language, specifically the grammar/logic of statement versus that of propositions and phrases, implying a grammar of understanding as “a system toward pointing:” to put it in Stein’s terms, as an auditory distribution of differences and repetitions, echoes and resonances. At question is grammar as a model of understanding referred to by Foucault as ‘episteme’ and manifested in Beckett’s interests in the hermeneutics of understanding conducted in the spirit of the post-Enlightenment critique of reason and subjectivity.

There is something peculiar about Beckett’s approach to philosophy; it is indirect with regard to expected discourse, proceeding rather through a plethora of strange voices of various discombobulated and disembodied personas, ‘schizo voices’ to use a Guattarian term. Through his twists of the literary genre, Beckett approaches philosophy in a most quirky
manner, offering a true thought experiment that extends beyond mere theoretical thought to the embodied thought of an extended system of cognitive-bodily operations of literary characters. More vivid than ideas and their relationships alone — though often with Beckett his characters are not particularly human — these cognitive-bodily operations are manifested through the multiple personae of his texts. Positioned modestly away from the certitudes of philosophy in the ditch of poetry (he famously defined poetry as the last ditch), Beckett advances a peculiar method of investigation, introducing a series of strange characters and performing on them a methodical reduction of the subject to intersubjective, semi-conscious or otherwise latent states that manifest among other ways as voices, multiple and increasingly incoherent, dislocated and fragmented, spreading in the mind, sounding out in the dark of their imaginary possible virtual selves, flickering through the splintering/fragmented being, operating as differential, incomplete, shifting semi and under subjects.

Beckett’s systematic examination of the technology of the self as a persistent evocative faculty of the mis/articulating mouth/mind, capable in the act of utterance of erasing its own existence yet paradoxically, by virtue of this erasure, asserting a small degree of certainty and being, aims systematically at dismantling the relevant discourses of the so-called Enlightenment, first by inquiring into the structure of language and of the statement, in relation to knowledge, as an epistemic form of what can be known, and second as a critique of the Enlightenment fantasy about objective, transparent, unsituated knowledge. Taken apart as a seed of logos, language returns, “ill seen ill said” style, as a material vibratory sounding out and vocalization at the edges of the rational and doable, as systematic radicalizations, sometimes compressions, of voice, meaning, reason, and sense. In this regard, it is justified to say that Beckett’s nothing project resonates with Foucauldian investigations around language
and discourse — whose subtext one way or another boils down to the problem of madness as a boundary of normalness, history, truth — as cultural technologies constitutive of the self. Beckett’s philosophical influences are significant. Recent forays of Jean-Luc Nancy into the phenomenology of listening echo Beckett’s literary investigations of the relationship between voice and subjectivity.

Composition in the sense of the composition of knowledge and the mind are important Beckettian themes that analogously reappear in Cage in a similar way with regard to the two levels of the composition or structure, of the work itself and its thematic engagements, as well as composition and the discourse on composition, so to speak, as in his “Lecture on Nothing” programmatically commenting on its own formation in process as its immediate content. As connected with composition in the latter sense of the discourse of it, the mind occupies a special role in Beckett’s thought; let us just say that his project ultimately dissolves the mind, in its mad search for alternative, organic, auditory forms of consciousness, as articulation and expression at a remove from the centring mind.

Turning to the first meaning of composition, as a composition or structure of matter or stuff of whatever kind, Beckett’s prose of the post World War II period exemplifies a philosophical turn away from structures as both theoretical and ethnographic entities intended to stabilize and analogize a range of phenomena toward an open ecology of poststructural thought. Works of Foucault, Beckett’s contemporary living in the same city, are paradigmatic of the shift towards poststructuralism where problems of organization, taxonomies, morphology, and structuring do indeed remain centrally important but no longer as fixed and rooted in the ground of possible truth, but as constructions, fabrications, elegant hypotheses, bridges intended to connect, scaffoldings set up in order to be brought down the next moment,
as elaborate excuses to talk about the real other of philosophy: *peopling*. In this respect, Beckett’s writing resonates and inspires a whole generation of philosophers-activists who rethink the new dimension of the social, including language and its political ideological scaffolding. It is no accident that the Barthesian/Foucauldian death of the author coincides with the elaborately performative devolution of the self taking place in the Beckett’s trilogy. The performative dimension of language in the trilogy, and subsequently in the shorter works like *How It Is*, inspires a geographic-topologic-ecologic way of thinking about — theorizing — language. Foucault’s archeologies and histories carry a certain fabulating spirit reminiscent of Beckett’s crawling bodies.

Beckett’s is a practice of composition as an ‘immanent plane of consistency,’ to use a term from Deleuze and Guattari. The move to immanence and radical presence was noted already as an important orientation in Stein’s work, manifested in her idea of the present continuous as a narrative strategy of organically generating writing out of thought as a meditative being in the presence of the world. Stein is interested in the problem both theoretically — as a former student of William James interested in the relationship between time and understanding — and with regards to different forms of knowledge as different levels of affective embodiment. Her interest in geography, the flatness of land as a spatial presence and continuity *vis-à-vis* a historical verticality and temporal hierarchy, as well as the notion of language, as distribution of the units of difference, paves the way toward a distributive notion of knowledge, such that it is dissociated from tradition and history and ignores recognized hierarchies. In this sense Stein approaches all available facts equally laid out on a plain surface, as in the Foucauldian research methodology looking at a vast archive of interrelated discourse with a view to regularities, shifts, and discontinuities, in other words,
to various patterns. Let us note in this connection that quite analogously in McLuhan this thought and commitment to immanence manifest in his mosaic model of thought as a surface of interlaced heterogeneous materials copresent in the multidimensional space of the surface-thought. Stein offers interesting insights into the notion of immanence in her practice of writing and her theoretical understanding of portraiture and geography as continuous presences and distributive relationships of difference. Foucault, as explicated by Deleuze follows this direction and image of thought as the underlying principle of knowledge formation, as the image of knowledge, a distribution of copresent elements.

Let me outline notable points of the Foucaudian project through Deleuze’s insightful and thorough exploration in his Foucault. This text is valuable not only because it is systematic and offers intimate knowledge of Foucault by a close friend and colleague, but also because, like other monographs of Deleuze, namely on Hume, Bergson, and Spinoza, it reveals the scaffolding of his own philosophy and becomes the arena of fabricating his own philosophical concepts and personas. In the first part of Foucault, Deleuze turns to discourse as an underlying structure of knowledge and in particular explicates Foucault’s notion of the statement, as a building block of discourse. In this first part, Deleuze tackles three germinal Foucauldian works, Archaeology of Knowledge, The Order of Things, and Discipline and Punish; in the second, he addresses three meta concepts that inform the Foucauldian project as a whole: knowledge, power, and subjectivization. A close textual analysis paves the way for a more synthesizing approach outlining something like a coherent system through all its irregularities and discontinuities. What is especially relevant here in view of analogies with Beckett are the questions concerning language, specifically its epistemological dimension, and the problems of selfhood as emerging through disciplinary and institutional formations,
and so the production of selfhood or subjectivity, that manifests in Beckett through his schizo voices and personae.

Deleuze begins by commenting on Foucault’s claim that the logic of the statement differs from the one governing phrases and propositions. Whereas phrases and propositions can be multiplied by abstraction and contradiction, the statement — banal or original — occupies a field of rarity. Statements are transmittable not by virtue of the transmittability of particular elements associated with them but “with the shape of the whole curve to which they are related” (4), and the field within which they operate. Later in the text, Deleuze points out two forms of outside in Foucault, developed along different social processes, of exiling and partitioning, and representing two models of exteriority aimed at containing madness and delinquency. From an epistemic standpoint, the standpoint of embodied knowledge, forms of exteriority enable the redistribution of the visible and the articulable; this outside, the “thought of the outside” as Deleuze terms it — which in terms of the Foucauldian archeology conceptualizes the process of synchronization of two histories, the production of social forms, the archive, and the evolution of forces, the diagram (43) — is the social space that much of contemporary theory is in search of, struggling effectively to understand it not as an empty container waiting to be populated, a vacuum surrounding atomic individuals, but a teeming social ecology, the social sphere that delimits the lived exteriority of the social body. Deleuze mentions three correlative aspects of the outside: the outside of an unformed element of forces; the exterior taken up by concrete assemblages where relations between forces are realized; and the forms of exteriority that are the spaces of confinement and interiorization (43). These aspects of the outside may apply in specific cases in Beckett’s prose or drama in situations, for example, where his theatre exhausts space. Later in the chapter, this thought of
or concern over the outside returns with regards to Beckett’s two prose pieces that are examined.

Just as statements, in a Foucauldian sense, reflect general and unique discursive formations above and beyond individual subjects — “thrown up by the corpus in question” (18), and so merely passing through a speaking/articulating anonymous one as exemplified in Beckett’s *How It Is* — so do the diverse banal materials that make up Stein’s meditations and narratives, as well as Zappa’s rock compositions: nothing but extraordinary collocations of social matter expressing their own combinatorics and rules of formations. This production of statements reveals the power contained in the ordinary, the power that disrupts and corrupts by seducing, the power that lies at the core of ethics and humanism in art.

What a sentence cannot do, a statement can. A statement exceeds the limits of a sentence in both ways: it is both shorter and longer. A statement has no centre in the sense that it is free of a central idea that syntactically subordinates all its elements, the subject-predicate serving as that central logic expressing the clarity of thought. A statement works in ways similar to the landscapes of Stein, as a configuration of elements of equal value — indeed of no value insofar as they are inherently free from judgment — constituting together a whole, though not in the subordinate manner of a sentence which is always subjected to the assessment of truth/falsity test. Because a statement is not reducible to a particular grammatical shape, it is not wholly ruled by grammar, not calibrated to the logos. As in Stein’s landscapes that recognize the active interplay of non-subordinated particulars, a statement is about distribution of parts, not the first or last word uttered, a rule of how to, an opinion ascribed to this or that agent, but a system toward pointing where the part and the whole are mutually constitutive.
Statements then function by a different logic from propositions and phrases, as they are part of rich and complex operations, not of composites of words and objects as self-contained atomic entities that can be ruled as true or false, but of conditions of the possibility of phrases and propositions. At the level under language, as it were, both Beckett and Deleuze find something, an apparatus that predates it, precedes it, a machine that produces the rules of the formation of propositions and so not restricted by the logic that governs sentences. Deleuze shows how statements bring about word formations and objects, and how they are multiplicities; he then argues, quoting from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, that unlike structures, that are axiomatic and propositional in nature, and involve homogeneous systems of elements, “statements cut across a domain of structures and possible unities” (15).

As to the curve and the field noted before: this particular nomenclature already underscores the spatiality of statements, resembling the proliferating growth along the surface of writing in Beckett’s *How It Is* and his maddening cogitations spreading through sheets of paper, horizontally, without any regard for vertical coherence. Statements are indeed territorial phenomena, confined to the ground and surface, lateral, non-vertical distributions and flows. The ground is an operational term here, confining both thinkers deliberately to a particular mode of locomotion of thought, horizontally, in Beckett taking the mimicry form of actual locomotion.

Statements are also characterized by rarity but not in a sense of the originality or uniqueness of thought representing a particular thinker or speaker. They are rare by virtue of rarification, a process of natural selection that enables their emergence from the mass of everyday banality accruing over a period of time; they are events rather than thoughts; they are part of knowledge formations, paths or means of thought, at times elementary or
fragmented. In a Deleuzian reading of Foucault, the statement, quite similarly, encircles a
territory; indeed these territorial markings make possible a typology of statements. Following
Foucault, Deleuze distinguishes three types of spatiality encircled by statements: collateral,
having to do with the proximity/adjacency of domains; correlative, having to do with a
similarity of subjects, objects, and concepts; and complementary, having to do with the
interconnectedness of activities, organizations, institutions, social bodies, and texts. Domains,
subject-objects, and activities: aren’t these the pathways where so many of Beckett’s
characters perambulate in their maddening search for nothing, counting steps, and mumbling
to themselves?

Language and subjectivity are the two poles that organize Beckett’s philosophical
poetics, “the fundamental sounds,” to paraphrase a letter to Alan Schneider defining, in
abstracto, the domain of Beckett’s interests. There are striking analogies between Beckett’s
and Foucault’s understanding of these terms, as their works are equally driven by this
problematic. With regard to the complex question of language in Beckett, specifically his
project of boring holes through language, of getting to the other side of it, as it were, he
indeed offers a dimension above language. He is not interested in the senses of syntax and
semantics, as units of coherence subservient to the taxonomy of fixed ideas, but rather in a
random distribution, a fluid flow of continuities evolving immanently through sedimentations,
from within their own content, driven by their own matter or materials.

Since composition is related to its compositional elements, forces constitutive of it,
such as the voice and its attendant multiplications, it is interesting to notice how Beckett’s
concept of a deindividuated and disembodied voice, as performed and theorized in the trilogy,
reappears in Foucault, famously in his inaugural speech at the French Academy where he

wishes for himself, as scholar and voice, to be the voice of nobody in particular, issuing from nowhere in particular, as if a voice with its own volition. Foucault’s interest in the problem of subjectivity and subject formation is at the core of his entire philosophical project, the rediscovery of philosophy through social and literary studies. Foucault’s engagement with the self delimits the temporal boundaries of the problem itself, its emergence in a specific historical period in response to — as part of — social processes, situated within social and institutional practices, its discursive orientation connecting dialogically with other aspects of modernity. With his provocative pronouncement, “man was born circa 1800,” Foucault stresses that this discursive emergence of the self is a relatively new phenomenon, a phenomenon that outlines something larger yet, a nexus of interconnected points and lines that form a paradigm, a larger system of understanding that cuts through the various social formations providing a coherent explanation of their operations.

This relative newness of the self as a philosophical concept helps with a renewed vigor to examine literary works, particularly contemporary works of literature that might have influenced thinkers like Foucault or Deleuze, who openly celebrate their appreciation of literature and the arts. In particular, Stein’s epochal experiment in novel writing, *The Making of Americans*, offers an experimental novel that reflects on the constitutive elements of subjectivity, its social/collectivist dimension underlying and amplifying the quest for individuality, presenting a fluid form of individuation manifested through unique repetitions and organizations of the ordinary, repetitive events and facts of social life, capturing their electric, mediatized becomings: as haecceities. Through the crawling Molloys to the spastic amoeba of *How It Is*, issues of subjectivization and identity reappear in Beckett. In turn, through Foucault, we are made aware of how the subject formation constitutes the centre of
attention for Twentieth-Century philosophical discourse rediscovering ‘the man’ as reason, logos, and self-identity through his disappearance into social formations, into the complex socius of bio-power.

Paradigm and/or episteme is an immediate context, a peculiar ecology that facilitates the emergence of philosophical concepts and problems, in their own right produced as critical and theoretical responses to specific social and cultural exigencies; the two dimensions, theoretical and practical, effectively delineate what the paradigm is: what appears to be circular is actually a network providing coherence to the system. One senses a certain circularity of Foucault’s project, postulating a paradigm through the terms meant to explain it, and in turn explaining its operations — social and institutional formations — by tracing those discontinuity lines that delimit it in the first place. His work is conceived as a fantastically spiraling movement, a series of socio-spatio-temporal ruptures. Indeed, one may propose that this spiraling circularity is the central paradox, a series of paradoxes constitutive of the subject itself, in effect, the black hole where the subject disappears, giving off a faerie of rainbow lights and sounds.

With regard to knowledge formations as institutional social power constructs, the embodied knowledge is constituted through the spoken and the visible in their basic raw form united at the level of strata, that consist of “bands of visibility and fields of readability [contents and expressions]” (Deleuze 47). Deleuze derives the latter terms from Hjelmslev’s linguistics, altering radically their use to illuminate the principles of a Foucauldian archeology as territorial, ground-oriented, immanent methodologies. Here, as elsewhere in works co-written with Guattari, Deleuze rethinks the juxtaposition of form and content as two abstract coordinates of meaning, breaking the symmetry of the general and particular orders, and
insisting on a different, fourfold division into content and expression, with each further divided into form and substance. This model allows Foucault to analyze both the homologies and discontinuities between penal systems and mental asylums, and to postulate the formal structuring of episteme, itself serving as a compact expression/diagram of a historical period or era. Beckett, in *How It Is* in particular, provides a remarkable commentary on the embodiment of knowledge, on the way the writing machine inscribes knowledge on the body.

Although commonly known as an archeology, Deleuze suggests that Foucault can be better understood as employing what is essentially a geological model of sedimentation where layers or strata of earth signify consecutive historical periods along with continuities, ruptures, and correspondences between heterogeneous elements. This conceptual framing of the social world presented to the philosophical eye for analysis remains in line with the Beckettian poetics of perambulating-mumbling bodies. Beckett’s characters just happen naturally to inhabit a world where the earth is an animated pulsating multiplicity of vocalizations singing the glory of madness. The geological aspect confers a certain bias, paying special attention to the significance within the visible. The geological model is a model of an immanent present continuous, predicated on the processual nature of earth formations guided by no external forces but evolving from within the ongoing system of stratification with visibilities and significance simultaneously present. Mapped back onto the social field, the strata represent features unique to each historical period, each being a unique composition of two determinants, discursive practices and forms of self-evidence (48), reappearing in each consecutive layer of history, that in turn is animated as a discipline by the generalized theory of stratifying elements, the articulable and the visible, and their two respective forms, of expression and of content.
The visible here must not be understood as pertaining to the sense of sight alone, as a highly specialized section of knowledge governed by the technology of vision. Rather, it is taken as the irreducible realm of things, non-verbal traces, not posited against sound or aurality. At this level, the senses are not yet separated into their specialized functions; likewise, they are not divided up according to the ratios of sense perception necessary and responsible for a particular kind of knowledge formation. At this level, rather — the total level of all times, durations, and orientations of Beckett — perception is esemplastic, and it is in this fashion it becomes one of the strata that constitute knowledge, always consisting of “the lesson of things and the lesson of grammar” (50), the visible and the articulable. The visible then signifies the kind of indissociable noise simultaneously juxtaposed with logos, knowledge, and grammar.

The innovative aspect of the Foucauldian analysis of historical periods and the methodology of periodization employed therein lies in a radical commitment to immanence as a model of ‘looking’ at a wide range of complexly interrelated phenomena or matters at hand. The term ‘at hand’ here may be a good operative phrase, for the materials examined are diverse in nature yet contiguous, treated as essentially belonging to the same field, like the beads and glass shards of the same mosaic, lending themselves to a unified composition. Heterogeneity and difference are not arranged vertically, belonging to different, incompatible orientations, but horizontally, as part of the same field where anything can be related to anything else. In this sense, a historical period is itself a non-reducible phenomenon. At stake for Foucault is inventing a method appropriate to process a given heterogeneity of materials in such a way as not to have to make recourse to consciousness, be it transcendent as in Descartes, or immanent as in phenomenology, but which instead can effectively turn toward
the audiovisual archive as the only exteriority, more appropriately called immanent exteriority, an open-ended field demarcated by the range of matters in question, in the way the hermeneutic pulp works in Beckett’s *How It Is*. Despite his attentive regard on print and vision, despite his archival bias privileging texts, Foucault paints an audiovisual-auditory picture of the history of thought and power, discursive and dialectical in the very spirit of these two terms, as related to speech, as formations of their own immanent voicings about things.

Why so much attention to Foucault given the media orientation of this investigation? One can question to what extent Foucault is biased toward print and print culture as media constitutive of knowledge formations and epistemes. Might he not be omitting the whole unrecorded and unwritten endless flow of discourse like the ongoing hum of the innumerable multitude out of which one can fish lumps of momentary specification, even personalization? Isn’t Foucault too buried in the books in his library? Yet, even in this regard Foucault shares something unique with Beckett: their commitment to print and writing; their reaching out to the auditory world of murmur at the edge of logic and meaning as encompassing us all through writing. In a way, though, Foucault is merely a figuration, a framework or point of reference conveniently collapsing a cluster of works of contemporary theory variously referred to as poststructuralist, postmodern, or post-Enlightenment, engaged simultaneously in a cluster of related topics, at times, as in the case of de Certeau, through polemical debates and alternative points of view.

Leaving aside the specifics of the polemic with Foucault, de Certeau, particularly in his “Scriptural Economy” provides the missing link of the Foucauldian print episteme, and at the same time bridges Foucault and McLuhan’s position with regard to media and their
formative roles in structuring understanding. With their attention to auditory media and the
oral or secondary oral cultures of the modern media systems, McLuhan and de Certeau
counterbalance the Foucauldian commitment to print and the Gutenberg paradigm. De
Certeau is not naive to think that orality and oral culture remain in their raw or natural states.
He recognizes a degree of hybridization and mixed media contained in the voice, as for
example in the idea of the voice as a reservoir of social content, an idea also entertained in
Beckett’s *How It Is*. Speaking of the voice, for example, de Certeau admits that the “voice is
‘recorded’ in every imaginable way, normalized, audible everywhere, but only when it has
been ‘cut’ (as one ‘cuts a record’), and thus mediated by radio, television, or the phonograph
record and ‘cleaned up’ by the techniques of diffusion” (132). And so the voice is inflected by
the particular media orientation that socially and institutionally structures it. The voice too is
in a void, voided; instead of speaking for the self, on behalf of the self, as in some optimistic
utopia of subjectivization, it becomes merely the mechanical echo or repetition, the murmur
or feedback loop of the multiple radio-television voice of the broadcast system. And so orality
too is secondary in the sense of its actual entrance into the mind of the
auditor/listener/speaker; rather than a primary set of experiences, it echoes the dominating
medium/media. “Orality insinuates itself, like one of the threads of which it is composed, into
the network — an endless tapestry — of a scriptural economy” (132). De Certeau’s critique of
the typographic man reads like an extended commentary on the scriptural economy of
Beckett, who in his textual peregrinations insinuates himself as the multiple voice of a media
system, echoing the sounds and voices of the murmuring outside, becoming a vessel through
which the murmuring multitude passes. Beckett’s famous boring holes through language finds
its direct application in the construction of the language of expression for the narrator/narrated: the network of the text with voices woven in and through it.

In closing this overview of philosophical investigations around Beckett, I emphasize that the discourses of personal identity and the self — the question of consciousness in relation to language, mind, experience, and the modalities of being; the question of the fate of Western metaphysics, to take a cue from Heidegger, or the fate of the Enlightenment and the dismantling of reason of poststructuralism, tackled in the context of being, nothing, and existence as significant conceptual directions of the post World War II philosophy — are interlinked in Beckett with experiments with poetry, prose, and eventually stage, radio, and television writing, resulting in a plethora of auditory texts. Regardless, Beckett develops his literary characters and scripts, and constructs his literary voices in the spirit of the philosophy of the post World War II period. In turn, Beckett influences the new wave philosophy, as evidenced in the copious references and essays written about him by Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Badiou, and others, at times concurrently with his writing.

Iain Chambers in “A World of Images” shows how the visual environment consists predominantly of socially constructed-mediated phenomena, the artificial world woven out of images disseminated through photography and cinema. Here the “optical empire” is a carefully assembled scaffolding where a system of power relations forms with the purpose of controlling populations through the various media of representation, offering a world that projects, mirrors, and forces upon its viewers norms, values, desires, and understandings. Chambers’s is not a unique position attacking the establishment for creating a simulacrum of society, “the society of the spectacle” as Guy Debord has it; media studies frequently returns to the idea of the constructed nature of social reality, particularly with regard to the mediated
reality of the Twentieth-Century media systems. The constructedness of vision does not have to be an expression of a Baudrilliardian cynicism, but rather is an integral part of Twentieth-Century culture animated by cinema and photography, explored at the level of science, technology, philosophy, visual art, and poetics. The visual field shifts toward a multi-sensorial, multi-mediated hybrid where textual, sonoric, visual, and other elements coexist. In this sense, an analysis of the eye and the attendant problems of sight and vision, even in the context of print culture as the visual, eye-oriented episteme that McLuhan calls the Gutenberg Galaxy, ought to include the emerging mediations of print alongside the auditory dimension of text as manifested for example in Stein’s plays and Beckett’s experimental prose. This theoretical extension of the eye marks its social mutation, the mutation of vision and image where we witness the imploding Newtonian episteme on a trajectory from the non-perspectival flat icon of the Middle Ages toward the three and multi-dimensional image of the postmodern 21st Century media systems. In the process, the image as a semantic horizon of the visible becomes a material semiotic hybrid. In the first sense, as material and embodied, it extends prosthetically into an auditory multi-sensorium to blend ‘visual’ senses, such as depth, direction, distance, and movement, with the unlocatable, non-spatial tactility, viscosity, intensity, rhythm, pulsation, and sound. This blending evolves along with the development of the recording and media systems themselves spinning a global sensorial ecology. In the second sense, as text-like, it captures the patterned, sequential, and logical orientation of language, its semantic, lexical leanings even at the level of morphems and non-coherent word fragments and signs, as for example in the dada poetry of Kurt Schwitters.

As I turn to the specific primary texts of Beckett, I want to show that one of the central paradoxes there lies in proposing — for lack of a better description — a kind of blind image, a
representation unable to image or represent visually, which, consequently, falls into the
auditoriness of voice. Image here becomes dissociated — or to use a Deleuzogauttarian term
— deterritorialized from the eye. This deterritorialization of the eye as an organ of perception
fixed within the aesthetic continuity of body-politics thematizes the evolution of the eye itself,
its techno-bio-social mutation taking place in the age of meditational production and
involving various technologies of vision, from bionic prosthetic eye extensions to the ways
social practices of seeing are shaped. In pondering the question of the image, the
speaking/writing subjectivity of How It Is experiments with and delineates the expressive
capacity of a deindividuated eye.

The Deleuzian readings of Foucault’s archeology of knowledge and his theory of
statement find their application in the analysis of Beckett’s television plays in Deleuze’s “The
Exhausted,” in the explorations of three levels of language in Beckett. Here too, language
becomes rarified, stripped of its grammatical underpinnings; it enters the domain of a
statement of a particular kind: comprised of images and non-words. Deleuze refers to this
process as purification: a language leaving behind the baggage of words, reference, semantics
and reaching a degree zero. Deleuze traces the evolution of language in Beckett, outlining
three stages of language being increasingly transformed and reduced in its scope, though
opening up new exciting avenues. Deleuze refers to these stages as “language 1, 2, and 3,”
reserving the last for the deterritorialized language of Beckett’s television works, but
suggesting that the seeds of this language of TV in Beckett are contained in earlier literary
texts. To take up the Deleuzian suggestion, in the following section I show how this rarified
language emerges in Beckett’s 1961 prose piece How It Is and in another of his
autobiographical texts from 1980, Company, claiming that it manifests itself as space-
auditory, what I call ‘televisual.’ The term ‘televisual’ can refer at once to something televised (already mediated) or something that is televisable (containing the potential for a certain type of mediation); and it’s the latter, as a set of conditions enabling a visualization toward ultimately a reduction or diffusion of language, that is primarily considered here. The term televisual, taken in this sense, helps to place my explorations at the confluence of McLuhan’s media studies of television and the Deleuzian analysis of the development of language, more specifically the devolution of language in Beckett’s work, reaching in its final stages the furthest limit of refraction, “the language of images and spaces” (162), the language as a space of limits, a threshold, where words and voices come together in the image as image, of nothing in particular, of a televisual void.

The following are the characteristics of Beckett’s work explored by Deleuze, which provide a framework for the concept of ‘the televisual’ and its application to the study of experimental prose like *How It Is*. Beckett’s interest in and preference for the possible, a configuration or permutation of possibles rather than a particular fixed state, give off a ghostly ambience. This preference explains one of the paradoxes of Beckett, here the obsession with movement despite the stasis preoccupying his mind, movement as a way to quench movement, the time-movement-image-montage of Beckett’s prose reminding of the cut-and-paste nature of the television mosaic. ‘the televisual’ void occupies centre stage as a flow of irrelevant stuff, a veritable chaos: where at last there emerges the murmur of the innumerable voices, a play of lights and shadows, blending the shades and grays together in the ultimate gray of the image barely differentiated into a specific thing, and if so thanks to incessant repetition. “The combinatorial is the art or science of exhausting the possible through inclusive disjunctions” (154), which requires an initial exhaustion as a necessary condition,
for only an exhausted person could give so much attention to nothing. The space of permutation is the breeding ground of the possible, indeed the inevitability of being, its vitality ultimately defeating itself; as Deleuze puts it, “a fantastic decomposition of the self” (154) likewise takes centre stage in Beckett’s prose. This decomposition of the self is rendered through a decomposition of the form of expression itself, an exhaustion of writing as process and act even in the heat of composition.

A language of enumeration as a feature of combinatorics and permutation is what Deleuze terms “language 1,” a language of names. When the names dissolve to become just voices and sounds, that is where language 1 becomes language 2, a language of voices. Both of these languages are transcended in a language

which no longer relates ... to enumerable or combinable objects, nor to transmitting voices, but to immanent limits that are ceaselessly displaced - hiatuses, holes, or tears that we would never notice ... This something seen or heard is called Image, a visual or aural Image, provided it is freed from the chains in which it was bound by the other two languages. (158)

In language 3, names and voices are brought together as image. And as the method of suppression, the silencing and nothining of names resulted in the language of voices, here they become productive of something else; here suppression and silencing become productive of a transformation from language proper to image, more specifically to the modalities of space that can be tampered with and the powers of the image that can be further suppressed or silenced. Hence, How It Is may serve as an example of a particular kind, a televisual image of the voice trapped in writing.
2.3. Narrative In/Formation: Traversing the Plane of Immanence of Beckett’s How It Is

In her 1926 lecture “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein writes of “beginning again and again [as] a natural thing even when there is a series” (23). Thirty five years later, in How It Is, published in the original French in 1961 and soon translated by the author into English and rendered a unique text — a kind of variation on the original — Samuel Beckett inadvertently repeats this premise. The call to begin again and again appears in the very title of the ‘novel’ and is frequently repeated throughout, how it is, which in the French original Comment c’est sounds exactly like the verb commencer, to begin.

The ‘novel’ belongs to one of the happiest moments of Beckett’s life, when the success of Waiting for Godot secured for him world-wide recognition. It was the right moment for him to explain to his audience his origins, “others knowing nothing of my beginnings save what they could glean by hearsay or in public records nothing of my beginnings in life” (12). The scope of the novel is vast, relating not just “my beginnings” but all life, all reality. The goal is to make sense of chaos without imposing on it an arbitrary system of ordering; the challenge for the narrator-voice is to grasp the all enveloping ‘chaosmos’ from within, with what critic Peter Murphy calls weak syntax, as a series of present formulations, because “all I was given [was] present formulation” (46). The method consists in flattening all contents into the surface and creating a hermeneutic pulp where all elements and possible relations can be comprehended in terms of what Deleuze and Guattari, in A Thousand Plateaus, call the abstract machine, as if literally placed on the surface of text. “The abstract machine develops on the plane of consistency and no longer has any way of making a categorical distinction between signs and particles: for example, it writes, but flush with the real; it inscribes directly on the plane of consistency” (65). The result is, in the
panting words of *How It Is*, “an image in its discontinuity of the journeys of which it is the sum made up of stages and of halts and of those stages of which the journey is the sum” (126), a self-referential open-ended immediacy which comes to life momentarily and sinks in the mud forever in its very utterance, having nothing else, not much else, going. *How It Is* and, some years later, *Company* both deal with the fate of so-called life stories, taking up the challenge of writing an autobiographical text that accepts responsibilities for sound thinking, without falling uncritically into the naiveté of an otherwise thriving literary genre.

*How It Is* is a direct response to the blow of *The Unnamable*, the black hole left after the final disappearance of the last person. It announces a new form of writing that will subsequently preoccupy Beckett in his late prose pieces: “a new narrative style, liberated from the requirements of ordinary human speech” (137), says Thomas Cousineau in *After the Final No: Samuel Beckett’s Trilogy*. Here language is no longer the property of a Cartesian subject caught up in its own cogitations, but a plane of coherence to the surface of which this peculiar non-subject, or a not-yet subject, is inevitably attached. With regard to that problem of subjectivity as a structural unity, the ego-mind, in a letter to Hugh Kenner, Becket refers to the notion of the narrator/narrated introduced through *Molloy* and designed emphatically to merge the main character and the actions he is subjected to (94). The narrator doesn’t invent or narrate the story but quotes. The narrated, whatever content burbles to the surface of the page, is equally framed, depending at any moment on the operations of its other, neither being more primary, more privileged presences. And so, from the beginning the narrator/narrated hears and relates “scraps of the ancient voice in me not mine,” stressing that expression operates with symbols comprehensible only from outside, and so necessarily and by definition intersubjective, and that expression relies on stratification, on the coexistence of
heterogeneous strata and systems of translators. Kenner clearly illustrates the relationship of
the narrator/narrated within “ancient vignettes” of the text of How It Is with reference to a
specific childhood photograph which Beckett subsequently released twice for publication thus
ensuring its existence in the Beckett canon (140). In the passage analyzed by Kenner, the
narrator is describing the photograph of himself from childhood and then further expands the
photograph into sound through the alliteration in the description of his mother’s “huge head
hatted” (15). The text continues in an auditory sense with “she closes her eyes and drones a
snatch of the so-called Apostles’ Creed I steal a look at her lips” (16). This ekphrastic moment
in How It Is cements the idea of the narrator/narrated and furthers the position of the
narrator/narrated as having an awareness of Beckett’s memories.

How It Is ought to be considered a special experiment in auto-poiesis, a self generating
text, taking voice literally and abstractedly as the principal perpetual movement of the same,
asserting the same repeatedly and, consequently, creating an elaborate variation series out of
next to nothing. Here Beckett, not surprisingly, given the theme of beginning again and again,
returns to his famous dicta, like the “I can’t go on I must go on” and “there is nothing to say
and only endless ways of saying it” of the trilogy, though this time he takes a dictaphonic
approach to formulating such statements, working with automatic writing, allowing speech to
compose the shape and content of the repeatedly unfolding statement, as if trying to cheat
thought out of its own content, to crush and obliterate it; as if trying to exhaust the thought.
The conceit — and the principal concept — of How It Is lies in the meticulous recordings of
“the mutterings verbatim” (82), voice recorded as is, word for word. This very premise,
however, right at the outset introduces a series of problems, such as what to talk about and
how to feed or otherwise incite this talking machine, to mention just two. Once formulated-
considered, however ill-formulated and ill-considered given the mechanical, dictaphonic style of writing, these problems must tag along, be reconsidered and reformulated again and again, destroying the very premise of the novel, the clean slate of the voice peeled off the face and detached from body. This destructive — deconstructive — approach makes it a special case of auto-poiesis, elaborately positing — or indeed repositing — a cliché-paradox of life generating out of its opposite, death and destruction. Bodily excretions are the mechanicals of this tragicomic midsummer nightmare, in one sweep articulators and sediments of the growing text-voice. They are the noise of life (where signs and particles are no longer distinguishable) uttering from the various holes and through gaps of the tossing and turning human-amoeba reenacted throughout the 140-page scripture, the amoeba, which otherwise, in another universe of the clean, abstract thought, in the form of Deleuzoguattarian Body Without Organs, would be one continuous origami folded from an infinitely long sheet of paper.

Written in a telegraphic style, in short choppy sentences and predominantly sentence fragments with no punctuation, though arranged into short blocks of text tempting the reader to take them in one breath, the novel repeatedly begins and ends, giving the impression that every word added onto the inadvertently growing pile should be the absolute first and last. The mechanical style reminds one of Stein’s meditative writing, concerned with the immediate, continuously unfolding present/presence of the world, and produced in the state of an intensely meditative exhaustion, a head bowed low, face touching paper. This intensely reflective stance in Beckett projects a visuality beyond the perceiving body, disembodied, floating on its own in a televisual space of pure image, imagined by Beckett as a direction of low resolution fuzzy television images in contrast to a high definition movie image. In his
image of television, everything flows indeed into perception as an abstract affective construct outside the body, intersubjective, interembodied.

The novel is constructed out of remarkably few elements, using basic vocabulary notwithstanding a number of ‘difficult’ words appearing here and there unexpectedly to alienate the reader, and out of line with the overall repetitive prose and imagery; it features a nameless character — a sequel to Beckett’s celebrated ‘last’ novel’s protagonist, The Unnamable — at least presumed to be a character, and indeed repeatedly speaking in the first person, flat on his face, in the dark, crawling through the mud and speaking to it, recollecting in this peculiar predicament his “life above in the light,” one of the notable repetitions of the novel, as in “above in the light my life my living” (85), in a confusing tangle of parts and stages though principally insisting on three, “before Pim with Pim after Pim” (7). The before, with, and after clearly point to the temporal division of past, present, and future, though equally so laughing at such orders, indeed parodying a sermon, for from the standpoint of beginning again and again of the present formulation, all past and future are only grotesque aberrations of the rambling mind. It’s the sermon of the church-broadcast media system, the chatter of news with its info and temporal divisions of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In line with this conceit, the landscape — the setting of this drama — also becomes progressively more desolate and strange by comparison with the novels of the trilogy, pushing Beckett further toward the impossible, reducing the scenery literally to nothing — universal darkness — though at the same time populating it with confusing memories and half-images, generating time and again the flickers of endless, vast, and unlocatable life. The play of light and shadow, a subtle innuendo of the body occupied or possessed by the imaginary tangle of screaming bodies and voices, provides a televisual ambience to the text, renders it televisual.
The conceit of the novel posits an essential homology between setting, character, action, and voice, privileging no particular orientation, offering no special insights, and situating all as an immanent outside. In this sense, the raving presence of the speaking I, dominating as it may be, is not privileged; it is indeed tormented and faced with a whole series of human-like presences, with the principal Pim being possibly the voice’s double, a necessary witness or companion, possibly a divine presence demarcating a boundary between the immanent now and the past and present of what extends beyond the present formulation. The divine-mythical, at the same time, remains intimate to the narrator. In one of the scenes the two are emphatically stitched in the eternal embrace to the same cross.

The theme of examining, counting, and listing possessions — a take on the trope of the epic catalogue — reappears throughout, echoing again the trilogy, specifically Malone’s obsession with cataloging his things. The inventory of How It Is is shrinking, featuring just a sack containing tins of sardines and a can opener, to which the narrator is especially attached and that serves him as a writing utensil, when it is jammed into the arse of another, Pim or Bom as the case may be, making them scream, sing, or articulate. The can opener constitutes one of the central objects of this narrative, possibly the Lacanian petite object a, for it fits well with the concept of the mysterious, untranslatable, non-signifying signifier of Lacan’s, though it is difficult to ascertain to what extent Beckett’s experimental novel coincides with the celebrated lectures of Lacan where the concept was first introduced. Narrating through close-ups of objects, insignificant common objects are suddenly rendered symbolic; objects fuzzy, fluid, electrified, bleeding into their surroundings, bleeding into the ambient sound of the surroundings are common techniques of television storytelling that appear in flashes on the pages of the peregrinating How It Is.
It would be a stretch to call the narrator/narrated a character or indeed assume he is the actual speaker listing his journeys through a strange world of Pims, Pams, Prims, Boms, Krams, and Krims; for there is no clear sense of a human person present but rather, at best, in those best moments signifying clarity, whether at the level of expression or thought, a human-like creature that merely fantasizes about growing a body, giving it a shape and direction, forcing it to move and speak, all remaining at the level of the hypothetical projections of the text itself, essentially constituting the only action, setting and persona of the novel. The question regarding the use of the first person pronoun, “if it’s me,” appears already on the first page but reportedly cannot be reliably answered. What we encounter is a disembodied voice and, technically speaking, a mute voice in the form of brief outbursts of text to be enacted by the reader, silently in their head, mutteringly when they try to figure out how to tackle some of the more confusing lines, and out loud in those rare moments — good moments — that inspire this much confidence. The act of crawling through the mud, in which the reader partakes symbolically, crawling through the muddy text, in fits and starts, is the action of the ‘novel,’ mimicking the act of reading, doggedly following the text from left to right, line after line, “as in our civilization.” The English translation loses the play of words behind “mouth” and “mud.” In French, bouche (mouth) and boue (mud) sound alike, with the mud phonetically resembling an incomplete (inarticulate) mouth, figuratively the mouth muddying things as if to stress that speech is a messy affair. The phrase “voice once without quaqua on all sides” (7), another notable repetition, marks the auditory voice that belongs to no specific person; as auditory, it has no direction or orientation; it is all encompassing.

The voice of How It Is quotes rather than speaks: “how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it” (7), ambiguating the difference
between writing and speech, but also implying that voice is always the voice of another.

Insofar as we may be tempted to think of voice as constitutive of subjectivity, this subjectivity is constituted through the undifferentiated collectivity — multitude — passing through it. As quoted, the voice is less spoken than stored as memory, recorded, inscribed on a page, magnetic tape or disc, committed to memory, othered. Again, the mediated voice of television news comes to mind, a voice that inherently belongs on a tape, detached from the body, the voice of no one in particular, standing in metonymically for the audience, mesmerized in front of the tele-text. What we witness here with regard to the voice is what Garrett Stewart calls ‘phonotext,’ a non-localizeable murmuring that takes on the timbre and texture of multiple voices making up the voice of self, faltering and stuttering in its imaginary space of neither sound nor image, hopelessly and amusingly searching for an adequate groove — rhythm, stress, pitch — with which to capture what’s out there, the chaotic world of beauty, justice, and pain of the universe expanding in no particular direction, for the concept of direction makes little sense at the level of metaphysical dimensionality invoked in the text.

Voice then is a complex aggregate involving the cognitive capacity for speech, the system of sounds/sonorities recognized as carrying legitimate meanings, the mouth and its attendant organs as instruments for reproducing and participating in orality, the social outside of other selves which can effectively interpellate one, bring one, with a can opener jammed into an ass, into the community of civilized speakers. All this complexity has to be considered and has to tag along as a bare minimum even to begin talking about what seems like a private little possession: “my life.” How It Is demonstrates that “my life,” the first and last image of the ‘novel,’ is a messy and bloody affair, never as clean as the shit and piss of infancy. And let’s add: never as clean or abstracted as theory. Voice bleeds into speech, becomes a speech,
not attached to a particular self or position: general and impersonal as in a televisual presentation where it’s never certain if it’s the image or the sound that matters more, neither of them strongly mattering. The being of the voice as speech, the act of speaking more so than the speech act — a doing — remains unmediated and untheorizeable, even though entirely framed with the repetition of: “I say it as I hear it.” The mediated televisual I disappears into the black hole of the screen-frame.

Television others, specifically others the grammar of language by rendering it auditory, dissolving it into the ambience of the surrounding. The emphasis on the surrounding is what television brings to the focus, dispersing the eye as suddenly not needing to read closely, let free to roam around the room in the virtual space projected by ‘the televisual’ presentation. Television deterritorializes language, places it in the room. The self dissolves into the other, the otherness as a permanent presence of image-language. The other is likewise the outside of the self, the exteriorized self lost in the play of darks and shadows.

According to Alain Badiou’s article, “Beckett’s Generic Writing,” How It Is “dismisses a fruitless encounter — between a cogito that solicits and a realm that maintains its neutrality — and puts in its place the encounter with the figure of the ‘Other’ that breaks up and dissipates solipsistic enclosure” (13). The problem of personal identity addressed in the trilogy is redirected, “replaced by ‘occurrences’ of the subject, i.e., the enumeration of its possible positions” (13). Ideas and impressions bombard the narrator/narrated with the flow of inner and outer perceptions, leaving for it no clue as to how this I-assemblage can stay together and how it corresponds to the world without. This is precisely because How It Is (signifying here the nameless ‘character’ or voice, the narrator/narrated rather than the title) is already on the outside, given over to the symbols and translators operating between the strata.
One of the possible stratifications concerns a temporal order. Here a flow of territorialities, particles, and signs is arranged vertically into three parts or temporal stages: “part one before Pim before the discovery of Pim have done with that leaving only part two with Pim how it was then leaving only part three after Pim how it was then how it is vast tracts of time” (16). On the surface, then, the method is to “divide into three a single eternity for the sake of clarity” (24); or elsewhere it offers a doubling, my life down here in the mud and the one above in the light, both equally subjected to the present formulation of the muttering mouth which reaches through its collective speech the possibility of an archivist scribe writing it all down for posterity. Yet we would be naïve to think that this seemingly vertical representation corresponds to, or signifies, the essential verticality of strata with writing sitting on top. Although the narrator/narrated of *How It Is* seems to be evolving sequentially from the mud of beginnings, through the murmuring voice, to reach the written inscription, an actual record of his journeys, he is aware that this is merely a manner of speaking and that he can at best describe a full circle and return to the beginning, folding over completely and erasing the difference between before and after. Toward the end, the narrator/narrated is still thoroughly preoccupied with the formal staging of his journeys, coming up with “two possible formulations therefore the present and that other beginning where the present ends and consequently ending with the journey” (132).

This obsession with legislating over the flow of time indicates its own impossibility, showing each formulation to be a mere attempt to name the layer of current sedimentation, destroying in the act of articulation-inscription the audible inscription of before. Beckett draws here on the nature of television as projecting a certain immanence, a continuous presence of the current presentation mesmerizing the viewer, keeping them in the place of
surroundings, in the circle of televsual radiation. Beckett’s prose reenacts this kind of
televisial present continuous immanence in text.

Constructing a temporal order is only a provisional way of structuring chaos; it
provides a certain mobility, offering in the face of the quaqua — all the audible ‘shit’ out
there — a series that can be shuffled and played with, but there is no way of legitimating this
kind of design. The formal design is thoroughly and repeatedly elaborated as one of the
principal movements of the text, as part of its own action, which offers an escape from the
actual pain of the strange, unindividuated solitude populating the world *How It Is*. Paul
Davies, in *The Ideal Real: Beckett’s Fiction and Imagination*, suggests that “the organization
is too conscious to be useful but becomes a source for jocular amusement [as] the measures of
containment have themselves become laughable” (96). No wonder that the initial division is
repeatedly leveled to the flow of presences, for existence can be asserted only by virtue of the
continuous unfolding of the present formulation and, literally, on the back of momentarily
emerging strata. The murmuring mouth and the inscribing hand keep collapsing into the mud
of an all-encompassing presence.

At stake in this peculiar structuring that emerges only to be erased is, according to
Davies, grasping “the consciousness of eternity” (110), catching the universal through the
particular, reducing this particular, as is often the case in Beckett, to the most elementary
shape, such that it can be expressed — known — with some degree of epistemic certainty.
*How It Is* becomes the arena of a dialectical sort of struggle. On one hand, it urges the
modesty of asserting — ascertaining — the absolute minimum known; on the other, it
captures no less than eternity, “vast tracts of time,” that continually come hauntingly to the
narrator’s awareness, becoming a canvass on which he can perform his tracings — journeys
— of the mind and mouth, which in turn become the endless mud that plasters everything over, returning the reader to the surface of text as the only empirically available reality.

Insofar as the understanding is involved in the formal design of the text, dreaming its dreams of growing a functional body, the model of the understanding, the mind or, to use a Deleuzian term, the image of thought, has to meet certain requirements, the minimum level of reliability. This minimum of reliability axiom is achieved by allowing only a certain kind of content, holistic rather than technical or a specific type of understanding, pertaining to essences, and so in a way inhuman. ‘The televisual’ surrounding of How It Is’s narrative is indeed constituted by the inhuman steady flow of imagery, of garbage, sardines, cork openers, and things flushing in front of one as an already othered spectator, the general viewer subjected to the operations of the media apparatus.

How It Is strives toward treating all elements, all signs-particles, as an immanent reality of the written/spoken text, the text framed and shooting like a projectile. Stratified, the self can grasp itself as an aggregate, a part of the endless procession of bodies crawling along a curve, at once victims and tormentors of those in front and those behind them, carving on one another’s backs their Roman capitals. This stratification within self is owed to writing and speech operating essentially on the outside, the resonating outside of a sound chamber, be that a system of cavities of one’s body or a momentary collision with other bodies, in relation to the other, “on Pim’s back intact at the outset from left to right and top to bottom as in our civilisation” (70). Writing already presupposes language, though no particular form of it, since the appearance of a string of characters inscribed on a surface merely signals the invisible auditory cosmos whose silhouette is captured in print, the expanding infinitude of the possible-real that produced the string; writing detaches from writing, translating or
recoding a particular regime of signs. This translatability implied in the written form is not a recent evolutionary stage of expression. One could argue that language has originated from writing as easily as one who argues that it has evolved through orality. Translatability is an essential ingredient of language in any of its forms. It is the ability to represent other strata using merely the elements of its own, the ability to articulate effectively and so formulate a regime of signs which can best capture other regimes.

One the one hand, one might be thinking here of ‘the televisual’ box or space as a space of enclosure, and yet on the other ‘the televisual’ likewise erases the space, crams it into a virtuality. After all, ‘the televisual’ remains to be a flat image, a surface of watching. The image of surface as immanence, as a plane of consistency, abolishes the real distinction between interior and exterior, imaging both as relative positions of the same outside. This lateral leveling of verticals occurs despite doublings within the subject who is always shadowed by its other: “he lives bent over me that’s the life he has been given all my visible surface bathing in the light of his lamps when I go he follows me bent in two” (18), and in spite of language itself being doubled, split into speech and writing. The repeated image of the scribe who, having been previously subjected to the same procedure, is inscribing on the back of another, stresses the gestural character of writing, its own kinesis carefully erased through the strings of characters substituted for the movement of a desiring body. In any case, the doublings are formal, provisional, speculative, for the displacement of subjectivity involves a certain degree of synthesis, a machinic aggregate in the form of a suffering and silenced multitude.

How It Is considers the assemblage ‘writing/ subjectivity’ in which the subject both coincides with and is constructed through the act of speech as a subject of enunciation. An
abstract totality, referred to as I, voice in me, the sack and me is assumed at the beginning and in the process is subjected to articulation. “I quote I say it as I hear it ... murmur it in the mud” (7). It is true that the assumed completeness of the speaker never really works in practice, for each consecutive presence, each present formulation in which it is inevitably caught up, constitutes only a segment of a totality. This radical segmentation within the subject of enunciation announces a series of breaks within the self. This fragmentation is represented on the level of language in various syntactical slips, “midget syntax” as the narrator himself puts it. Being the projected totality of his utterance, the self is conveyed in the spirit of it, lapsing into chaos. But the final result is a life record nonetheless, a record that opens with “recorded none the less it’s preferable somehow somewhere as it stands as it comes my life my moments” (7), and ends most appropriately with “end of quotation” (147). It is a record that openly aims at a system in which the self can be erased — removed as a subject of a hermeneutic investigation — by an alternative and shifting figuration, the ancient voice in me not mine: A formulation that would “eliminate him completely and so admit him to that peace at least while rendering me in the same breath sole responsible for this unqualifiable murmur” (141). The disjunction considered by and troubling the narrator in the late stages of the novel — I am alone or we are innumerable — collapses on itself. Epistemically and ethically the two statements amount to the same, becoming a conjunction of “I am alone and we are innumerable.” As such, the whole project is emphatically dismissed as “antique rigmarole” (147) of “murmurs fallen in the mud” and representing innumerable souls wanting and failing to be heard. The voice of How It Is ponders the desire to leave a little trace of itself in the mud, laughs at the very desire, and somehow, idiosyncratically, acknowledges it as the only possible action and thing to do. This immodest desire to leave a trace becomes particularly
laughable in the face of impermanence as the essential mode of expression in the immanent televisual presentation of the continuous presence.

The project of finding solace may very well boil down to this idiosyncratic recognition of the silent murmurs fallen in the mud as the ultimate voice, the only voice there is. What we otherwise loftily call ‘collective forms of enunciation’ thus invoking a collectivity that can sustain us and along with it the social dimension of communication, is for Beckett not more than “antique rigmarole,” the voice without quaqua, shit plain and simple: “I pissed and shat another image in the crib” (9).

If the premise of *How It Is* is to place humanity on its collective face in the mud, this premise is less a symbolic body orientation than a model picturing for us the predicament of the expressive possibilities of humanity under the conditions of immanence. In a text which started out as *L’image*, Image, the challenge must be to arrive at what the image is and how it works rather than accept a standard figuration of figure and ground. In a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* dedicated to showing what the ‘plane of immanence’ is, “November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself A Body Without Organs,” Deleuze and Guattari start off by indulging S&M fantasies of sawing up a body’s orifices, “making sure everything is sealed tight” (150) ultimately to show “what remains when you take everything away” (151). Beckett offers an equally compelling picture of the body without organs aka abstract machine: a body flattened to the ground, becoming one with it, embracing it, fondling it, speaking to it and on its behalf, and in the process becoming capable of unique insights concerning its being, the being of what is at once figure and ground.

*How It Is* sounds out its Roman capitals amidst, fully aware of and fully involved in, a veritable auditory revolution — the ‘auditory turn’ — that sounds out full blast through
Cage’s sound experiments of the 1950s, themselves resonating with numerous aesthetic experiments that define the post World War II fringes of the American avant-garde. The auditory/scriptural premise of How It Is is reminiscent of Charles Olson’s work with auditory texts, that in his discussion of the concept of projective verse Olson refers to simply as “verse.” Beckett inadvertently responds to the opening of Olson’s manifesto/essay: “Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (The revolution of the ear, 1910, the trochee’s heave, asks it of the younger poets.)” How It Is offers pages of breathing-reading exercises that require a great sense of syncopation.

The midget syntax of How It Is achieves a peculiar feat. On the one hand, it compresses language telegraphically or televisually to short elliptical communicational farts, emphasizing the excremental, evacuative nature of verse, and abolishing the sentence and its grammar of logic while producing an excess of statements. On the other hand, it stretches language discursively as a complex organizational structure governed by its own peculiar rules, creating a plane of coherence, a kind of territory where diverse groupings of statements make sense collectively, not as lines and verses of poetry but as lumps or clusters of words, and so as statements. In both cases, the body or the embodiment, to be more precise notwithstanding the terrible ambiguity of the idea of a body with nothing essentially supporting it, but as movement, expression, volition, and other attributes articulating on their own in the continuous present-presence; the bodily as what’s thrown up in the face here remains as the gauge and driving force behind this particular image of eye-voice.
The eye-voice axis signals a peculiar conceptual twist required to make sense of the convoluted voices of his prose. In Beckett, to return to Kenner, the reader must break the silence to reconstruct the text as a listened document, bridging the gap between their personal memory and the fabulist retelling of a story taking place in front of them. The reader becomes positioned as the narrator/narrated and in “sharing the protagonist’s vigil must deduct for himself the boundaries of the phrases and reconstitute the muted bel canto” (Kenner 139).

Kenner rightly describes the world of Beckett as a peculiar parody of the Newtonian universe, a closed system of universal verities that remain in a perfect equilibrium where nothing can be added or subtracted and everything becomes an expression of an ongoing transmutation of matter. I say peculiar parody because as this elaborately excogitated model is of genuine interest to Beckett the cosmologist and explorer of closed systems, it is equally so brought to the brink of absurdity, exploded, showing aleatory, unpredictable, uncontrollable elements in the form of human volition and utterance which somehow refuse to shut down, picturing a little life with its little scenes persisting against all odds, good moments as the narrator/narrated of How It Is repeats, often referring to painful moments of torment and despair. In the world of Beckett we encounter extremes, bodies stitched to places, immersed in their presence, barely moving, barely speaking, barely willing and yet somehow advancing forward, marking or projecting this forward, perhaps only as a mere figment of their morbid imaginations, perhaps as a real possibility faintly appearing on the existential horizon. Kenner remarks: “Persons stir because every word is an utterance. Patterns close because all discourse has shape” (184). Beckett’s late prose represents a blind alley of modernism where things must come to a halt, where the mastery must undo itself, for such is the logical conclusion of thought undoing its metaphysics. But at the same time, his late prose offers something
positive and empowering: the sheer power of undoing the paradoxes that trap. The principle of divisibility sustains the system, providing for it a method of structuring in the form of strata, which in turn serve as articulators; it allows multiple voices to enter and be heard, of countless other bodies fallen on their faces to murmur in the mud. Although Beckett takes away what is so dear and private, “my life,” he offers in exchange a little murmur of a life as at least something to count on, the audible/textual presence with its polyrhythmic words. The exhaustion exhausts language and text replacing them with an auditory televisual image-statement-gesture-sound.

2.4. The Lonesome Multitude of Company

While How It Is is concerned with the image of a de-individuated self immersed in writing, the 1980 novella Company bypasses — at least in its premise — the problem of the written text and literature by tapping directly into the auditory dimension of language and the community of speakers implied in the concept of the soundness of words. In her Samuel Beckett: A Biography, Deirdre Bair suggests that Company was inspired by — indeed written in response to — her own complaint about the rigid rules imposed by Beckett during the interviews. Apparently, Beckett not only did not allow the use of tape recorder but also forbid any note taking, forcing the biographer to rely entirely on memory. After many hours of listening to Beckett talk in response to the various minute biographical questions, she would rush back to her hotel room and write down as quickly as possible whatever she still remembered from the session. Whatever escaped, she tried to recover from the auditory memory of his voice. The image of a young scholar lying on her hotel bed hearing voices in her head resonates through the opening lines of the novella: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine” (7). A voice and alone, the first and the last phrase of the novella, frame its
intensely autobiographical content by offering the auditory image of the voice relating its personal stories.

According to Carla Locatelli, *Company* interrogates the problem of self or subjectivity in utterance, in action and as action-performance, without having to unveil the core that sustains this verbal action; the novella “considers the need to situate the subject by letting it speak, that is, by means of a definition which avoids naming” (157). The emphasis here is on the spontaneous soundness of the speech act rather than on the logic of agency in charge of the speech. Taking away the name takes away an important part of the substance of self, its individuation replaced in the text by a set of shifting pronouns and subtle timbral changes of the principal voice enacting the story. The story of one in the dark on his back questions the assumed self evidence of the Cartesian cogito as a cogitating and self-aware machine, replacing the silent logos of thought with audition. The reading ear of the auditor continuously hears the pages of the script, both carefully constructed characters and strings of words, and the empty spaces between them. In this way, the subject multiplies, as if reading itself was company, as if multiplied voices and characters were projections of the auditory reading of text. “Yet another then. Of whom nothing. Devising figments to temper his nothingness” (46). A discourse aiming at self-identification endlessly perpetuates itself and multiplies new devisers. Given that this shifting structure indeed constitutes the identity of a person, this identity could no longer maintain its name. “Would he gain thereby in companionability? No. Then let him not be named H. Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You” (32). In this way, *Company* moves beyond the metaphysical nostalgia of the self as it is manifested in a desire for naming, since the self is constructed here as a network of speech acts stitched together and open to endless negotiations, offering innumerable possibilities.
For Locatelli, in Company, Beckett consciously delves into language and, by eliminating naming, “allows a processive use of language to take the place of a definition” (158). The repeated speech acts serve the purpose of locating the subject in a larger context, that of collective forms of utterance. We can hear the playful shifting of the subject(s) in the following passage:

Wearied by such stretch of imagining he ceases and all ceases. Till feeling the need for company again he tells himself to call the hearer M at least. For readier reference. Himself some other character. W. Devising it all himself included for company. (43)

The narrator of Company is not interested in the flow of inner perceptions but, instead, in the language itself, its auditory all-at-onceness, and so in its social dimension. As the ground of the acts of consciousness, language becomes a plane of coherence that effectively locates, and locks in, this subject-medium trapped in utterance and splintered into multiple voices.

For from the beginning, the subject is posited as a troupe of speakers, a company of performers.

If the voice is not speaking to him it must be speaking to another. So with what reason remains he reasons. To another of that other. Or of him. Or of another still. To another of that other or of him or of another still. To one on his back in any case. Of one on his back in the dark whether the same or another. So with what reason remains he reasons and reasons ill. (11)

What concerns Beckett in Company is the nature and number of this other — the relational difference as a certain kind of speaking population, a commonness — the cankerous other which, when appended to the initial equation between the voice and the listener,
problematizes this relationship by superimposing on it a possibility of another, an altogether different world order, of the deisher, no doubt along with its recombinant structuring of another voice. At the ultimate limit of otherness there appear other devisers as well as other darks and other selves. The narrating subjectivity of Company, emphatically renounced within the text, must be multiple and plural; the I shifts toward the he and again swings back to the you, ending melodiously in “alone,” as if to encompass all in one, the all-at-onceness of self. The different figurations of the self are captured through the polyvalent oscillation between alone and all-one, and through the ambiguity of reference, since throughout a person is viewed relationally, in the company of other personal pronouns, in reference to others. This composite, multiple subjectivity, subjected to pronominal shifts and posited amongst the interplay of voices, hearers, and devisers continuously lapses into he, you, forming a system of dialogic relations. “Personal pronouns as characters become the coordinates of self-visibility” (Locatelli 167), and yet the self can never become the finalizing consciousness since in principle, as a monad cast into the semantic universe, it is open-ended, an open-ended field of auditory mutations.

Insofar as a speech act can be taken to represent an act of consciousness, the multiple consciousness — the social realm of language — of Company proceeds through the calculus of articulations, each pointing to some hypothetical, mental being in the dark responsible for creating — uttering — the voice. At the same time, the consciousness is delimited by injunctions prohibiting the acts of consciousness to be subsumed under the first person subject. This staging of the other within the narrative of the self provides “mental activity of a low order. Rare flickers of reasoning of no avail” (45). The rupture occurring within the subject, who cannot contain himself but continuously spills into the outside, beyond the self
as a singular and locatable entity, puts forth the possibility of a de-individuated consciousnesses, a social consciousness as ground of thought processes.

The conscious lapsing of the subject into a narrative, where there may always “be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking,” and “where he could be potentially always overhearing a communication not intended for him” (9), eludes the problem of the naming of subject. Thus *Company* reaches the initial goal of *The Unnamable*, to create the unnamable, the unnamability as a way of writing, initiated already by Stein in her attack on nouns in *Tender Buttons*, yet this time not by adapting the epistemological nominalism of the trilogy but rather by dissolving itself into collective forms of utterance, collective voices. The fragmented self dominating the trilogy is replaced with the fragmenting image of discourse. The utterance — for example the constant “murmur in the mud” of *How It Is* — forms a discourse that functions as a “procedure of identification rather than the reflection of an *a priori* concept” (Locatelli 164), the self posited ahead of the speech, in charge of it. The ‘protagonist’ of *Company*, the multiple voice, and indeed at times the ghost of a voice, inaudible voice, no longer designates a pure consciousness, but the calculus of discursive possibilities, the movement of the voice that is not able to verify its own experiences of the world as converging within the same self due to the inanity of language, of words, but that can nevertheless consciously problematize language and overcome the skepticism regarding the nature of it. For, as *Company* attempts to show, regardless of their meaning, the multiple referential configurations and connections language is ‘naturally’ inclined to produce constitute a plane of coherence on which the self — selfhood — can be reassembled.
What is productive of the self or the subject is a system of procedures initially serving the purpose of self-identification, that develops into a complex narrative involving a group of speakers. In effect, the I can be easily exchanged and variously negotiated in the spirit of both its objective limits of reference and its immediacy being challenged. If the pronoun I is shown to be merely a semantic figure, and only thus related to other figures, it is essentially denied the substantial self: “[T]he I is a result of dialogical practices enacted by the conscious self with an unconscious self, a self as other” (Locatelli 172). This existential denial or, or to use a phenomenological term, ‘bracketing,’ is possible because the figurations of self are functions of the semantic rules adapted into the communication system, where pronouns are permanent existential possibilities and where, as different possible modes of representing the subject, they are necessary elements of the narrative of self.

A company defies the first person, or else preserves it only as a figure of speech, as purely relational, in other words, a material absence, a point on the intersubjectively triangulated grid of voicing. “Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. You cannot” (8). The prohibiting of the first person echoes the split personality of How It Is being used as a mechanical device that propels the movement of a life story as narrative. In a way, Beckett offers himself an elaborate conceit behind his autobiography, that he calls “the proposition” and articulates in the following terms: “To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past. With occasional allusion to a present and more rarely to a future… And in another dark or in the same another devising it all for company” (8). This emphatic denunciation of the first person, this tragicomic death of the author, the relegation of the author to the zone of interpersonal relations, is necessary, as Peter Murphy suggests in
Reconstructing Beckett, in order to overcome the narrative impasse of the I created in the last novel of the trilogy, The Unnamable. As shown at length in the previous section, the problem of subjectivity and subject formation of Foucault run their parallel courses in Beckett’s poetics.

Consider the following passage exemplifying the peculiar absence of the first person as agency within the narrative:

By the voice a faint light is shed. Dark lightens while it sounds. Deepens when it ebbs. Lightens with flow back to faint full. Is whole again when it ceases. You are on your back in the dark. Had the eyes been open then they would have marked a change. (19)

Striking in this passage is the initial sentence, “By the voice a faint light is shed.” From it, one can extrapolate two readings, one in which the light is shed near the voice (taking ‘by’ in the sense of ‘near’) and a second reading in which the voice causes the light to be shed (taking ‘by’ in the sense of ‘caused by’). Beckett’s use of the passive voice complicates the problem of human agency, creating a range of interpretive possibilities. In either reading, agency is technically — grammatically — absent, though in the second reading, that accords the voice particular powers, this agency is conceivable, indeed tempting to think through. Voice here stands metonymically for self, indeed possibly for a divine kind of self, that is erased nonetheless, reduced to one dimension-organ-function only, the mouth, as in Beckett’s play Not I. The second reading implies a resonant relationship between voice and light where the two are no longer linked yet somehow coincide, somehow, mysteriously. It would be too much to say that voice brings about light, but one is bound to formulate that thought, rightly or wrongly, since after all they are said to appear thereabout. There is a possible third reading
in which the light might be interpreted as a synaesthetic response to hearing the voice, save that, with a synaesthetic response, the light would have been marked regardless of whether the eyes were open or not.

Let’s notice another carefully staged ambiguity that Beckett is playing with. It has to do with the juxtaposition of “voice” and “you” in the passage. As was just observed, the initial sentence is ambiguous with regard to the presence and type of subjectivity. The first part of the passage comments on the light and dark, their appearances, strengths, associations with other phenomena, possible relationships, observed from a non-localizable, un-situated, so-called objective point of view. By introducing the pronoun “you,” Beckett awakens the reader from these musings and reveries. The “you are on your back in the dark” returns the reader to reality, marked here not only by the realization of lying alone in the dark, but also by the use of notable repetition of the text, a melodic refrain that sustains the entire narrative, reminding the reader that the narrative is just a system of voices inside the head.

When it comes to voices in the head and sound, philosophy does not offer a whole lot. The famous problem/question of George Berkeley, whether a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is there to hear it, is not really a question concerning sound in relation to self and/or being, but rather of the relationship between being and perception in general. The recent short essay of Jean-Luc Nancy’s, Listening, attempts to fill that void. In an aphoristic-poetic way, Nancy insists on a philosophical question par excellence, a question concerning the powers of philosophy, its capacity to understand, addressing a particular domain of understanding: “Is listening something of which philosophy is capable?” (1). Nancy pursues this problem relentlessly through the text, by returning to interrogations and methodologies of the sound-meaning relationship. In the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology, combining the
poetics of sensibility with a scientific precision of analyses of perception, he turns to the
relationships between sound and knowledge in a special area of social sciences, concerned
with the operations of persons — self as agency — in the world. Sound as a layer of what
constitutes the self, as engaged by Nancy, stresses the vibratory-affective constitution of the
self. “To be listening is ... to be on the lookout for a relation to self” (12). Listening, then, is
the reality and practice of access to the self, a way of sensing the I inscribed within a new
kind of spatiality, the space of pulsations, resonances, and fluid movement:

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for
it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it
opens me inside me as well as outside, and it is through such a quadruple, or
sextuple opening that a self can take place. (14)

If How It Is, as an image of writing, operates principally on the surface, the “fall into
fiction” of Company explores further the two-world order, the world of above in which the
“he” resided once, and the world of below in the darkness of which the “you” resides now
(Murphy 145). The polarity of the you and he, corresponding with the two lights, of above and
below, symbolizes two forms of knowledge, a divine-like devising of pure intellection or
reason, in the form of spoken words, indeed a coherent intentionality of speech, suggesting
some kind of intentional volition of language, and the affective material silence and darkness
of the sensible realm, where, as the voice of Company proclaims, “unable to continue you
bow your head back to where it was and with closed eyes return to the woes of your kind”
(59). Put another way, Company offers a discussion of two modes of being, of the deviser and
the devised, both in relation to speech and sound, the former being the source of the narrative,
however alienated from it, the latter being its auditory other, not materially present in the text
but residing in the auditory form of reading that the text promotes, lifting the words from the page even if only back to their silence of a silent or barely audible reading:

Why in another dark or in the same? And whose voice asking this? Who asks, Whose voice asking this? And answers, His soever who devises it all. In the same dark as his creature or in another. For company. Who asks in the end, Who asks? And in the end answers as above? And adds long after to himself, Unless another still. Nowhere to be found. Nowhere to be sought. The unthinkable last of all. Unnamable. Last person. (24)

Indeed, it is in *Company* that we come closest to capturing the Beckettian creator: alone on behalf of all his selves, carefully staging his spectacular absence. This peculiar position, of self in relation to his/her others, results in a form of social contract. At first, there is a sense of moral obligation on the part of the narrator in properly reassembling all the relevant selves, but there is also a sense of the competition among different voices for the authorial position, for taking over the leading voice. The project of legitimating autobiography initiated in earlier texts like *How It Is* leads in *Company* to a meditation on the status of an author — a creator of sorts recollecting his tumultuous past in the tranquility of solitude and old age — and considers the new kind of author as well as the “new non-authoritarian relationship between [the] author and others” (Murphy 146). Murphy shows how *Company* posits a collective subjectivity where utterance is never individual but functions as an aggregate of voices belonging to the community of speakers. Similarly, according to Gary Handwerk’s “Alone with Beckett’s *Company,*” the novella proposes “a new version of intersubjective identity” (66). This is the intersubjective self of television, of the self dissolved in the play of image.
While *The Unnamable*’s task was to deconstruct the identity of the subject by taking away from it the creative use of language, by subjecting it to utterance even against the will of the narrator/subject, in *Company* language plays a performative-creative role, offering continuous language games and riddles coming at one as it were from outside. This procedural scaffolding stipulating what can be said and under which conditions — the limits of sayability, to put it awkwardly — provides a plasma where the real — merely what’s being recalled and consequently previously recorded — resides in some way, though it’s not certain what way. Magnetic tape and radio, the former explicitly used in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, a play whose premise lies in rereading old diaries and reliving old moments lodged in the mind, are in the air so to speak. Although not intended initially as a performance piece, *Company* is an exemplary auditory text calling for a sound performance that involves one voice manipulated and edited on the recording console in such a way as to capture the range of timbres and auditory textures belonging to the multiplicitous flow of the voice of self. The self of *Company* rises to his own awareness in the repeated act of utterance, by compulsively mumbling to himself his own story, but by the same token sinks into the plethora of proliferating vocalizations, losing track of a stable subject position, becoming a listening subject subjected to a radio-like broadcast of the play of inner self. The initial ambiguity created by the voice coming to one in the dark is never resolved, and the ending of the tale is equally telling:

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till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. (63)
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The Unnamable strives toward leaving the self, toward a permanent deterritorialization in the form of othering; by contrast, the model of subjectivity of Company shifts in the direction of multiplicity, and through its open endedness evades the anguish of self. The self, as a form of temporal individuation, is the labor of love, as the opening of the novella establishes by showing the labor of birthing of the mother, the aversion to the pains and escape into mountains of the father, the communication of the maid announcing the successful birth, offering a stock Beckett joke on life: it begins by being over. The labor of individuating lies at the outset in the company — both a grouping and an organization manufacturing individuals with their sense of unique self. In Company, desire is divorced from any agent; it is a transparent veil that encompasses both the agent and the formal structures or agencies, the empty figures of speech that subjugate the agent, the futile poetic flow of sounds that articulates it.

Through its differential capacity, the multiple self of Company manipulates its memories, arranges and rearranges them, and combines them with different selves, which is how the externalization of memory takes place. Even though Company returns to the problem of self, it sees and listens to it as an active difference, proliferating its voices, and thus is opposed to the abstract other, which is a purely mental being, the self in inverted form. This difference permanently embedded within the self is not a negation but a productive and positive force; it multiplies subject positions in an attempt to provide — mobilize — company, manifested as echoes resonating through the hollow chamber of selfhood. “The test is company” (26). This different/differential self is both a memory machine playing its tapes, and a deviser, lodged somewhere deep in a recording booth of this auditory farce, a veritable creator of sound and tone relations: between voices, hearers, speakers; “crawling on all fours
devising it all for company” (27). The text of *Company* ultimately collapses into sound; becomes suspended in sound, in the midair of it. Though initially not intended for theatre, it was only logical to turn it so, to dissolve the text into sound, render it auditory without a trace of print.

How does one read and listen to Beckett in the context of McLuhan’s claim about the scandal of cubism and his explorations of television as the quintessentially Twentieth-Century medium undermining the logic of print? What justifies us in referring to Beckett as an artist of the ‘megaphone’? First, there is the musical immediacy of the narrative and the voice. The narrative/structuring device, signaled by Beckett in a letter to Kenner mentioned with reference to *How It Is*, the narrator/narrated, does not make a distinction between the act of description and the present moment described. Both are fused and this fusion is the way the text is constituted in the act of writing as well as how it operates in reading. In his late prose, Beckett creates this sort of fusion constantly, which is also analogous to the way sound works, and which I call ‘the televisual’ text.

‘The televisual’ as a designation of Beckett’s auditory writing is meant only symbolically to relate to television as a medium. Although Beckett wrote and participated in directing a number of important television plays (important in a sense that for Deleuze they mark the final step in the process of purifying language, effectively deconstructing and deterritorializing it), it’s not exclusively in television that such a project needed to take place. ‘The televisual’ and its relation to television, just as in the case of Stein and radio, was imagined and anticipated ahead of the actual communication technology and before its media domination that wasn’t fully realized until the height of Beckett’s work, from the 1950s on. In a sense, Beckett is a precursor of television, specifically of ‘the televisual’ auditory ambient
text, in the same way that he was one of the first writers to use a tape recorder in a play, and as the central character no less.

Inspired by McLuhan’s analysis of television in his *Understanding Media*, the concept of ‘the televisual’ as applied to Beckett is also a gesture in the direction of the Canadian media guru, whose comments on Beckett may be sparse, but whose interrogation of literacy and the regime of print and writing capture the essence of the Beckett project. Absorbed by Joyce, particularly by *Finnegans Wake*, McLuhan seemed not notice that a bigger blow to the typographic man as the centre of the Gutenberg Galaxy might have been coming from the auditory writings of Beckett, who, more so than Joyce, was proceeding through sound, listening, and touch to create a flicker of language-speech flashes, shedding a faint light on the printed page perforated with words punched through it. All this in the vicinity of a body of sorts, ghostly, invisible, yet whose breathing appears audible in spots only to sink into silence and nothing the next moment, dancing there, sonorously, in the grays of white on the page, making it seem alive and moving, as if on the way to be stilled again, yet remaining there, trapped in the oscillations of this effortless nothing and void, like life itself. Beckett’s writing proceeds by erasure, attempting through words, images, syntax, references, through fragmenting them, to get to the other side, to create a void as if telling the reader to abandon the text and read/hear beyond words, to the nothing gaping at one through language.

The domination of sight and vision as part of the domination of print culture and visual literacy resonates with a certain dominance of perspectival space not just in painting or sculpture. This perspectival space as the space of representation affects ways of thinking, thought too in consequence of being located spatially within the Cartesian grid of coordinates, navigating this space in the manner of a calculus figuration. In cubism, as in *How It Is*, there
is no longer a clear figure/ground distinction, as both figure and ground interpenetrate.

Cubism presents a unified thing that indeed is the heterogeneous oneness of a cluster, and this unification brings into the painting-image a number of simultaneous perspectives. The viewer becomes the listener of the twisted space, echo-locating within it, at any moment having to jump, as in an Escher sketch, from one set of abruptly ending stairs into an altogether different perspective.

Stein’s landscape plays may seem more confusing theoretically than Beckett’s prose due to the manner and the speed of their presentation, but they are in many ways even more interesting examples of the narrator/narrated approach. The plays are so fragmented, and the stage directions so fused with everything else, that as a reader one has to make sense of the text every step of the way by rendering it as dramatic writing taking place in the exchange between often numerous people invisibly-audibly present. Reading the plays out loud somehow kills them, though reading them silently is worse still. This is because each line or fragment is spoken somehow, but never by one singular voice or one specific character or group of characters. A line may be spoken by several possible characters, as in opera librettos and musical writing in general. The reader has to first and foremost imagine-understand what is going on, despite having very few if any clues. They have to constantly consider which voice is audible and how, which comes from where, with what intensity and with what pitch; they have to decide if the voice comes from afar or from close by, whether it is moving or still, if it responds to another one or coincides with it, if it is even a voice or a subtitle or a prerecorded sound, issuing from the radio, gramophone, or tape. A reader staring at the text has to face a chorus of virtual voices embedded within it, populating it, and passing through it, with the quality of sound, however slightly, constantly changing.
In their respective mappings of the resonant landscape/outside, Beckett and Stein differ in the quality of descriptive prose they generate, Beckett working more within the confines of syntax, carefully sculpting words and reducing their number to approximate silences, while Stein — scooping up a chunk of reality full of melodious verbalizations — multiplies words and inserts all the multitude into the text without much attention to questions of literacy. Beckett’s voice is a chorus of fragmented vocalizations in the head bleeding onto the page in short spurts to be read thus, in short spurts, without pausing before a break, in the manner of a swimmer dipping under water and coming out to breathe. Stein’s voice, alternately, is the chora coming at once from all possible directions. The voice as the chora coming at once from all possible directions is the thing that defines the 20th Century, creating amazing convergences and discontinuities, contradictions and systematicities, the ongoing play of possibilities that the postmoderns delight in.

Beckett’s immersion in writing, specifically his explorations of writing aiming towards exhausting, open up lines of related investigations concerning the problem of language and the self, a problem that has haunted the Twentieth Century. Inadvertently, Beckett follows the experiments of Stein with his use of semantically open systems, diving into a poetic of statements as opposed to logical propositions and phrases. Stein is concerned with expression using affective clusters of words, typically resulting in fantastically redundant verbosity, that can be understood musically and affectively as Deleuzian lines of flight, that is to say as waves of resonance where individual words are taken out of their logical and semantic boxes, and let loose, to sound, associate, and resonate freely. Statements produced in the course of this musical composing provide affective frames for a “meditative looking at the world,” that in turn imbues each component with its own relational/differential meaning.
Statements become the conditions of possibility of individual, specific phrases, seemingly nonsensical and disconnected from one another, yet remarkably consistent with the mode of thinking and expressing present throughout her work. They are the music of speech that gives meaning and content to individual speech acts.

With Beckett, this attention to the poetic of statement continues, and becomes the tactics of the dismantling of words and language as regimes of logic no longer applicable and, indeed, no longer available in the world of threshold forms reached by his literary sensibility and thought. In the extended soliloquy of Beckett’s trilogy, it is the soliloquizing machine of the statement that enables the continuity of speech acts to take place; here the famous paradox of “I cannot go on I go on” embodies the very rule of the formation of speech: it’s the way that, deep down, all speech works, in all of its gestures, recognizing and crossing the threshold of the impossible. Beckett’s auditory poetic, by boring holes in language, in fact reveals something universal about language: the conditions that make it possible, relevant, and poetic are independent from subjects, facts, truths, norms, or evidence. These very conditions are situated at a place where one abandons all hope and becomes the void: in the flow of the real, which is immediate. Statements enable the real; they are the conditions of possibility of meaningful glimpses at it. The power of Beckett’s prose lies there: in offering auditory glimpses of the real at the point where language and meaning dissolve. This particular insight into the operations of language, not unique to Beckett alone, is the precursor to Foucault, the analyst of statements, who in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things* lays down a new poetic for philosophical understanding.
CHAPTER 3: JOHN CAGE’S POETICS OF THE AUDITORY TEXT

3. 1. DJ Cage on Composition and Nothing

In this chapter I turn to John Cage as a representative anecdote exemplifying the auditory immanent or copresent composition taken up earlier in the chapters on Stein and Beckett. Cage indeed provides a conceptual grounding for this model of composition through a series of his conceptual performance pieces. My purpose here — an odd word in the context of an art that purposefully has no purpose, that disrupts the intention of arriving somewhere and allows for new directions to emerge as part of the process of the work and thought — is to glide over the selected works and fragments of Cage. In the spirit of sampling that animates his work, I show how the practice of auditory composition manifests a set of theoretical or critical questions regarding the role of the avant-garde in creating and opening up new experiences of understanding through sound and listening and the modes of perception and thought thus shaped. I imagine this chapter reading in spots like a series of critical vignettes concerning Cage, retelling or replaying well known facts and stories, as if in playing records. And so I imagine Cage as a series of vinyl records, and the following pages as tunes selected, sometimes followed and sometimes dropped, most of them very familiar to Cage’s fans. I recognize that Cage did not support the phonograph record as a medium of music listening, as he explicitly called to destroy as many of them as possible, but then DJing is exactly that, an act of killing a record by transforming the passive consumerist mind of the listener into an active creative mind of a doer, the artist-musician-performer who uses existing or found material as the materials to compose with.
In DJing one begins at nothing in particular, by grabbing a chance record and dropping a needle on it somewhere. Nothing, as a concept applied to music and aesthetics in general, as a direction or path of artistic practice, paves the way toward conceptual art. It is the nothing of the work in real time, the work being non-existent or consisting of nothing, which is replenished in a retrospective grasp and appreciation of the cognitive dimension of the experience, reconfiguring the experience as a process of searching rather than the absorption of the ready-made and packaged product of art. Cage is a notable representative and one of the pioneers of conceptual art, certainly in music. More importantly for the purpose of this thesis — as locating Cage or Beckett historically, in relationship to the avant-garde movements of the 1950-1990 period involved, is not my primary intention — nothing is a direction in composition; as a structural device, it aims at immanence, the copresence of its constitutive elements as a compositional tactic rather than a transcendent principle that subsumes the elements or parts, not that conceptual art and Cage in particular do not play around with this idea of transcendence; each work becomes unique in the application of structure because the structure isn’t imposed from outside but is part of the work and its unique processes. Broadly speaking, Cage’s is an immanent composition of the character of How It Is, self-creating from within its own content, without the distinction between form and content, metaphor and literality. It uses materials, like objects or other texts or found sounds, and it applies various procedures to them in a way that block the self-expressing agency and creates a sense of chance or non-intention, ultimately arranging just the elements and creating self-contained totalities or statements. It’s a composition as a system of points and lines and relationships, where all parts are connected to all parts, as in a Deleuzoguattarian rhizome. Even in sparse pieces like 4’33’, there is manifested a wild division of time into parts and
minutes and seconds, punctuated with the opening and closing of the piano, all this within the landscape of silence with no other movements than that of the expanding universe with its ongoing multitudinous buzz.

In specific cases in Cage’s works, this call for immanence translates into the use of voice as a musical element, in some compositions being the only instrument, which effects an intriguing engagement of the question of multiplicity and multitude, likewise manifested in Cage’s social anarchism, his diary writing, his use of multiple objects — and so a range of sounds not restricted to ‘orchestral’ sounds — and ways of making music. With regard to the relationship between composition and voice, Cage offers a series of works with the voice as a central or exclusive instrument, a set of aural voice performances akin to a lecture, in some cases being actual lectures. The text as the obvious subtext of a lecture is here transformed into an aural performance that addresses the voice or medium more than the language content, and in a Stein-like fashion returns to the problem of the lecture as form, as well as theory, elucidation, and meditation. Cage produces a score of influential treatises intended/designed as performance pieces. In line with the logic of nothing utilized in his music, however, his theoretical discourse, explicit at times, on the whole tends to be poetic, consisting of gestures, performance, and deliberate syntactical and logical fragmentation rather than coherent propositions and structures as required by the knowledge system of schools and academies.

In that regard Cage exemplifies a move toward the statement in the way elaborated in the previous chapter and broached in the chapter on Stein. This ritornello, to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari’s sound plateau, is not intended to enforce a conceptual continuity connecting Stein, Beckett, and Cage. The thesis takes up the model of the mosaic rather than the evolutionary historical analysis, calling on the ritornello indeed to indicate a discontinuity,
an artifact bridging organic units. Even if the idea of the statement as a distribution of points would not rightly apply to the analysis of works of a singular author or even a specific school — since on principle it is concerned with the whole curve of the social uses and understanding — it is a direction that the work itself takes in terms of its own composition and concern over the resolution of the problem of structure as well as the binary of content and meaning. In that regard, Cage continues in the vein of Stein addressing norms and types of coherence, the ‘sense of sense’ or the logic of sense as in Deleuze, specifically questioning some of the traditional modes of logic and norms of coherence, for example related to syntax. Meaning escapes the one dimensionality of clear affirmative or interrogative propositions, and becomes a swarm of voices and noise, a visualization as in a spatial projection, a diagram or concept, at times containing only empty words.

The conceptual orientation of Cage may be the influence of Marcel Duchamps’s refusal to participate in the business of art-making, aiming at producing non-works or counter works: events, statements, performances, provocations. His substantial body of works resonates across disciplines, from musicology to critical theory to literature. The group of Cage’s works selected here exemplify the coming together of text and sound, his extended literary scriptures constructing a de facto theory of sound, a textual ecology that hosts music, inflecting it discursively. As a conceptual artist, Cage is an indefatigable experimental writer bridging sounds and ideas, yet engaging both in the most unconventional ways.

This shift into text as part of composing, necessary to compose a credo or state a problem, but also a recognition of it as an aura of language at all times surrounding music and sounds, translatable into sound and deep down sound-like, is part of Cage’s conceptual deviation from the straight path. From the straight path, Cage deviates into the resonating gap
of McLuhan where theory and practice, form and content, materials and ideas coalesce into an
open-ended event with its specifics and variables. As medium, text offers a range of
orientations and degrees of theory, from explicit to nonsensical and non-verbal, pictorial,
diagrammatic, conceptual. Essays like “Composition as Process” and “Experimental Music”
in the collection *Silence* illustrate Cage’s ‘theoretical’ interest in music. Of course, they are
not technically theoretical since the line separating theory and practice is here blatantly
violated. More specifically, they represent Cage’s artistic and aesthetic practice of composing
using different materials: words, syntax, durations, sounds, and silences, where he does not
impose on these concepts-materials any categorical limitations and likewise does not limit any
chance of recombining and reconnecting them. For Cage there is no clear-cut distinction
between the various genres of writing and music making. Indeed for him there is no
discernible opposition between music and text. Cage’s writings offer literary scholars a rich
plot of material to study because they are purely textual, as in scripted, and yet purely voiced
and sound-like, as if language itself was at last bored through.

Cage’s theoretical treatises and statements offer the scholar a method of analysis for
the works themselves, though given that the distinction between theory and practice is
deliberately blurred or removed, the spiral of the infinite mirroring of analysis, constantly
looking at its own image and reflecting upon its own manner of operations, has to be
recognized as part and parcel of analysis. It is important to think of the spiral here as both
concept and sound, in the spirit of the phonograph record spinning as it were as we speak. The
point concerns the placement of ideas and concepts in relation to other things, spinning them
rather than thinking of them as fixed points of an objective analysis, which by itself has no
place or ground to stand on other than the movement of the spinning record. Cage postulates a
move toward “no ideas of order;” in other words, of no need to multiply ideas of order. For example, in “Composition as Process,” musical composition is taken as a movement away from ideas of order towards no ideas of order. This subversive turn in the face of the whole corporate machinery of music-making in its classical, popular, jazz and other niches is part of Cage’s ongoing commitment to nothing as a key concept and practice to frame the self and the world, indeed to reconfigure the world, seeing or hearing it differently, opening it to unstructured sound, open-ended organization, with attention to immanence and presence as modes of thought and sustainable being in its affective cognitive kinetic capacities.

Attention to sounds and the life of sound are the paths that take Cage there. Sounds for Cage amount to life and hence the connection with the auditory composition and mind frame that occupies me in this thesis. Cage is indeed the most representative of this kind of composition and understanding, through sound and listening. This equation, sound = life, may seem vague, but the vagueness begins to disappear if one considers the practice of sound making — of composing music — as a form of life philosophy, an active engagement with the creative and aesthetic — sensible — dimension of living rather than musical schooling. Cage’s music — and he is the composer of not just sounds but also of events, images, words, and ideas — is not reducible to theories and techniques of music. His theorizations are both serious and poetic, showing a dedication and a deep understanding of musical matter and also dismantling the very structure of theory. Sounds bring about an unforeseen situation; a multiplicity of centres in a state of non-obstruction and interpenetration. In such a situation, and under such conditions, the ego of fixed ideas no longer blocks the action, including the activity of thought, the action being a non-knowledge of something that has not yet happened, a fluency characteristic of nature. If this decentredness can be seen as nostalgia or a desire for
a complete experience, this closure in Cage would be of a performative nature. Toward the end of “Experimental Music,” he asks: “Where do we go from here?” And promptly answers: “Towards theatre.”

Aside from performance, there is another dimension of decentredness in Cage suggested at a theoretical or conceptual level: a non-verbal immediacy, a prelinguistic experience as non-mediated perception, at least non mediated by language as an orientation for aesthetics as well as understanding. Interested in the problems of perception and understanding, ironically as in mimicking the philosophical frame put forth in the Kantian critique of reason, Cage, as Michael O’Driscoll in his “Silent Texts and Empty Words” suggests, “can be said to participate in a much broader cult of experience played out in various guises in both Western and Eastern philosophies, that seeks to locate our engagement with the world in a sphere of prelinguistic innocence” (620). This prelinguistic stance has been observed earlier with regards to Stein and Beckett, in the ululational and musical approach to language in Stein, in the application of text as opera writings, as voices and melodies, refrains and harmonies, and in Beckett’s famous boring of holes through language, aiming to punch through to the other side of immediate affective auditory understanding, manifested in his texts as a plethora of voices ensconced in the voice of the narrator/narrated. As O’Driscoll further asserts in the article, “Cage... displaces the ethos of understanding with one of experience” (622), the displacement occurring as a result of removing the boundaries between life and art, work and its surroundings, however the latter may enter the picture or frame.

Thinking of musical material as inclusive of the environment, always merging with other sounds, Cage paves the way toward the indeterminate structure of compositionality that,
at the same time, remains controlled and accompanied by an insistence on purposelessness, an absurdity reappearing later in Zappa’s dadaesque “Anything Anytime Anyplace For No Reason At All.” One of the implications of indeterminacy is the redirection of attention toward process. Cage is one of the early practitioners of the idea of sound as process, and the whole movement of thought oriented around the concept of process as it applies to art and aesthetics as well as pedagogy, engineering, conflict resolution, and environmentalism. His junk sound sculpting — “sounds that happen in the environment” — arriving in response to Rauschenberg’s practice of collecting junk for his installation pieces, are an early mark of Cage’s interest in ecology, resulting in his intense attention to it in the last years of his life, and running as one of the important themes throughout his Harvard Lectures I-IV discussed in the last section.

If Cage’s approach to music-making can be rightly characterized by indeterminacy, organizational simplicity or weak structure, and a tendency to accept any sound or combination of sounds, then in a sense it embraces noise as the fate and essence of music, and in turn recognizes ideas and uses of machines, or technology in general. Noise may take different forms or guises, as for example in the rejection of structure and foundation, where as O’Driscol posits “the contingent and aleatory remain the only possible (non)principles of (dis)order, perpetually disturbing the surface of textual assemblage void of any stabilizing deep structure” (623). Further in the article, O’Driscol refers to the avoidance of structure as a “play of surfaces” (624) that characterizes Cage’s works.

This connection of the play of surfaces at the core of Cage’s ideas regarding composition as process as well as his understanding of the role of indeterminacy in it, are worked out to a large degree by his incorporation of magnetic tape as well as recording and
playback devices into his compositions. For example, toward the end of “Composition as Process,” Cage explicitly proposes the use of tape and playback as organizing musical material and aids to understanding what a musical environment might mean and what it could sound like. Working with tape and music synthesizers is here presented as a way of subverting one’s own desire to control and shape the environment; working with sounds in this way is no longer a matter of yielding to individual preferences or egotistic drives but a creative attitude that doesn’t anticipate anything in particular and is open to what may emerge in the process of letting things emerge, as an “action in a field of possibilities” (31). Similarly, in “Experimental Music,” Cage stresses how a record player and a tape recorder are media used not simply to record performances but also to make new music, and how this unique world of sounds is possible only because a recording device is treated as an instrument. In effect, Cage explicitly interrogates the relation between music and noise. What’s in the noise? Is noise in some dialectic relationship with non-noise or music, as a pair of opposites? For Cage noise is a question of presence, the ability to hear and interact with the environment that is material and that consists of actual sound waves. Anything can happen, as in his famous 4’33.” This ‘anything’ is noise.

Here’s where McLuhan’s notes on the phonograph/gramophone/record player become useful. In line with pursuing McLuhan’s comments on various media and the way that they together coalesce into a paradigm or mosaic of understanding, and certainly of communication, of mediation of thought, I stress the areas that resonate with the particular sensibilities applied in the artistic field where they may be additionally amplified or otherwise developed as concept-practices. In this sense, McLuhan’s presentation of the phonograph, as per its listing in the book of media — though today one would more likely want to refer to it
as a turntable or at least a gramophone, more in line with the current resurgence of the vinyl — resonates with the spirit of Cage’s project concerning indeterminacy, non-intentional intention and non-purposeful purpose, his renewed interest in the mechanics and compositionality of sound and language as immanent forms, his interest in small sounds and amplification, his interest and practice of chance as well as the actual use of the phonograph or related media, like the magnetic tape, in compositions. More than the actual gramophone/phonograph/record player/turtable, I am referring to the medium as image, concept, ‘megaphone’, particularly in the case of the phonograph from Cage’s boyhood, symbolic and transformed from a piece of middle-class furniture into an aggressive avant-garde noise instrument. I implicitly use the ‘megaphone’ as a figuration to engage Cage’s uses of recording devices and media and to address the larger question regarding the logistics and logics of playback and dislocation alongside immanence and presence.

As part of the project of tracing the auditory avant-garde of the Twentieth-Century in relation to John Cage, the final point of the chapter concerns the question of the avant-garde itself, very notably present in Cage’s provocations, that in many ways exemplify if not stereotype, the outrage of the avant-garde, the pushing of the proverbial envelope further than anybody could think of, faster than anybody could theorize.

3. 2. The Sound of Silence: Composition Recomposed

In the opening pages of his chapter on the phonograph, McLuhan confronts the “misconceptions [in its naming] as one of its early names — gramophone — implies” (276). McLuhan explains that in its initial uses, the record player was envisioned as a kind of voice box or machine storing data recorded as a result of telephone transmissions; in turn it was seen as a kind of dictaphone machine, or talking machine, a machine for recording voices,
inscribing them on a wax tablet in the way of ancient scriptures. The initial record player “was conceived as a form of auditory writing (gramma-letters)” (276), and “had to be seen as a kind of phonetic record of telephone conversation” (276). And so ‘phonograph’ and ‘gramophone’ were names that delimited the device as ultimately a way for preserving the voice and so extending it in time against the fleeting nature of its actual auditory existence. But “the entire electric implosion” (276) of the record player had to await the evolution of the radio and the invention of the magnetic tape in order to become revolutionized and freed from its mechanical trappings, to become an amazing communication tool of the electric age, creating the stereo culture, a virtual and portable music hall, and further extending what the initial device did to the rhythm of actual speech, forging new rhythms in music as well as creating new rhythms of the language of poetry (276). A few pages further, on page 281, McLuhan cites *Finnegans Wake*, specifically the condensation of language in Joyce as a device managing to squeeze the entire quaqua of the innumerable multiplicity of the human race into one sentence as ultimately conceived of in the electric age of the phonograph and radio.

In a sense, with regard to the record player, Cage takes us sideways, back to the mechanical trappings via the mechanical parts and motions of the device and forward to electric sound via the magnetic cartridge used as a sound making device, amplifying small sounds otherwise impossible to be heard and introducing a whole cosmos of sound. In his phonograph chapter, McLuhan mentions the experiments with the electric audiograph that led the psychologist Lipps to realize that “the single clang of a bell was an intensive manifold containing all possible symphonies” (277). Karlheinz Stockhausen, recognized and praised by Cage initially, was around the same time conducting similar experiments with sound,
compressing the whole length of a symphony into one single clang, and realizing for example how the nine symphonies of Beethoven sound distinctly as individual beeps. Cage’s aesthetic of small sound, treating non-musical things as articulatory auditory surfaces, in a way analogous to Stein’s *Tender Buttons* where the syntax splits into affective clusters of word-sounds, is part of the movement that represents the electric implosion described by McLuhan, the splitting difference/spreading difference of the acoustic field and consciousness freed from its typographic trap.

The fate of the acoustic in Cage is explicitly imbricated with the fate of music, but his continuous work with text and writings, increasingly involving these media in the workings of sound and music, also delimits the conceptual boundary of language in its pragmatic, informational functions, although without removing these at all and nonetheless pointing to the extensions of language that may correspond to multiple unforeseen yet social uses and dimensions. And so the acoustic — the dimension of sound comprising its noises, impossible silences, and rhythmic pauses, where rhythm and duration ultimately replace harmony — is connected in Cage with the future of not just music but communication and thought, perhaps with the latter more so than music itself. Indeed so, since Cage provocatively claims to have no reason to worry about the future of music, for music is simply a way of being/playing part of one’s sonic environment, a manner of listening to the world; from this perspective, the job of the composer is to create ‘soundscapes’ where listening can occur. For Cage, these are spaces of letting go of everything meant to order things, which is to say letting go of the very premise of composing as the form of a transcendent ordering of musical materials, and letting go of forms or standards as norms or normalized frames of organizing sound. While freeing the process of composing from any control cannot be literally accomplished in a composition,
particularly in a composition that has an individual author-creator-composer claiming its authorship, it is a relevant direction to pursue as a conceptual orientation related to decomposing and deconstruction in art. (Indeed, performance art seems to be ‘naturally’ suited to concept art where the object itself becomes displaced by the direction of thought of the perceiver facing a void.)

The decompositional direction helps Cage to orient his ideas and practice around composing as expression free from self-expression, an expression of a new kind that calls for a different kind of agency both on the expressing and receiving ends, if these might even be conceived as ends. To redefine composition, Cage must remove the composer from it, leaving composing as an act free from a particular creative form of intention. Composing happens when there is no purpose, no necessities, no privileging of any particular order, but an absence of ideas of order, an empty space void of segmentations where intentionality is given over to nothing, to a space where any shape, form or sound may occur for no reason at all. This open premise however does not mean that there is no composing at all. Indeed at times it involves strenuous work, as in hours spent cutting and splicing pieces of magnetic tape for what became Cage's first composition for magnetic tape, the *Williams Mix* in 1953, to follow along Pierre Schaeffer's experiments with tape started a decade earlier.

The *Williams Mix* as a concept outlines a dimension for music and art, auditory in orientation, showcasing the power of electronic playback in the processes of communication. The piece fuses the idea of work, concept, and performance, its only performance being the actual work, the master tape, comprising combinatorics and chance-determined steps and elements of the composing process, the idea being the medium of magnetic tape itself and playback as its salient feature. Though the *Williams Mix* took many weeks to splice together,
in a sense it does not differ from a work improvised on the spot or otherwise chance-determined and unique in its very performance. With regard to this kind of work, free from the actual control of the singular composer but free to evolve as it were, there is then no difference between the work, the idea, and the performance of it; as Cage writes in his “Composition as Process,” “nothing therefore is accomplished by such a performance, since that performance cannot be grasped as an object in time” (39) but rather is process, the becoming.

This becoming is also the immanent landscape of Stein’s plays with their immediate playback of fragmented impressions or molecules of sound/voice woven into the ululating textures. And it is similarly the immanent texture of How It Is, transcending its script, drilling a hole through language and the surface of writing reaching out to the other side of it, its voice, the ghostly voice of the innumerable multitude. This is the same all-inclusive attitude toward musical material one witnesses in Cage — the emphasis on composition as process, the choice of an experimental action the outcome of which is not known or cannot be determined — as it articulates an orientation around noise as the permanent possibility of a full range of sounds and musical events merging, a scape where all answers answer all questions. But it is likewise a scape where there is no longer any hierarchy of sounds, where “a recording of such a work has no more value than a postcard; it provides a knowledge of something that happened, whereas the action was a non-knowledge of something that had not yet happened” (39). It is in this sense that, implicitly at least, Cage speaks against the possibility of historicizing noise; the immediacy of noise calls for a non-knowledge approach — an openness of one’s mind to a field of possibilities — whereas history invariably offers a
knowledge of something that is no longer a process or event but a closed system of information.

The larger, more difficult question outlined in the opening pages of this thesis concerns the role of sound or the auditory in shaping the Twentieth-Century compositional sensibility. In Cage at least, the prominence of this question as well as the elegance of the solution along with multiple applications come to the fore. Increasingly, music is dissociated from the product and focused on as process, an experiment or field of possibilities. (Toward the end of one of his essays, Cage points out that “with tape and music synthesizers, action with the overtone structure of sounds can be less a matter of taste and more thoroughly an action in a field of possibilities” (31).) Freed from the structuring blocks constitutive of it in some traditional sense as a sequence of preordained parts, music becomes its own terrain, its lines, speeds, durations, harmonies emerging from the particular aggregate of elements composed. Ultimately, as in Cage’s ‘theoretical works’, his voice assertively proclaims that new music equals new listening; composition becomes irrelevant for ultimately we hear the listening itself. New listening is new composing, which itself is nothing other than absolute attention to the activity of sounds, increasingly teasing these sounds out of non-musical materials and things. For new music likewise means a disregard for instruments. Their range is too limited, and hence the tampering with them represents acts of sabotage, a form of aesthetic subversion. Silence becomes something else, not an absence of sound but rather the totality of it, the ambient space or scape whose nature is unpredictable and changing: silence as a space buzzing with life, full of noise. Silence is the sound of nothing in particular, just whatever is in range. In a way, it is a question of the range and what constitutes it, and how it
aligns with the range of perception in the mind of the listener, their capacity to make sense of their environment.

Let us note that Cage’s interest in silence is directly linked with his ongoing experimentation with structures, specifically with systems characterized by a low or zero degree of organization and no desire to articulate any harmony. Silence is paradigmatic of the quest for a perfectly indeterminate system; a length of silence as in Cage’s 4’33” used as a method of compiling and organizing musical material as an opening up toward any possible sound; for silence is a recognition and admission of anything that can happen. But silence, as Cage discovers, is not simply an absence of sound. In fact, the word absence seems rather inadequate in this connection. Technically, silence is a type of structure that in itself tends to be indeterminate in nature. Silence cannot be determined. It cannot be kept for essentially it never occurs: the movement of internal organs, the beating of the heart and the hum of blood pulsating through the veins — the hearing itself as it were — are never free of some sound. If there’s any sort of absence implied by silence, then it is at best the absence of authorial intention, the abdicating of power that privileges singularities and centres, or an admission that even the absence of intention is not quite possible but that different strands of intentionality and different threads of agency, however weak, may spontaneously form and disperse throughout the act of composing/listening.

The multitude of symphonies contained in the single clang of the bell or a beep, whether analogue or digital, is the thing that is released from the record player after it embraced the electric technology and released itself from its mechanical trappings. This reconfigured player, as turntable, as a musical box, capable with so much more speed and accuracy of spinning all of Krapp’s tapes without having to wind them onto spools and
without cumbersome rewinding and forwarding, is a medium that exemplifies playback and compression, as well as the spatialization of sound in its capacity to select and cue particular sounds and in its ability for the manipulation and transportability of sound. The record player, used as an analogue of the microphone through its megaphonic logic, releases small sounds. Sound becomes a powerful signifier as it compresses all content into itself, but then sound is no longer a point that can be written against another point as in a harmony exercise. Sounds are continuous waves that never go still as they transform and pass into other waves.

The notion of small sounds and the absolute attention to sound encourages a thinking and hearing of it as a multitude of symphonies packed into a single beep of auditory data: Cage finds in sound a dimension of spirituality that Ong insists on referring to as orality, manifesting a certain epiphanic/epiphonic dimension of sound as spirit. David Revill’s biography Roaring Silence shows that Cage was inspired early on by Fishinger’s comment on the spiritual dimension of things manifesting audibly as a set of vibrations. The idea of placing the audibility of sound right smack in its material physicality, the idea of hearing it as right there, transgresses a whole set of aesthetic dimensions, and crosses various aesthetic lines. Placed under such conditions, though, the physicality of sound becomes mystical or spiritual, resonating and affirming life and experience — sensibility. Cage sets out to explore the audible world and what this amounts to is the spiritual vibration of the world, of the ten thousand things, linking this auditory sense of being in the world with the sound of the everyday (Revill 52). Ignoring harmony, he turns his attention to structure, duration and organization, retaining a high veneration for all sounds, finding an infinity of them in the environment, and democratically opening up the field of music to include any form of production of sound and any sound instrument. “Cage opened the musical establishment to
the democratic ambience and semiotic ambivalence of aurality,” as Dyson asserts (374). An “art of noise” or an “organization of sound” was Cage’s preferred way to call his music; he pursues sound sources readily available in the world, actual sounds. For example, Living Room Music calls for any household item. This engagement of non-instruments and the sounds that modern technology provides echoes his early works where the radio and gramophone are treated as the unique sound instruments of the electrical age. Possibilities of found and invented instruments are explored. Prepared piano is one of the early examples of an invented instrument, in this case calling attention to the piano as a percussive instrument as well as extending it to comprise a whole ensemble, inspired by the sound of a gamelan orchestra. Ultimately, instruments are procedures calling for a certain vibratory reconfiguration of the world — later Zappa will say something similar about the nature of musical composition, comparing it to a sound sculpture — and the human/social conditions of actively residing there.

Attention to sounds, and to means of hearing what otherwise is not audible through amplification, leads to the aesthetics of small sounds. As early as 1939, in this mind frame of remaining open to sounds, Cage composes his first electroacoustic piece, Imaginary Landscape No. 1, where electronic and conventional instruments intermingle and where the boundary between them collapses. This piece illustrates a contemporary sonic landscape, desolate and yet thriving in sound, musically consisting of a series of test tones arranged compositionally, found sounds, analogous to Duchamp’s found objects, treated in the way ‘legitimate’ musical notes emitted from an instrument by a performing artist/musician would be. And so there is a turn to concrete sounds, otherwise meant to be ignored, discarded, treated only as measures of distortion/noise, as negative sounds. This Cagean aesthetic fits in
with the aesthetic orientation of the age, its legacy of dada, surrealism, musique concrete and Varèse; it predates, or directly precedes the quaqua of Beckett’s *How It Is*, the voice within and the voice of the page, the voice in between, suspended within/without the reader, the voice of the inner bowels of the system of speech and communication, the body electric of the communicational apparatus, a voice on its way to become pre and post articulated. Beckett’s attention to the physical actuality of voice, its soundness, resonates with the way test tones punctuate the auditory landscape of *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*. Integrating all the faculties of the body through the order of composition becomes the highest use of music for Cage (Revill 94). Composition is a way of organizing-structuring, and questioning this organizing-structuring, as it encompasses the chaosmos of matters and perceptions — percepts — into a system of structural relationships, as a statement, gesture, point, experience, or model of thought. Composition becomes a highly existential position, a problem of life and living, emphasizing the non-verbal, non-discursive layer of life in its organic life-like formation/formulation and stunting discourse itself in the same way Beckett’s *How It Is* skilfully does.

“Cage was … seeking a music that does, rather than one that speaks — one concerned with the activity of the vibration of sound, rather than with the use of sound to talk about something” (Revill 122). This active music calls for active agents, sounds themselves. In one of his late interviews, Cage remains consistent on that score, stressing how sounds themselves, just sounds, are enjoyable, not owned or otherwise contained by anybody, free to sound out on their own. Cage finds meaning in music problematic because meaning is not naturally presumed in sounds despite that this is where it would naturally seem to belong. And so the meaningfulness of sound is not regarded as the actual component of music, which is
largely associated with its social and cultural ways of understanding, being a part of a paradigm of listening/hearing which has little to do with the music itself. The quest for meaning is always part of the larger quest of making sense, of taking in the world and calibrating it to a presumed master significance, imposing a logos on it and so limiting its actual experience. Meaning imperializes music, and whatever deep down constitutes it, its acts, practices, materialities. This take on meaning is likewise what Attali’s \textit{Noise} shows by framing music and its social forms to fit with particular epochs, their social and political structures, as part of their particular logic and subsumed under their regimes.

Cage’s \textit{4’33’’} as exemplary of a rebellion against the regimentation of sounds breaks a particular social sound barrier of music, puncturing a membrane of hearing, reaching the limits of its social listenability, ultimately revealing the other sound of music, its other social face. In the case of \textit{4’33’’} this other face is a wide open ecology, a face dissolved into the multitude of faces, simultaneous and unconditional conditions and acts of hearing. But attention to sounds themselves also means dissociating them from the particular syntax that binds them into ready-made meanings; hence the Cagean rejection of harmony and his seeking other ways of harmonizing or structuring sounds — alongside a new recognition of what comprises musical matter in the first place — having more to do with actual musical material, timbres, vibrations, durations, pitches, revealed particularly well through the new technologies of sound. Sounds ultimately take over the compositional process, liberate it from value and meaning, opening up a truly aesthetic dimension of sensibility/experience free from judgment and norms.

The use of chance operations in deciding on the order of composition and the nature of sound evidences a radical approach to the meaning of sound, aiming at “the suspension of
likes and dislikes essential to Zen” (Revill 152), yet aiming spiritually even mystically with regards to everyday sounds. Cage compares chance to a leap “out of reach of one’s grasp of oneself” (qt. in Revill 152), out of one’s own mastery, that mastery imposed through a system of education/understanding, a pattern or habit of thought/behavior. A peculiar leap of faith, finding solace not in the intention of the mind clinging blindly to self, but resting in the larger non-intentional environment of auditory actuality, comprised of an uncontrolled simultaneity of events. Chance dislocates intention, splitting it rhizomatically into a multiplicity of paths, possible answers/positions, “freeing the ego from its taste and memory” (qt. 152), the way of the world replacing the way of the self. Non-intention is still a kind of intention, exercising some degree of taste, in the sense of being directly/actively involved in a project/experience, wanting something, pursuing a particular concept or example. Perhaps it would be better to call it a form of deindividuated intention, intention not readily assignable to a particular synthetic unity of experience as Kant would think of the self. Desires, drives, wants may still take place — Cage himself speaks of a minimal amount of organization necessary for survival — but they are essentially free, dissociated from the will, setting emotion and the sense of self free (152). Chance discards the mastery of self possession, of the possessiveness of the mind, inducing a meditative/contemplative mind open to the multiplicitous ways of experience. Chance offers to “free the mind from its desire to concentrate” (qt. 156).

Perhaps at the bottom of all this rebellion is “a neoromantic nostalgia for the prediscursive” as Frances Dyson puts it in the opening paragraph of “The Ear That Would Hear Sounds In Themselves: John Cage 1935-1965,” suggesting that a turn to the sounds themselves represents a return to the prediscursive dimension of music. In this context, Dyson confirms Cage’s interest in the spiritual, talking of the “anchoring of [Cage’s] philosophy of
sound and life within the darker folds of a mystical and metaphysical notion of existence” (373). Dyson calls attention here to the problems of sonic representation and musical meaning preoccupying Cage’s aesthetic, pointing out an ambiguous play at work in a double conceptualization of sound, along “the phenomenal and metaphoric determinations of aurality” (373), clashing noisily. Dyson examines Cage’s retreat into silence as it manifests at the edge of this double conceptualization of sound, as phenomenon and metaphor, splitting life from representation, separating locations and moments (374). Silence is not absence but “a presence whose essence is actualized even when its sonorous potential is not” (380).

Dyson reports and discusses Cage’s comment that he relates radio waves to light waves (380), radio waves existing in the ether in the form of distribution, “mystical and sublime” (381), non-locatable, uncentred. Radio waves and sound represent an idea and are a process without imposed values (382), related to the idea of sound as an object and objects as inherently possessing sound (389, 387) so fundamental to Cage’s aesthetics. Dyson stresses that many of Cage’s ideas regarding sound came about as a result of his search for silence (387). Cage began utilizing the chance operations of the *I Ching* to compose (393); his ideas of chance were developed further as a method for the composer to work with an absence of intention (397). The essay concludes with notes on further investigations into absolute music and its relationship to the sublime (399), discussing Cage’s assertions of the need for an absence of a tonal quality in achieving the sublime through an attempt to reach a void, a silence so pure it cannot exist where there is life (400).

Radio is explored by Cage in its complexity, not just as a symbol of the electric age. The symbolic-esoteric associations of radio with radius and radiation play a somewhat insignificant role in this connection. Instead, Cage is interested in radio effects, what a radio
can do as a sound emitting device, a ready-made instrument that can be explored in a musical
ensemble as a portable — transistor — sampler full of unpredictable noises and music
relentlessly assaulting the collective ear. The technical aspect — demonstrating the extension
of the mechanical ear, the idea of technics colonizing the body as part of its media extensions
— marks the horizon of the possible — what the radio can do, as in a Deleuzian what a body
can do — emphasizing the social material reality of radio as an exemplary Twentieth-Century
technology of communication and transmission of messages.

The radio is taken up by Cage insofar as it contains a recorded/broadcast intent from
another agency/source. This agency/source can be played or operated on in highly
unpredictable ways, say by twelve performers simultaneously blasting or quietly playing their
radios, as well as constantly changing stations and catching a lot of static in between as in
*Imaginary Landscape No. IV*. The problem lies in probing the radio to reveal its specific
effects, of creating a form of interacting with it to release its special powers, as in McLuhan-
like experiments with media studied for their impact on the body. Let us stress that Cage’s
attitude toward the radio and his intention of using it as an instrument in a chance generated
composition was a conscious decision, neither an impulse of turning to a tool that happened to
be ready at hand, at an ear’s distance from the composing hand and mind, nor the result of a
chance operation.

What motivates Cage in the first place to use the radio is a problem subsequently
addressed in a long conversation with Morton Feldman, a close friend and member of the
same circle of avant-garde American composers (“John Cage and Morton Feldman In
Conversation, Radio Happening I of V recorded at WBAI, New York City, 1966 - 1967, July
9, 1966”). In the course of the conversation/dialogue/exchange covering a range of concerns
about the condition of contemporary music and society, Cage asks provocatively what a
composer should do in the face of radio sounds confronting them and disturbing their
compositional process. Whereas Feldman insists unequivocally on shutting the door to
separate himself from the noise, to retain his meditative quiet, Cage proposes to open the door
wide, not only simply to allow the annoying radio noise to enter the space of composition but
to amplify and expand all this noise, to throw it back as it were at an audience already
mesmerized by the technology, ready to dance to its proliferating messages. What interests
Cage in the radio, then, is social ecology radiating from and pulsing through an electric device
that forges new and unprecedented relationships with and within music.

Performances of Cage’s radio pieces like The Imaginary Landscape No. IV are a
perfect example of the fluid presence of the shifting social context inadvertently embedded in
the piece. Composed in the 1950s, the piece comes to a new life every time it is performed,
for every performance of it requires a set of radios tuned to different stations broadcasting
current programming, news, talk shows, advertisements, music and so on. The use of radio,
then, is a statement about the radio’s presence in culture, the new social roles emerging from
and assigned to it, a social commentary on the system of power relations involved. On his The
Man From Utopia album, Zappa facetiously proclaims that “the radio is broken / it don’t
work anymore.” For Cage, who passionately disliked mechanical music, playback, and
recordings, the doors of radio perception remain open, though refreshingly radio sounds
nothing like itself.

In his experiments with magnetic tape, the record player, and radio, Cage steps right
into the typographic conundrum of the Gutenberg man, and takes the listener from radio as a
playback device, which is largely how we understand it today, as a way of replaying favorite
music arranged into niches and demographics, back to the liveness of radio the way Stein might have thought of it, as a society, a polity, fostering collective understanding, dialogue, social consciousness and cooperation. Radio in Cage, skillfully manipulated on the operating table of modernity, explodes with a slice of social/sonic reality, a snippet of jazz, a piece of news, a weather report, a speech, the statement of a politician or the sound of a live event. Radio in its application and in its very idea differ. As a conceptual artist, Cage the prestidigitator reveals the idea. The idea still carries to an extent the presumption of liveness, of the always already now moment being broadcast; radio is just the way sound travels, in radio waves, and radio waves are the way to understand the universe from the earthly vantage point, as oscillations, a vibratory pulsing of the presence stretching forever in all possible directions at once, in relation to all points and lines, as voices and the soundness of things.

3. 3. Empty Voices Raging: Toward an Auditory Reading of Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing”

In sound — whether hearing, making, or contemplating it — the distinction between form and content does not exist. It is important to think of this non-existing distinction not as a metaphysical mystery but as the empirical reality of sound insofar as this reality designates the sonic element of sound, namely pitches, durations, and timbres, in other words the intensity, and not the cultural meanings associated with sounds and their uses. Sound channeled into particular social uses is what music dramatizes through a highly structured organization and set of specific roles assigned to it, a position on music championed, for example, by Jacques Attali. Obviously this sort of channeled sound is subjected to rhetorical and semantic analyses just like language and speech are, though the poetic immediacy resides in sound to a larger extent than in language and words, which are far more burdened with
reference and signification. Music, received, processed, and thought of in terms of sounds, affects, and intensities, carries a certain potential already lost even in poetry, more naturally than other genres inclined to challenge semantic norms and relationships within language otherwise used as a tool of communication.

M. C. Richards, commenting on the work of John Cage in *A John Cage Reader in Celebration of His 70th Birthday* effectively articulates this immediate potential of music by opening her short essay with “[t]he union of mystery and sensory exactitude makes music a possible metaphor of reality” (38). The union here is the explicit coming together of radically different spheres — sensibilities — of human wholeness, the spiritual and the scientific orientations fusing into a form of spiritual certitude, so dramatically searched for and comically botched within religious quests and dogmas. Richards’s poetic exploration of “music as witness to reality” (38) is particularly apt with regards to Cage’s project where “strictly musical questions” are set aside (Cage qt in Richards 39) to open up spaces for what Richards calls “a musical apprehension of the world” (39). Music, though by no means all of it, but rather a certain potential of it discovered by Cage, is the model of the auditory immanence and copresence signaled in the previous chapters with regards to text and language as media, where the musical connection manifests in the non-conventional usage of words and the treatment of them largely as sounds, refrains, melodies, melodic motifs, noises. The texts of Stein and Beckett are instrumental in articulating this auditory immanence at a conceptual level, as a space of apprehension of both the medium and its capacities, and the world as a composite of meaningful elements.

It is in this sense, as a space of possible apprehension, that sound becomes unique theoretically as both a concept and a practice. Let’s clarify: the form-content distinction
remains perfectly coherent with regard to conventional music, even if it causes some confusion in the case of an instrumental piece that is not so-called program music, in other words, an instrumental piece not intended to tell a story or represent anything. But even this confusion doesn’t exist for a musicologist for whom the use of harmony and other technical aspects constitute the form in contrast to the overall feel of the piece, its mood or ambience, even its intuitively grasped melody. In this sense, a musicologist may approach music the way a literary scholar would tackle a poem, taking notes, chord progressions, transpositions, and inversions as formal devices analogous to the way metre, rhyme, alliteration, and a score of figurative language devices are considered formal elements of a poetic text. The distinction between form and content would seem more comprehensible in the case of poetic texts by comparison with music or plastic art. In any case, the distinction between form and content doesn’t make sense as an analytic method of approaching experimental texts that explicitly tamper with this very distinction, creating a type of fusion text. This fusion text is what I call — following McLuhan — auditory.

The auditory is the fragmented text of the phonograph, telegraph, radio, and advertising systems, dislocated from the logos of print and forcing its new reconfiguration; reembodied, passing through a mediatized and electrified body suddenly aware of its new extensions, its speed, intensity, and radiation. The auditory is the text of Stein and Beckett, ululating and murmuring, breathing and laughing, trampling joyfully and nauseatingly over the established forms of coherence with their emphasis on syntax. The shifting relationship between text and sense is in essence the new aesthetics, that as Cage postulates in the prefatory words to his “Lecture on Nothing,” begins with the artist trail-blazer, independently of the standards of beauty, indeed at a place and time where beauty ends: “Where does beauty
begin and where does it end? Where it ends is where the artist begins. In this way we get our navigation done for us” (108). Cage proposes here for “our navigation” to take us away from the norms and the canon of beauty, toward the ordinary, boring, uninteresting as spaces that could be constructively explored (as he admits much later, for example, in response to criticisms of his Lectures I-IV).

Stein’s narrative-descriptive reconfiguration of objects in Tender Buttons anticipates the experiments of Stockhausen and Cage with so-called small sounds, involving the close miking of different objects to render them musical and capable of generating novel new sorts of sounds. The fragmented sentences of Stein’s Tender Buttons, splintering into words as small units of non-syntax, of syntagmatic clusters calling for an affective logic of tone, melody, and an insistence to understand, finds its analogue in Cage’s radical approach to words and language manifested in both his musical compositions and lectures, that like his “Lecture on Nothing” or Lectures I-IV are performance sound art pieces.

In the Preface to his “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage testifies: “The most amazing noise I ever found was that produced by means of a coil of wire attached to the pickup arm of a phonograph and then amplified” (117). When amplified and electrified, any surface tapped, rubbed, or scratched becomes a tender percussion set, offering a sort of drumming no longer based on banging a military-inspired snare drum to the 4/4 beat of marching armies, but inherently polyrhythmical, offering textures and a tactility absent from the set of sounds institutionalized and legitimated by a symphony orchestra. Such experiments involving sophisticated recording technologies, approached in the alternative, non-commercialized manner of an experimental artist-child — “values independent at least from Life, Time, and Coca-Cola” (117) — releases into music the vibratory soundness of the world, a musical
rhythmic anima of things in the very material spirit of their molecular pulsating structure. Cage’s experiments with amplification, for example in his Five Stone Wind and Cartridge Music, that become deeply meaningful and immediately comprehensible at the point when the listener no longer consciously listens or makes sense of them, bring music back into the world from which it was separated through centuries of institutionalization and control. The separation resulted in a limited understanding of music and its social role.

Stein’s innovative portraiture of objects in Tender Buttons, breaking away from representational conventions and searching for a non-mimetic, dynamic, resonant-relational-cubist descriptions of things, proceeds through the dismantling of the grammar of a sentence. By consciously moving away from grammar, Stein can release an extraordinary melodious richness of phrasing closer in spirit to the thing described, in the manner of mapping rather than tracing. As with portraits of people, as Stein reasons in “Portraits and Repetition,” portraits of things ought to be “as they are existing and as they are existing has nothing to do with remembering anyone or anything;” it has nothing to do with semblance or resemblance. And she adds, “that thing existing” is no memory but “a continuously moving picture,” as in cinema (105). In an analogous manner, in his musical practice, Cage opposes harmony and conventional chord progressions not for the sake of rebellion but to release “that thing existing” in sound and sequences of sound, in ambient noises and found sounds, like the police sirens he laughs about in “Lecture on Nothing” he was required to have a New York City Police Department’s permission to use. That thing existing has nothing to do with resemblance or a memory of what one knows, what the listener already comprehends and expects to hear over again, but all to do with the capacity to hear sounds afresh, to perceive experimentally by twisting and subverting one’s own intentions, judgment, and taste.
The objects of Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, composed of language but resisting it, its microchips or small, not-quite-words pushing the language to its very edge, reappear in the spirit of her experimental poetics in the introductory note, a preface to lecture: deterritorialized from fixed taxonomies, free from symbolic ties connecting them to cultural norms, rearranged and televisualized (moving constantly as in a cinematic representation) in relation to the material thought and gaze of the onlooker, intensified by the electric pulsations of their factual-molecular being:

Of course, there are objects. Who said there weren’t? The thing is, we get the point more quickly when we realize it is we looking rather than we may not be seeing it... And object is *fact*, not symbol. If anything is going to take place, it has to come out from inside the Mason jar, that is suspended in *Talisman*, or from the center of the rose (is it red?) or the eyes of the pitcher (looks like something out of a movie) or — the farther one goes in this direction the more one sees nothing is in the foreground: each minute point is at the center. (108)

Stein’s call to act against the center gains a less mysterious and more precise meaning in the context of this introductory note. The aim of Stein was to dismiss a singular intention lodged within a fixed agency, proposing instead an intersubjective, resonant intentionality of a cluster or group of agents, and at the same time to observe the multiple within the singular, each minute point being indeed a resonating-vibrating pattern of presences. Objects were not words with their fixed referents but multitudes of sounds, affects, semantics, sense. Thus the carafe of the opening section of *Tender Buttons* is constituted not as a singularity but as a complex pattern of relationships which refer back not to a singular viewer but a virtual viewing involving a simultaneity of many points of view. This resonant simultaneity of the many within the presumed oneness of a common household item is what brings about the perception
of musicality and the soundness of things. This program operates from the outset as a series or, better yet, a circle of interconnecting lines and implicitly; whereas in Cage the same program is laid out in however idiosyncratic and performative-poetic texts which nonetheless maintain conceptual cohesiveness and coherence, and offer explicit, provocative claims concerning music and art in the way of manifestos.

Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” returns to the provocative premise of Stein’s “Composition as Explanation,” offering a performance lecture that explains nothing other than itself, its own system of coherence with its own rhythms, durations, pulsations, and ... wit. Cage is creating here a poetic repetitive composition that brings to mind a piece of music with repeated motifs but with a chorus appearing in one solid piece done seven times in a row rather than after each verse.

In a gesture of setting content aside to address poetry as form, Cage indeed proceeds to dismantle the binary between form and content by stressing performatively the rhapsodizing nature of language and speech, contained within a segmentarity and compositionality of words and phrases, possessing natural musicality as pitch, duration, timbre, and tone, qualities that likewise define what music is, at least music in the sense of the activity of remaining attentively open to the open field of sounds. The attention of sound to itself, its own rhythms and pulsations, enables Cage to create a peculiar distance to the words on a page, peculiar because by the same token, treating words poetically as musical sounds makes them immediately present, not distant, vibrating in and around straight meanings, slicing through them.

The text of the lecture is poetic in the way manifestos are, employing a certain liberating style of thought, quick, aphoristic, fragmentary, but otherwise perfectly coherent in
its individual impulses and statements. Yet as a whole, the text remains non-referential, or better, self-referential, focusing on its own rules of formation and meanings, the intentional non-intention that fragments discourse, stripping it of deeper significance. In this sense, the text is no text but rather voice, obviously a carefully prepared voice, scripted with painstaking attention to the effects of its sounding out in a public space as well as its exactitude of poetic line, but ultimately operating as just a voice unfolding from within itself, immersed in its own vocalization as the only compositional objective and tool, burbling to the surface in the continuous present. The lecture mimics the pulse of life peculiarly curious about itself, taking language — words, punctuations, inflections — as musical material and producing the auditory articulation of the Zen-like life-mind gazing at and listening to its own murmur.

The non-referential nature of the lecture is best exemplified by repeated attention to the structuring of text, the time in the composition, as Stein would call it, that occupies a fair portion of the lecture and is consistently repeated with slight variations, as in the following passage:

That forty minutes / has been divided into / five / large parts, / and each unit / is divided / likewise. / Subdivision / in-volving / a square root / is the only / possible subdivision which / permits / this micro-macrocosmic / rhythmic structure / , / which I find so / acceptable / and accepting / . (112)

Although on the surface it may seem like Cage is very exact and serious with regard to the organization of the text, in fact his particular structuring is of no consequence, a mere chance operation. It is not clear why “subdivision involving a square root is the only possible way” and indeed the point seems irrelevant. This particular subdivision is only necessary from the standpoint of this particular performance-lecture, articulating itself factually and exactly in the
very unfolding of the piece; a different subdivision would have provided a different pulse and
ambience, but then it would have been a different talk. As is the case of Jackson Pollack’s
rhythmic paintings, each particular distribution of paint has its own deepest meaning within
the reality of the piece and for no other reason at all; this structural arbitrariness is captured by
Cage with the realization: “As you see / I can say anything / . / It makes very little / difference
/ what I say” (112).

It is as if Cage indeed had nothing to say and needed urgently to communicate that
fact, and in order to fill the silence of the lecture hall with something, kept telling whatever
story he could muster. The opening contention of the lecture comes close to such a position,
for in fact Cage says that “what silence requires / is / that I go on talking” (109). The
confusion has to do with the concept of nothing, its essential non-referentiality and self-
contradictoriness: as an absence of something, absence of anything, ‘nothing’ cannot point at
or name anything, and whenever uttered it ceases to be what it says it is. ‘Nothing’ is an
empty word, and Cage delights in the use of such purely contextual words, for they derail the
logic of discourse in spite of its multiplication. “Nothing more than / nothing / can be said”
(111). It’s comical to hear how he begins to sound like King Lear with his ‘mathematical’
ideas about nothing and zero. But the provocation here lies in a parody subverting
expectations that concepts and their relationships can actually explain anything. The nothing
is the nothing is the empty word, void of specificity, clarity, meaning. Empty
words are like sounds taken out of their semantic-harmonic sequences, suddenly turning into
sign-waves and sound particles, evading conceptual thinking altogether: it, there, his, at,
nothing.
One could reasonably say this is a lecture on nothing in particular, and such a reading makes sense given the content of it, musing on this and that, shifting directions, switching from one thing to another in the manner of a person in the woods hunting for mushrooms or ideas. But the actual title is accurate. It emphasizes a need for nothing, the poetry in it, the necessity to reduce intentionality and the constant hunger for things in art, thought, and life, and move towards the appreciation for a Zen-like openness to anything, free from particular desires and needs. “Each moment / presents what happens” (111). The manner of bringing about such an emphasis seems to lie in talking about nothing in particular, for nothing can only be approximated; it’s not a thing but a practice, a form of attention, attention not to the content but the compositional organization, the form.

What I am calling / poetry / is often called / content. / I myself / have called / it form / . / It is the conti-nuity / of a piece of music. / Continuity today, / when it is necessary / , / is a demonstration / of dis-interestedness. (111)

In this vein, as if constantly searching for something to fill the void, Cage repeatedly updates the audience on where they’re located in the lecture-text, mimicking their rising attention to time, and anticipating them to be checking their watches only a few minutes into the lecture: “At / this par-ticular moment, / we are passing through / the fourth / part…” (112). Given that the structuring of the piece is of no consequence, and given that its content proper — what one would ‘naturally’ expect here to be the content, statements, stories, and insights — relies almost entirely on the structuring, it follows that content too is of no consequence, being at best a momentary manifestation of itself, producing what epiphenomenologists would call a puff of smoke, a thought bubble intended to appear and pass by, the way Kansas pulses outside the window of a car of a person passing through it, as a momentary impression-image,
not even a memory to hold or ponder since essentially it is disconnected from other moments. In effect Cage explicitly admits: “most speeches / are full / of ideas / This one / doesn’t have to have / any” because “each moment / is absolute, / alive and signifcant” (113).

Near the end of the third large part of the lecture the already broken structure is broken again by the beginning of a story which is of course an allegory supporting the theme of nothing, about a man who just stood, for no reason at all. The structure of the piece is interrupted again at the end with the non-lineated statement/coda, “All I know about method is that when I am not working I sometimes think I know something, but when I am working, it is quite clear that I know nothing” (117). Here Cage seems to be recalling St. Augustine’s famous teaser about time: ‘I know what it is when I don’t think about it but lose my insight whenever I direct my thought at it.’

It is notable that the silences in the notation of “Lecture on Nothing” are particularly emphasized, not only stressing the conventional role of silence in hearing musical notes, but also fragmenting discourse to underscore a dimension of meditative melodic thought within speech, indeed to release the non-intentional thought as an expression of life buried underneath the communicational drivel of the everyday. To get to the bottom of this drivel, Cage makes no effort to avoid it or replace it with poetic turns of phrase and striking metaphors. The entire discourse consists in piling up commonalities, such as “Arizona is more interesting [than Kansas]... especially for a New-Yorker who is ... interested in everything” (110); or “I also met America’s youngest college president. However, she has resigned, and people say she is going into politics” (113). Such statements, indeed most of the content of the lecture, including personal musings and anecdotes, strike one as non-poetic and uninteresting. Neither diction nor content is on Cage’s radar, and witty insights are employed sparsely.
Instead, Cage is interested in the form of discourse, in what one can do with words, slowing them down, inserting odd pauses between them, using the mimicry of speech that can reinflect phrasing and words to release their musicality, to bring about in the words of Stein “that thing existing” in discourse.

Cage gives precise instructions for reading the lecture:

- Each line is to be read across the page from left to right, not down in an artificial manner (which might result from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page), but with the rubato which one uses in everyday speech, (109)

clarifying that the unconventional appearance of text in four columns per page is to be ignored as a visual clue; the visual distribution of text is clearly there, but it doesn’t have to serve any immediate practical purpose. It provides a certain affective aura to the text, emphasizing empty spaces between words, stressing the difference as a permanent possibility in words and things, showing that there’s poetry in everything, in every word and in every sound, and there’s joy in releasing it the way it already is, by no special means, with just an awareness of language and its operations, with attention to the way language speaks us.

The nothing in the lecture is not the nothing that is spoken of within the text but the lack of clear reference to anything outside the written lecture. This lack of reference comes very clear with a comparison to the cadence of an oral rendition of the empty spaces in the “Lecture on Something,” “the empty spaces, omitted in the printing but to be encountered below, [as] representative of silences that were a part of the lecture” (128). The actual words in both lectures are of no consequence. This lack of consequence with regard to words (or relative lack, for words are employed in both cases as words, neither to be fetishized nor to be
dismissed) was observed already in the case of Stein’s “Composition as Explanation.”

Preparing for her short lecture tour of England with scheduled engagements at the seats of European learning and knowledge in Oxford and Cambridge, Stein inadvertently anticipated McLuhan’s teaser, the “medium is the message,” wanting clearly to question the highly specialized and formalized role of the medium of the lecture within the university system, and pushing for an open and holistic understanding of what a lecture could be, what it could do as a type of composition involving words and sounds, as a creative act intended to provide the audience — university students — with valuable insights. Sensing the blurring of difference between form and content, Stein implicitly began with a premise that the lecture as explanation could take different forms, ranging from logical proofs, to articulate verbal expositions, to story-telling, to poetic performances and manifestos, to non-verbal and/or musical demonstrations. In her explanation, Stein stresses that the most important thing for the audience is the experience of listening to the lecture, not the actual content abstracted from the lecturer and the space where the piece is performed. Analogously, from the standpoint of the lecturer, the key is the experience of reading or otherwise performing it. The line dividing the audience from the lecturer may seem clearly drawn on the surface, but deep down remains imaginary. Being present and participating in the subtle oscillation between something and nothing presented, between the light and darkness of understanding equally at work on the side of the lecture hall and the lectern, is at the heart of composition.

Cage’s instructions for reading his lecture are of course going to give a reading that makes reference to the formal qualities of the text, for the natural cadences of speech will be broken, even by a reader doing their utmost to perform a smooth reading, due to the broken lines and jogs from one line to the next. There will also be a certain number of misplaced
words/lines/phrases that will certainly fall in such a way as to interrupt the reading during the
text’s most repetitive moments. All this subversion is employed joyfully; it aims at silencing
the expectant mind constantly hungry for meaning. It is this expectant mind that is the
ultimate addressee of the lecture, and thanks to this the reader/listener/witness may appreciate
the powerful premise of the lecture, infused with anti-lyrical lyricism in response to
Twentieth-Century culture’s unrelenting quest for meaning: “I have nothing to say / and I am
saying it / and that is / poetry / as I need it” (109).

On one obvious level, nothing connects with silence, both demonstrated to be not quite
nothing and not quite silence. Cage’s experiments, specifically his 4′33″ but also his interest
in small sounds and the use of silences — nothing — between notes in many other musical
pieces, are to a certain extent visually inflected. Commentators, like the biographer David
Revill, frequently mention Cage’s interest in visual art. His painstakingly executed scores are
themselves visual works that could technically be appreciated and analyzed without
references to the sounds and music embedded in them. But this visuality is no longer ocular;
in the case of “Lecture on Nothing,” for example, it is aimed at structuring speech in such a
way as to release it of its print bondage and its bias toward grammar and semantics. In this
sense, the scores resonate with the typographic experiments of the literary avant-garde of
modernism, such as dada and Russian constructivism, which represent the emerging and
reconfigured Gutenberg ‘man’ of the Twentieth-Century ripping his Bible into pieces,
transforming discreet spaces of print into the continuous, multidimensional, and ‘inter-
penetrating’ pages of the hypertext.
3.4. The Rhizomatics of a Hiccup: Writings Through as Evocative Texts

Attention to the auditory dimension of the world requires an interdisciplinary approach. Exemplary in this connection remain McLuhan’s media studies in the 1960s and 70s becoming the ground where cybernetics, poetics, information theory, and particle physics interconnected, and offering artists a coherent field of aesthetics to rely on. Commenting on McLuhan in *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*, Richard Cavell observes: “When all information moves at the speed of light it literally translates itself into the auditory mode. For it conforms itself then into a simultaneous field of relations that is the nature of the auditory space at all times” (138). For McLuhan, then, movement is inherently auditory; and insofar as movement literally holds things together, giving them their peculiar shape and texture, it provides a unique musical frame to view things through, counter-intuitive and synaesthetic, involving sense perceptions of what seemingly is not present, as in the case of the kinesis of a still object, the vision in sound, the smell in color, and so on. And so sound is not just a metaphor that frames an understanding of the world but an essential feature of it, and, by extension, an insightful description of the nature of things.

The soundness of things, requiring an ear to hear, complicates the particle-wave distinction embedded in the physics of the Nineteenth-Century, one of the last bastions of the typographic man, gradually discovered to be interdependent momentary aspects of the same matter. With his attention to information and mediation, McLuhan follows suit with regard to language and communication, emphasizing their resonant, musical nature. As Cavell adds in his commentary, “auditory structure is not composed of discrete components but of inter-penetrating components, as in musical forms” (138). This interpenetration questions cultural and epistemic foundational distinctions, such as the figure-ground distinction in the
visual/plastic arts and the relationship between time and space as it pertains to the most direct
direct experience of life. Music, understood by Cage broadly and deeply, as the engagement of the
entire field of sound, offers unique insights into the understanding of the world: the musical
appréhension of the world in the words of M. C. Richards quoted earlier. When Cage
proclaims, as he does in “The Future of Music: Credo,” that “[t]he composer (organizer of
sound) will be faced not only with the entire field of sound but also with the entire field of
time” (5), he addresses the necessity to reconfigure cultural and social foundational
distinctions and truths as perceptual/experiential givens, gesturing in the direction of
contemporary physics and media studies decentring the human presence at the core of these
experiences.

Inspired by Harold Innis’s analysis of communicational media in terms of spatial and
durational biases, McLuhan puts forth a quintessentially Twentieth-Century understanding of
wordliness as a hybrid form relatively free from the burden of Heidegger’s existentialist-
humanist philosophy of Dasein. For McLuhan, it is no longer the question of an individual
human subject occupying centre stage, but rather of the reality of the social life of populations
and crowds peopling his ‘global village,’ of a multiculturalism promoting fluid and shifting
cultural differences coexisting in the entire field of the world. The ‘global village’ is not a
container populated by individual units but a space-time continuum pulsating with relations of
difference. This mediatized village-network shot through with messages traveling at the speed
of radio waves, is the open field of all sounds in Cage.

For McLuhan, the new electronic media not only abandon but also reverse the
dominance of visual culture with its basis in the notion of writing in visual space through
connectivity and linearity, as words linked together in logical sequences in nicely packaged
phonemic clusters. McLuhan “embodied his insistence on the hybridity of forms within the
dynamics of the ‘laws of media’ which oscillate between the figurality of the visual and the
ground of the acoustic” (Cavell 138). McLuhan’s notion of an ‘acoustic space-time’ produced
by the speed-up of electronic media is less about a linear notion of committing the word to
visible space or printed media and more about the “possibilities of a speaking that takes the
form of writing, and a writing that takes upon itself the lineaments of visible speech” (138).

Beckett’s *How It Is* is an exemplary literary manifestation of the idea of ‘visible
speech,’ offering an explicit experiment in creating the image of a voice’s presence, recorded
verbatim and producing in effect what I call a disjunctive simultaneity of text and sound,
recorded as out of step with each other yet remaining copresent. *How It Is* resonates with
Stein’s experiments with the auditory theatre of landscape plays as well as her portraits and
avant-garde feminist poetics of *Tender Buttons*. The affective disjunction of theatre as
theorized in her essay “Plays” — where she emphasizes the difference in emotion between
reading and experiencing a live theatre, pointing out a different affective tempo of reading and
knowing — is key to understanding and appreciating all of her writing, so counter-intuitive,
bizarre, and outright incoherent on the surface. The surface in this context refers literally only
to the visible component of text, which, in Stein’s case, programmatically aspires to the
condition of sound, operating by echoes, resonances, cadences, timbres, and the rhythms of
literate orality as proposed by Ong and McLuhan. Cavell’s comment, quoted above regarding
the kind of transformation of text within electronic media, “a writing that takes upon itself the
lineaments of visible speech,” aptly describes Stein’s project and its reappearance in Cage’s
performance lectures and manifestos.
The resonant, acoustic space-time continuum of McLuhan can be compositionally created with the use of electronic media. In “Experimental Music,” Cage explains:

The situation made available by these means [of using magnetic tape not to record but to make music] is essentially a total sound-space, the limits of which are ear-determined only, the position of a particular sound in this space being the result of five determinants: frequency or pitch, amplitude or loudness, overtone structure or timbre, duration, and morphology (how the sound begins, goes on, and dies away). (9)

And further, “we are, in fact, technically equipped to transform our contemporary awareness of nature’s manner of operation into art” (9). This transformation has to do with an improvisatory non-intention compounded by the use of electronic instruments. Its aim is discovery, the creation of new rather than the repetition of old knowledge. In “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” he adds:

An experimental action, generated by a mind as empty as it was before it became one, thus in accord with the possibility of no matter what, is, on the other hand [in contrast to controlled or informed action], practical. It does not move in terms of approximations and errors, as ‘informed’ action by its nature must, for no mental images of what would happen were set up beforehand; it sees things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpretations. (15)

In “Indeterminacy,” the second ‘movement’ of his “Composition as Process” essay, Cage offers an argument against recording and playback devices by explaining the practicality of an experimental action:

An experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen. Being unforeseen, this action is not concerned with its excuse. Like the land, like the air, it
needs none. A performance of a composition which is indeterminate of its performance is necessarily unique. It cannot be repeated. When performed for a second time, the outcome is other than it was. Nothing therefore is accomplished by such a performance, since that performance cannot be grasped as an object in time. A recording of such a work has no more value than a postcard; it provides a knowledge of something that happened, whereas the action was a non-knowledge of something that had not yet happened. (39)

The non-reflective geographer Stein resonates through this credo that ultimately opens up a space of knowledge for non-knowledge as its methodology, allowing for an experience of what hasn’t yet been experienced and is not known. By contrast, dependence on playback and exactitude results in a simplification of sound that renders it text-like: non-acoustic, un-open, syntactical-semantic. This uncompromising emphasis on experimentation designed to create new musical experiences and chart new terrains is likewise a feature of Cage’s writing, equally innovative and experimental, particularly in his erasure texts known as ‘writing through,’ that use chance operations to create unique textualities out of existing material.

In “The Music of Verbal Space: John Cage’s ‘What You Say,’” Marjorie Perloff reminds us that Cage’s prolific writing output, mesostics as well as performance lectures, some of which, like Lectures I-IV are written in the form of mesostics, contrast sharply with his multimedia works involving radio, turntables, and computers, like the Imaginary Landscape series, by focusing on the voice as a sole instrument. And yet, mesostics, specifically Cage’s readings through Joyce, are examples of a phonographic usage of text, as in sampling, where the needle can be moved around a page and dropped in selected spots, out of context, breaking away from the linearity of text and narrative, respatializing the narrative and the text. Lectures I-IV even more explicitly exemplify gramophonic sampling or
turntablism with its sampling of a whole group of texts as records grabbed, cued, played, and
discarded by a DJ who creates a performance continuity by utilizing a multitude of records.

As a form of writing, mesostics evolve gradually toward auditory text-sound by
applying conscious effort to transform language. Cage declares in the 1970s in a conversation
with David Charles: “it is that aspect, the impossibility of language, that interests me at
present” (qt in Perloff), implying that hearing language musically as sound requires a poetic
syntax that can free the language from grammatical and semantic ties. In this regard even the
syntax of Finnegans Wake wasn’t sufficiently innovative; Joyce’s poetic effort, in Cage’s
view, was focused on explosive word formations within the existing conventional system of
grammar. Inspired by Jackson Mac Low and concrete poetry, Cage proceeded to change the
orientation of words and grammatical connections by dismantling words themselves, breaking
them up into individual letters (Perloff), as for example “Sixty-Two Mesostics Re Merce
Cunningham” which relies on a complex typographic arrangement that utilizes different fonts
and point-sizes within words requires the performer to achieve the impossible: to read
individual letters-sounds, simultaneously stringing them into sound clusters and sequences
reflecting the horizontal and vertical arrangement of words on the page.

In the case of “Sixty-Two Mesostics Re Merce Cunningham,” the challenge for the
performer-reader is not so much in approximating the auditory impossibility of the text, that
would require a singular voice to become polyphonic, and which could be remedied by a
reading that involves many voices, as has been done. The challenge, rather, lies in grasping
the conceptual impossibility, the figure-image of text becoming a system of speech acts. The
same challenge for the reader emerges from Lectures I-IV, which operate through sampling,
piecing together Cage’s aesthetic and philosophical credo in the form of fragments of found
texts spliced largely by chance though to some extent checked and orchestrated by individual
taste.

Perloff stresses the evolution of Cagean mesostics from being based on a proper name,
as in the example of Roaratorio’s writing through Finnegans Wake whose method of
selection of words from the text is the repeated search for the string “JAMES JOYCE” in the
text of Finnegans Wake, to being based on what Perloff calls “the sentence string,” intended
to multiply words running down vertically. This diversification, expanding the field of the
statement, breaks away from the stanza orientation with its even blocks of text (JAMES
JOYCE) and clear beginning and ending toward a wave, in the shape of a group of words, as
in Lectures I-IV, that actually are titled with the table of strings repeated using different
rhyming and pulsing tactics but also choosing from a group of texts representing an array of
stylistic and thematic differences.

The solution was to use a seemingly inconsequential prose text as the source, not
only for his own ‘writing through’ but for the mesostic string as well. There would
be, in other words, a rule to follow, but that rule would be so hidden that
‘beginnings and endings’ would not call attention to themselves. Moreover, the
discourse of ordinary prose--a passage from an interview, a newspaper paragraph,
a statement from a lecture--could now be decomposed and recharged so as to
uncover the mysteries of language. (Perloff)

In specific cases, like his Empty Words, language would be taken as a musical means and
increasingly dissociated from semantics; on purpose referring to ‘no things’ and pointing at
‘no objects’ or directions, empty words, as connectives or pronouns no longer referring to
anything, are used to create sentence strings.
As I turn to Cage’s *Lectures I-IV*, I recognize what a daunting a task reading and commenting on this work should be. One of the challenges, though, I propose is to refrain from an erudite reading, to avoid trying to claim mastery over the texts constitutive of the lectures, to sidestep having to gain command over a large corpus of texts, some of which are Cage’s early manifestos, performance pieces, and theoretical comments, and so lose the desire to make sense of the organization and logic, the meta-dimension of the artifact. In the spirit of my grammophonic tribute to Cage, I want to treat his text as a box of records to play randomly. I sample a few strings not for the purpose of creating a technical discourse on their formation but as a springboard to talk about Cage’s philosophy. Specifically, I want to argue that *Lectures I-IV* culminate the search for indeterminate spaces as a play of the field of possibilities as found and evoked in many projects before, but deep down explicated here in the form of a performance-lecture with all due sincerity to oppose the culture of instrumentalization, information, data, agendas, and policies even in the very heart of knowledge and love. Championing indeterminacy, and revealing the complexity of and multitude of possibilities and approaches in it is Cage’s largest contribution to the understanding of not just art but the larger operations of life.

This sampling approach would seem logical and in line with the orientation and formations of the work itself. *Lectures I-IV*, as many of Cage’s ‘writings through,’ can be read as a form of erasure poetry. Erasure poetry is created by removing — erasing, obliterating — parts of a found text and/or image, leaving only certain tactically or otherwise selected words, parts of words, or other elements, or indeed nothing other than the evidence of erasure, giving a new spatial orientation to the source text. The source text or material is shaped, sampled, manipulated, appropriated, obliterated, and removed, in short, edited or reauthored. These
erasing acts follow specific procedures (for example, a combination of subtractive and additive processes), and involve different media, mobilizing different techniques, technologies, and affects, and creating social positions, identities, and understandings. Any artistic practice involving the shaping of existing material can be considered a form of erasure. As Kelly and Jeffries put it, erasure poetry is a commentary on “the historical notion of editing” but also an invitation to make do with less. Related practices/genres include adbusting, graffiti, street art, sampling in music, and collage.

According to Ariana Kelly and Bill Jeffries in their introductory notes to the 2008 edition of the *Capilano Review* dedicated to “explor[ing] some of the modes of creative removal undertaken by poets, writers, and artists living and working in the age of information overload” (6), erasure poetry aims at creating a collaboration between agencies, “suggesting a participatory and communal practice” (9). Erasure poetry resonates with a contemporary moment, reflecting a growing commentary/practice/activism around issues of erasure by examining and engaging — reclaiming — different acts and social practices of erasing, evading, and dissolving meaning and distinction. The editors write: “erasure resonates with the global environmental crisis; provides a way to understand a world in which nature’s erasures threaten to eradicate all distinctions” (10).

If Cage’s *Cartridge Music* begins to make sense at a point when the listener no longer tries to listen, at a point of meditative non-intention, one could venture to claim that *Lectures I-IV* could be read analogously: without reading. But how does one read without reading? On one level, the answer seems obvious; scholars and students alike increasingly depend for their research and analyses on search engines and other sophisticated computing devices that can process and organize enormous amount of data. Reading is no longer reading but rather cross
referencing, comparing data, taxonomizing it into different streams. Inasmuch as university
and college instructors teach the skills of close reading, it would difficult to manage if they
had to close read and discuss every new text. The oligarchy of knowledge represented through
corporatized universities is becoming a gigantic redundancy apparatus that operates through
the repetition of the same. Real guidance and knowledge lie in inadvertent, subtle subversions
of this system practiced here and there, in areas where affective personal communication can
take place, where one can acknowledge and practice sensibility, integrity, difference, and
critical thinking, so otherwise appropriated by the knowledge system with its templates,
procedures, policies, guidelines, and learning outcomes designed to quantify and measure it
with a ruler. Cage, who dropped out of college, deeply offended that his instructors would
require all students to read the same text, in his Lectures I-IV has come to address the
audience of one of the most renowned educational institutions, Harvard University, and be part
of the Distinguished Scholars Lecture Series. He brings this audience a carefully sculpted
piece of nonsense that violates all rules of grammar, logic, coherence, even poetics, that looks
like this:

    future **Must**
    may **B**E
    naTion
    route and **w**Here
    Of the
    **anD** of
    a ’ sMall
    this for **thosE**
    uniTed
    late in a dark and muggy nigHt when my feet felt the path which
monks have repeated utilization of

This one arbitrarily selected passage on method (notice the vertical string of capital letters repeating METHOD twice), takes the reader to “a dark and muggy night,” indeed to a place where monks at best stand a chance of making sense of words and phrases otherwise not intended to make sense, refusing to add up to anything. How should a scholar exactly approach this material, hear these sounds, cherish the ‘social energy’ bursting out of every page of these strange textures? A reader versed in poetic analysis may start piecing together some kind of coherent flow of discourse. One may reason that the root of the concept of nation is birth, and that in this sense the future belongs simply to the future, to what “must/may,” the modality of the possible that emerges through the continuous articulation of that symbolic invisible community, in the modality of the community itself, that must remain possible if the nation is to be and remain. The auditory modality of the possible must may remain open to chance in order to meet what is already foreclosed, what is known and shouldn’t be lost. The possible and the predetermined meet in the “is” of now, the “is” of being. Is this a method, of free association, postulated or implied by Cage, or a joke of such a method, a joke on method? In line with the argument I offer, I want to think of the ‘non-intentional intention’ at work here as indeed refusing to historicize noise, sound, meaning; to embrace randomness as a way of creating beeps and clangs of bells that contain the multitude of symphonic readings, taking the textual Gutenberg spelunker on an exciting trip through the fissure in the original text created by the selection of its material and its distribution across the lectures.
One way of reading without reading lies in the database processing of the text, which after all has been constructed through sampling, where all bits of information, however fragmented and illogical, are traceable to the original source text where they do make sense. Yet I feel that an authentic reading of this provocative work has to resist two techniques readily available to a scholar; on the one hand the technique of referencing the existing bits of information, for nothing can be accomplished by discovering that such-and-such a line came from such-and-such a text, factual as this discovery may be; and on the other, it has to resist interpretation as its principle goal, making sense of what otherwise doesn’t make sense and should remain there, in its open oscillations of the possible, for equally nothing can be accomplished by making sense of a text. The challenge lies in designing a performative auditory reading that can experience the language of small sounds in its obvious presence here, and that can signal through the subtle juxtapositions of sound, references, and fragmentary meaning, paths of possible interpretations without foreclosing them, without imposing on the text a glossary of what means what.

*Lectures I-IV* sketch out for the reader a space for thought or numerous sets of paths for thought to wander through. In a way, Cage demonstrates here at the end of his life and life project a remarkable consistency, returning again to the problem of time, mindfulness, and being/acting in the moment as values that inherently refuse to be measured. How can mindfulness and attention to the present moment be real values in culture and arts where long-term processes, carefully crafted and preserved artifacts, canons, data bases, and reflective distance — timelessness — are the order of the day and a survival tool of knowledge systems? Even improvised music or automatic writing, like the surrealist experiments of André Breton, rely on preparation, reflection, practice, and the utilization of existing skills.
Analyzed down to technical details, improvised jazz offers very little spontaneity. Jazz drummers, for example, during improvised parts or solos, notoriously play well rehearsed rudiments in various combinations. What appears to be a free flow of musical ideas are preexisting charts lifted from exercise books. But neither is the text of *Lectures I-IV* spontaneously created in the moment; it is a carefully composed piece, using chance operations but making aesthetic decisions every step of the way. Inasmuch as it looks random, nothing here is random. Something else is at work. Stitched together through fracturing lines of texture sticking to their vertical strings, one sees fractals of an enormous heterogeneity of texts. The seam on the surface of text, the print machine with its staccato of stitching, the repetitive regularities of stitching, reveal the invisible corpus erased systematically in the process of composition, as if this erasure was to be

Solving
The
eniRonment i.e. a
seem jUst right ’
spaCe can
ouTspreading notion think ’
edUcation and
them foR public
usEd ’

(81, 82)

Here, in the structure string, Cage re-poses the ecological problem in the form of a metaphor or figuration of the world as a concept that requires a constant reconceptualization of what
may seem commonly understood as its space-time dimensions and its private-public domains:
“spaCe can / ouTspreading...”

In one of her recent poetic-performative essays, Lyn Hejinian indicates the role of poetry as a way of experiencing language. This self-reflective stance with regards to language as a poetic material is a continuous streak in Cage’s work, returning in the lecture as the question concerning words, nouns and specifically pronouns as “I,” language “newing” the I, renewing possibly:

Is curious how
laNguage
mighT
havE
New
The ’
I describe a
times befOre but though it
thaN the
musIc may ’ be
aNd

(83)

Notice that neither language nor non-language or some prelinguistic form of it is here presumed or conceived as the originary ground or beginning. Could this prelinguistic identity possibly provide an account of (or describe) a time before, a time of atemporal music and the soundness of words before they solidified into language as a cognitive logos and grammar? Did language at one point know what poetry is? Ought poetry to know language? If poetry knew at one point what the I was, now it’s all music to the ear. “Music may be / and”
providing connectivity, literally providing the coordinating conjunctions to stitch together disparate particles of one common environment we are all equally responsible for. Is that the INTENTION?

Is ’

aNd

or Two ’

answEr will set all well afloat ’

each time copper is scrapped melted dowN and recycled

no ideas of order buT

hIm ’

nOise

would theN take care of

that It is a

souNd

(83)

“No ideas of order” is a sample from Cage’s own essay on composition as process, sampled along with the other selected texts in the composing of the lectures. Here noise takes care of sound, covering the whole domain of sound as ultimately noise, where noise is likewise recognized by the speaker as what amounts to legitimate sound. Notice the staccato of the line. The regularities and irregularities of the stitching together, of sound turning into noise, are the innumerable voices of How It Is, the quaqua of accumulated knowledge that refuses to go blank and silent, muttering its notions and ideas, half coherently.

populatioN ’

Observed
wisdom or love or beauty

Are
quiet the
Isn’t
as we begin to
increase
in
everybody else’s
and Telephone
technology extending consciousness itself as

to some areas

of pastness although not always when I remember

no
answers

(92, 93)

In the spirit of repetition and resonance, the question of environment reappears several pages further:

vivid awareness is a stage on which is contained

environment i.e.

a way and with the most degrees of freedom

traveled through the minds

not

in what sense can

(107)
again invoking the path the mind has to travel repeatedly to make sense of “in what sense can.”

In the last string quoted below, NONUNDERSTANDING, Cage invokes writing, text, and sound in relation to knowledge and thought:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{means} \\
\text{clOth} \\
\text{Not of those and their spatial relations} \\
\text{its products will} \\
of the text if he would learn to write without \\
\text{poets essayists editors} \\
\text{writing silently without} \\
\text{world} \\
\text{as well say} \\
of it is in knowing when one \\
differently how do you know what you would do’ \\
\text{describing an intention means} \\
\text{if I could} \\
\text{which the music is} \\
to contemplate what is \\
\text{why}’ this should not really hold for our thoughts’
\end{align*}
\]

(131)

Here Cage calls for a writing without editors, without poets, even without the world, since the world is not simply given, but fought for every step of the stitching forward. The world as given would not know what to do, would not give a description of what may be, would not outline what a thought could do, would not define the intention. But music noise perhaps could. Hear the noise, reader.
For Cage, noise is not a veil that obscures proper sounds and harmonies, nor is the question of noise a matter strictly of historical development or technological progress. While in many ways the modernist legacy weighs heavily on his approach, Cage’s theory of music is relatively free from the determinations and necessities that characterize the modernist avant-garde’s embrace of technics, its celebration of the new, its love of the machine and the need to eliminate all that is not sufficiently machine-like. The use of chance operations in the process of composing, and the use of noises like radio static, or random street noises, mimic the machine as much as mock it. Cage leans forward to the future, embracing both the mechanical and digital potential of sound technologies, but at the same time his music is a way of walking backwards, against the grain of progress, to the mysticism of Meister Eckhart or Zen Buddhist meditations. Inasmuch as noise is linked with the mechanical paradigm — the assembly line and the clamor of the modern city — it has to do with presence or immanence where music connotes simply an ability to hear and interact with the sonic environment, a presence that evokes materiality in the form of continuously enfolding and pulsating sound waves. Cage operates here on the premise that on some deep level, there can be no difference between listening and music-making, that being in the world itself, as a dynamic relationship with the outside, is a type of composition, and moreover as such this method of composing naturally leans toward indeterminacy.

Sound, even in the case of the sound of inner voices in Beckett, references intersubjective states, a sonorous, vibratory multiplicity of the worldliness of the resonant outside of selves. In this sense, attentive listening is a form of participation in a vibrant social life, a participation seeking the creation, sustenance, and enjoyment of common spaces as
spaces of ‘participatory discrepancy’, to borrow from Kiel, where multiple rhythms and differences can coexist.

Attention to listening rather than knowing emphasizes process over product, experience over judgment, and sensibility over intelligibility, while recognizing of course that these are false dichotomies. It’s not a question of privileging one from of acting/being/knowing over another; it’s not a question of assessment or comparison. Indeed, the crucial part of the claim is the adjective ‘attentive,’ implying a non-judgmental, non-intentional openness to change and experience, the pulse of the moment, the expanding fluid continuous presence of now. The point is that listening is inherently ‘attentive’ and inherently unbound due to the way ‘acoustic space’ itself works; listening is not limited to just sounds in the sense of musical notes in a system of harmony/grammar, but open to the vibratory presence of the world. The ear knows no bounds because the spatiality it projects, the resonant ‘acoustic space’ of McLuhan, remains indirect, unfocused, multi-sensorial, and auditory-tactile.

In Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening*, listening as a kind of thinking and thought reconfigures the image of form, taking thought on a journey into the auditory. The sonorous dimension being inherently formless operates by fluidity and intensity, by resonances, and distribution as in Stein’s distribution of differences across a cognitive esemplastic sheet of understanding that brings together a range of simultaneous multi-sensorial experiences at the edges of the inner and outer worlds merely passing through a self. Form and/or structure within the auditory/sonorous space is of a special kind and has to do with timing and rhythm. Nancy’s *Listening* points to the importance of rhythmic behavior, the inner and outer
vibrations, pulsations, and resonances one is subjected to through the social material interactions with the world.

Sound helps construct a dynamic, shifting world: molecules and particles, of oxygen, solar radiation, radio waves; a convoluted oyster shell resonating with endless whispers from a cosmic afar on their way back into the cosmic oblivion. The living present of self and the world, self in the world, is taken up as a musical relation, with “melody [becoming] the matrix of a thought of unity of and in diversity” as cognitively constitutive components of complex selves. Referring to Husserl and his phenomenological investigations and intuitions into various domains of the experience of self, Nancy claims that “the living present [of self] resounds, or that it is itself resonance and is only that: resonance of instances or stances of the instant, in each other” (19). This resonance of being, as the agitations, vibrations, and movements of self, returns us to the question of powers and relations constitutive of subjectivity in direct relation to the resonant outside. This resonant outside is like the outside of Cage’s Lectures I-IV comprising entirely chance juxtapositions among found texts that project a meditative-performative reading free from a singular intentionality, though not precluding one, for on the whole Cage’s instructions are exact, giving the impression that the exact performance exists.

Cage’s attention to sound, as a frame through which to think of this resonant outside free from singular intentions, supports Nancy’s concluding claim of Listening:

not only has the entire movement of thought been turned toward music as toward its own sublimity - toward its metaphysics, as Schopenhauer said - but one could assert that all the arts projected into musical interiority and expressivity the need for an energy detached from the moorings that till then had held fixed in place the
connected registers of cosmological structure (of harmonic order) and of
representational technique (of objective reference) (53)

Listening, then, is a lesson in owning nothing, our poetry now, as Cage puts it in his “Lecture
on Nothing:” “our poetry now / is the true reali-zation / that we possess / nothing” (110), not
even, particularly not, fixed rules of poetics dictating what poetry should do, the role it ought
to play, the form it needs to take, lyrical, classical, constructivist, expressivist, and what not.

This Cagean realization of the necessity for poetry now, the poetics of nothing, is a
statement pertaining to the place and nature of the popular voice. Simply put, Cage’s social
anarchism is egalitarian and democratic. His attentiveness to listening and to sound promotes
the world of individual freedoms and human rights in the conciliatory, straightforward, and
deliberately naïve manner reminiscent of Stein’s republicanism. In the concluding sound-lines
of his “Lecture on Nothing” Cage states this program explicitly: “Everybody / has a song /
which is / no / song at all: / it is a process / of singing / and when you sing / you are / where
you are” (126). Listening then and now remains necessarily unfinished. After Cage, what one
may call ‘attentive’ listening remains framed only by the now and then of discrepant
participatory attention rejoicing in the vibrations of life.

The popularity of Cage shouldn’t be confused with the accessibility or even the
listenability of his material. Simply put, Cage became iconic, which in some ways foreclosed
the auditory sound orientation of his work, pushing it back into the ocular space of the
taxonomizing eye; popularity, which returns as a thematic in the last chapter with regard to
another iconic composer, Frank Zappa, and which was of concern to Stein at the time of her
1930s visit to the United States, and which has Beckett, the Nobel laureate, as a prominent
example, concerns the concept of a work dislocated from its own materiality and temporality,
moving into the atemporal cognitive space of experience of the mind prepared in a particular way. This space of experience, ultimately open and directed, though open non-intentionally toward nothing, is the nothing in particular of possible paths a work may take at any given point. The presumption here is that conceptual art may be relatively free from ideology, ahead of ideology or sideways, in the way in which its own messages or concepts are dissociated from the materials and experiences of the work itself, which may not even exist technically speaking, being a diagrammatic projection, a spatialization or visualization of meaning as idea or concept, a tear within meaning tearing it away from propositional truths and logic into the realm of pure statement. The subversive retains the element of fluidity as opposed to a final or fixed state, which may be a vulnerability in openly political art or theory, exposing them to the risk of being easily coopted or assimilated into a given hegemony. The subversive sustains a tactic of operation, a form of resistance to regimes, a way of displacing the centre and working away from it, as in Stein. A particular vulnerability of art lies in its informatics, with regards to the information it distributes. Art that is explicit in its messages and defined in its ideological orientation becomes marketable despite its anti-capitalist or anit-hegemonic stance. Such at any rate may be what Cage exemplifies as one of the cubist scandalists in the procession of the auditory avant-garde.

In spite of the whole critical industry writing on Cage and the establishment of a canon of the understanding of his work and relationships with the various modernist movements or tendencies, his music and writing retain an impossibility of cooptation as they are impossible to theorize and, though scholarship provides numerous valuable commentaries and thoughtful insights, the art itself escapes the scrutinizing analyzing eye, confounding the listener-auditor-reader with unparaphrasable events that call for experiences outside familiar knowledges.
They are statements rather than sets of explanatory propositions. This open-endedness, as the nature of Cage’s composition and voice, doesn’t mean that the words are always free from discernible meanings or thetic content. Numerous manifesto-like propositions are present throughout his essays, for example in the collection *Silence*, revealing highly opinionated positions on specific technical questions, and yet these statements are not separable from his other output and have to be heard alongside his other projects, like *Empty Words* where words are taken as pure material totally free from meaning, and are shaped into an imaginary language outside direct human comprehension. However clear the manifesto propositions may be, they are embedded within an unfixed and confusing matrix, of social anarchism applied to art, applied as a tool to refresh the relevance of art in the age of the commercial production of aesthetic commodities. Even the straightforward content in Cage refuses to be removed from that unfixed matrix of art theory/practice thought into a theorizable outside. Cage’s manifestos are parts of sound event structures, micro-granular events within larger event fields, ultimately framed by non-intentionality and non-agency manifested as the novel and intense experience of both being in the moment and being transposed into a timeless virtual mind space where raw experiences, perceptions, and affects take the shape of ideas and thought.

Cage’s social and aesthetic anarchism proceeds paradoxically through systematic control, to the point where indeterminacy is systematically constructed by the application of highly determinable elements and steps. What is aleatory is exactitude and specificity, some of the foundations of the Cartesian Western epistemic model of knowledge and scientific discovery. The sound and feel of many of his musical works remains somewhat predictable and recognizable, partly as the works became familiar to us as classics, partly because his chance operations, his radical procedures, up close at a micro level, concern a narrow set of
possibilities. For example, no matter how one decides to cut up a piece of text, following different procedures, the diversity of these paths is only relative, as they are all determined by the framing decision to focus on a particular text and subject it to fragmentation. Stringing together random words will produce similar effects regardless of the actual words chosen. Only insignificant details are left to chance; they give a particular flavor to the work. The moment the aural text solidifies into a particular text it becomes this shape regardless of whether it was formed by chance or a specific plan and intention.

But perhaps the point Cage is trying to make is not the question of whether the universe as a whole or a particular segment of it is determined or open to chance; it’s not a question of determinism versus freedom, the preoccupation of many a philosopher and scientist in post World II America, but rather a matter of a systemic production of defiance, counter-informational and counter-intentional, which in turn opens up spaces for alternative and autonomous modes of creative thought where the designation ‘creativity’ or anti-creativity no longer makes a difference. The question here concerns the role of avant-garde art as a particular modality of social being, fostering resistance to domination; avant-garde as a methodology of sorts, proposes a particular poetic, its material aspect, subjected to manipulation and transformation, providing a recipe for the elimination of the fascist in all of us as mentioned in Foucault’s preface to the Deleuzoguattarian Anti-Oedipus.

For Deleuze, in his reading of Foucault, the structure of a statement as a curve and distribution of points, paves the way for a unique logic of discovery, a logic relatively free from domination and hegemony, for example in the way statements are not ascribable to individuals or groups and do not serve particular roles or agencies, but rather make sense within the domain of larger collectives, unfixed, in the process of formation, as ‘a people to
come,’ ‘the making of a people’ to allude to Stein. Statements in the Foucauldian-Deleuzian sense contain the rules of formation of proposition; as such they are no longer, or not yet, attached to a particular subjectivity. When Deleuze speaks of statements being rare it’s not because there are few of them or they are difficult to find but rather in the sense of them not serving any particular agenda, program, or intention. They are real rather than symbolic or metaphoric; they are anomalies disrupting the course of things, bringing insights into coalescing planes of immanence.

Cage’s insistence on speaking despite having nothing to say affirms the poetics of statement as a space of production-creation free from the burden of theory or ideology, free from the burden of persons, subjects, biography. The logic of nothing, in a fashion not dissimilar to the spirit of existentialist philosophy, asserts that the existence or process precedes the essence or product; the purpose of art or life, however these categories may be distinguished, ultimately is living and art making for no reason at all.
4. 1. At Studio Z: Uncle Frank, Audaciously

In defense of William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*, Norman Mailer talks about the social role of artists in descending to hell to report to the people its measurements. Frank Zappa invariably descends to earth to report to the people their own stuff, their own way of collectively shaping the social realm, returning time and again to the body and its fears, desires, and noises as a central agent in shaping that realm. The earth and earthly matters signal in Zappa a decisively social orientation to his work, which he means as a social commentary but also as a product intended for consumption rather than analysis or cultural investigations. The social relevance and activism combined with commercial potential, of which Zappa possessed a fair dose despite his claims to the contrary, produces a potent critical mixture. And so he enters the field of critical investigations on the cultures of sound and the auditory ... loudly and resoundingly. Zappa enacts the assault *par excellence* on the book and the typographic man, collectively comprising god, author, and the apostles as a corporate assemblage; he represents the assault on the logos, the laws and the systematic violations of them that the book embodies. His assault is staged dramatically within pop culture, where he becomes a cartoon clown acting as an integral man. In his chapter “Comics,” in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explains that “[p]opular art is the clown reminding us of all the life and faculty that we have omitted from our daily routines. He ventures to perform the specialized routines of the society, acting as integral man. But integral man is quite inept in a specialist situation. This, at least, is one way to get at the art of the
comics, and the art of the clown” (167). The clown in Zappa performs his assault on the book as a satire, a megaphonic exaggeration; he is the cartoon character.

Musically, many of Zappa’s pieces sound like the soundtrack to a cartoon, which could indeed be a Zappa signature sound, characterized by the extended use of percussion instruments like marimbas and comical sound effects, spastic, bombastic, joyfully goofy, as well as arrangements involving quick changes and juxtapositions, the speeding up and slowing down, the aesthetics of montage, including the use of quotations and lampooning. The lines distinguishing strictly musical content from the verbal message are complicated here. Music is a form of verbalization, the stage a kind of amplifier or ‘megaphone’ of the voice where musical compositions become sound sculptures that tell stories. These stories, however, often deny the narrative element in music, proceeding dialectically and through paradox, zigzagging between serious and popular music, politics and entertainment, conservatism and social anarchism, control and freedom.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan claims that the cartoon or comic book is a bridge between print and television. Zappa embodies that bridge. He is that bridge in the way of taking it apart; he is the line of flight escaping from the regime of print into the auditory dimension of word and literacy. He is the expressive-explosive force that just escapes because he has the capacity to move swiftly between registers and idioms, to switch them around and mix them in. In all cases of explosivity, expression involves the creative and constructive manipulation of matter of various sorts: verbal, musical, cultural, auditory; for composing consists in organizing any kind of materials: words, shapes, musical notes, and sounds. Expression is a key word here. Zappa expresses, and he does so in marked contrast to Cage’s distrust of expression, a distrust characteristic of Cage’s experimental avantgardism, breaking
away from modernism to which Zappa, ironically and paradoxically, is closer in his aesthetic orientation. His being is the embodiment of performance. This expressive dimension of his work and life — the two are difficult to distinguish — has a lot to do with his relationship to his audience, with creating the audience and the stage, a place to speak from, a voice.

In *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, Ben Watson systematically compares Zappa to Plato, Shakespeare, and Joyce. These comparisons are clearly meant to elevate Zappa to the dimension of critically relevant academic material. Aside from the perceptiveness of Watson’s analysis, what should be noticed is the choice of critical figurations, philosopher-artists deeply involved in the problem of the mediation of the word and the way that writing, speech, and thought relate. Plato, through the character of Socrates and the use of dialogue, dramatizes philosophical discourse; he hears it as a living, animated word and not a script. Critics and commentators say that the history of Western philosophy is a postscript to Plato in the sense that all philosophical problems have been already formulated by him; however, not frequently is Plato studied in the context of the living word and orality. This approach, focusing on the status of the word in its transition from the spoken to the scripted form, was an innovative and revolutionary take of Havelock, which in the 1950s and 60s inspired McLuhan. Shakespeare is a representative example of a writer's awareness of the medium of writing; he represents the leap forward into language, dismantling the very foundations of the scriptural economy constituting it. And then Joyce, in the very medium of writing, deconstructs the logos and the systems of domination embedded in the scripted word through centuries of imperial-cultural-theological indoctrination. Plato, Shakespeare, and Joyce reverberate throughout McLuhan’s discourse; they are likewise the unmentionable
patron saints of the Zappa project; they are threshold figures present in spirit with Zappa who, after all, has no patience for literature and textual analysis.

Zappa is like a character in a McLuhan script designed to demonstrate the implosion of print in the world of the accelerated mediation of electric technology. He is a college drop-out who learned poetry and fine arts by studying advertising, reading comic books, watching television, hanging out with other drop-outs, and playing music. He represents the ethos of the age and the icon of a generation, collectively refusing to read as a way to voice anti-establishment sentiments. In his chapter on comics, McLuhan talks about the generation of American youth who grew up and educated themselves through MAD magazine. As McLuhan implies, MAD magazine was the place where all the angst, the obscenities and violence, was poured into as a satire on the madness of the contemporary world and civilization. “MAD is a kind of newspaper mosaic of the ad as entertainment, and entertainment as a form of madness” (169). As a performer, Frank Zappa embodies a similar spirit of satirical expression that serves as a critique of contemporary American culture. The cartoon is a tactic that enables Zappa to utilize a range of musical styles: “The comic strip and the ad ... both belong to the world of games, to the world of models and extensions of situations elsewhere” (169). The cartoon is a medium or, better, a tactic, that allows Zappa to extend into various situations, to pass through Beckett, Cage or McLuhan without even thinking of them, faster than thought.

Consciously or not, Zappa manipulates one of Blake’s proverbs from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell to invent one of his mottos: “Without deviations there is no progress.” Deviations suggest images of diverging and criss-crossing lines rather than two sets of contraries but, overall, deviations can be taken to encompass twofold phenomena, two types
of lines: lines that synthesize diverse elements and integrate the senses (esemplastic), and lines that fracture and split things apart, fragment them, revealing smaller components and cogs at work (analytical). The following are a few characteristics of deviations that pertain to the interface between sound and text. They consist of individual expressions intended to provoke, but also gather up collective forms of expressions: the satirical, sarcastic, comic, carnivalesque, or grotesque; are departures from norms and established codes, but also mixings and crossings of codes, dangerous crossroads, as George Lipsitz has it, or participatory discrepancies, as Charles Kiel proposes, crossings that are instrumental in mapping the social as a polyvocal and polyrhythmic multiplicity, a multitude; cultural codes, received, passing through the collective body in the way they are adapted, subverted, satirized, imposed, questioned and debated: sedimentations and articulations on the collective body, both territorial and social in nature; conceptual paradoxes, erotic zones of bodies, noises, empty words and chance-talk. For the purpose of the project, insofar as it is focused on the emergence of the popular voice, the term ‘deviation’ and its pluralization call forth a set of procedures that help to probe the social function of art and gauge its political efficacy. Here I ask, not exactly expecting to provide an exhaustive answer, what is the popular voice? And further, insofar as the popular voice has its source — a body from which it emanates and which it represents — what’s the embodiment of the popular voice?

In Zappa’s devotional material creationism, forces of the earth and cosmos gather to speak: megaphones of destiny (“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny”), human mountains and trees (“Billy the Mountain”), chronotopes and calendars (Lumpy Gravy, “Greggery Peccary”), megaphones as instruments of surveillance and control (Joe’s Garage), genetically altered bodies of the new modified world (Thing-Fish). Megaphones play various
important roles, some of which I discuss in more detail. Overall, the ‘megaphone’ is taken as a leading figuration that enables the capture of processes taking place at the interface between sound and text; the ‘megaphone’ is a way to engage how this interface is amplified through Zappa’s creative manipulation of language. As a figuration, the ‘megaphone’ manifests the various angles of the sound-text-image relationship, and so it serves as an interpretative frame and a set of analytical procedures — the voice-over on the Joe’s Garage album narrating the story and commenting on it through a ‘megaphone’; a series of non-verbal messages inscribed on the body of the wax disc as a judgment of the justice machine of “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” — that capture the mediated nature of verbalizations, and the collective expressions and groupings formed, invoked, presupposed, or implicated even in what for other reasons passes for individual expression or statement (Lumpy Gravy, Absolutely Free, “Billy the Mountain,” Apostrophe (’)). It articulates the complex dialectic at play at the coming together of the public and private voices (We’re Only In It For the Money, Absolutely Free, Apostrophe (’), Thing-Fish) and offers a foray into the grotesque amplifications and comic misreadings that poke fun at aspects of the popular (“Greggery Peccary,” Apostrophe, Thing-Fish). It operates as a spoken archive of multiple dialogic moments (We’re Only In It For the Money and “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” in particular, Joe’s Garage, “Porn Wars”). Figuratively, the ‘megaphone’ has a comic urgency to it; it is out of proportion, cartoon-like, standing in a figurative discrepancy from itself, sounding out the urgency of the mouth as a private domain — “your mouth is your religion,” offers one of Zappa’s songs — and yet collective and public.

This megaphonic rendition of the body as a feedback loop representing the public voice echoed back to its own source, the audience, takes us to the performative aspect of text,
often operating within its own logical or conceptual space as part of a given project, embedded in a particular grouping or sequencing of ideas on a concept album or opera. The dialogic, multi-vocal character of expression and the proliferation of personas and speaking bodies, multiplicities and multitudes as measurements of the human dimension, open up a discussion involving the larger context of the shift from the mechanical to the digital cultures of the virtual. Zappa, at heart, is a late modernist, his so-called serious music sensibilities growing out of the modernist musical vanguard and carrying out the projects of Stravinsky, Webern, and Varèse. His attention to dada, referring to dada practice explicitly as analogous to his ways of composing, likewise testifies to a ‘classical’ taste as perfectly coexisting with a knack for groundbreaking aesthetics and difference.

As an artist of the megaphone who operates by amplification and exaggeration, always controversial, opinionated, often extreme and excessive, excessive indeed, in the use of modesty and common sense, an exemplary provocateur and dissident, Zappa exposes aspects of expressive sounding out that are relevant elements of the literary: the mouth and the ear, taken literally and taken as tropes exemplifying a process of verbalization in expression and the resonating social field where sound is recorded, inscribed, and remembered. The actual megaphones, such as the voice-over of the Central Scrutinizer on the Joe’s Garage album and “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” which utilizes the megaphone to generate non-verbal messages, serves as a commentary on the medium of the recorded disc and the nature of recording itself in relation to inscription, writing, text, and the body.

The Zappa oeuvre itself, posited as a rhizomatic totality where everything is connected with everything else, across time and space, in the intensely pulsating continuous presence of conceptual continuity where everything is happening all the time, is a complicated network of
elements. All elements in the form of ideas and their material manifestations, which collectively Zappa calls Project/Object, operate as an ecology of organically-systemically interconnected and interrelated parts/segments, a systemic openness and heterogeneity of the world composition consisting of diverse materials forming a “united mutation,” to borrow from the manifesto in the liner notes of the Mothers first album, *Freak Out!*. In chapter 8 of his *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, Zappa compares “the connecting material in the Project/Object” (139) to a character invented by a novelist, as something popping up here and there. “In the case of the *Project/Object* [all emphases FZ’s], you may find a little *poodle* over here, a little *blow job* over there… I am not obsessed by *poodles* or *blow jobs*… these words… along with pictorial images and melodic themes, recur throughout the albums, interviews, films, videos … for no other reason than to unify the ‘collection’” (140). Zappa’s insistence on the interconnectedness of all works echoes a similar structural problematic at the centre of Stein, Beckett, and Cage’s projects: a modernist intentionality of capturing the self as the oeuvre comprising the body, history, archive, and expression.

The modernist legacies of dada, the absurd, cabaret, satire, and carnivalesque offer a legitimate placing of Zappa within the body of avant-garde experiments aimed at exploring the limits of possibility in expression as well as the limits of speakability of words and texts. Zappa’s work as a sound engineer and a textual producer playing with the levels of synchrony and what Zappa calls *xenochrony* (strange synchronization), as well as his manipulating the credibility of the voice and disengaging it from its proper space, provide a rich field of interplay between sound and text. The chapter uses three case studies that show how Zappa’s art deals with the problems of composition, voice, and multitude. The first case study focuses on composition, particularly in the way the question of composition plays a part in two of
Zappa’s early recordings, *We’re Only In It For The Money* and *Lumpy Gravy*. As an immanent copresence of text and sound, composition on both of these albums, I claim, emerges as an act of resistance to the standardization within pop culture and music, a way of subverting the expectations and releasing music from its confinement within the hierarchy of hits and record sales. Zappa’s defiance of norms manifests in various ways, most notably perhaps in the very rejection of the boundary between popular and classical music. In “From *Lumpy Gravy* to *Civilization Phaze III*: The Story of Frank Zappa’s Disenchantment,” Jonathan Bernard systematically demonstrates how Zappa’s *Lumpy Gravy* serves as an arena for negotiating the boundary between popular and avant-garde music. Zappa’s negotiations result in a type of immanent composition consisting of a range of heterogeneous materials. Both albums indeed are Zappa’s early forays into the poetic of statement designed to channel the articulating multitude, the voice of the people. The multi-layering of the voice, the deterritorialized expression, and fragmented discourse, symbolizing the comic and tragic fragmentation of the American public, resonates with experiments of Gertrude Stein and the disembodied voices of Beckett.

The second case study concerns the question of voice as a triad consisting of the author function, a typographic inscription, and the lexical meaning and so the idea or concept understood in the context of their social uses. Zappa’s 1974 *Apostrophe (‘)* serves as an extended example of his playing around with voice as a mediatized phenomenon passing through different registers. *Apostrophe (‘)*, I claim, thanks to its cartoon-like capacity musically and narratively to compress, stretch, exaggerate, ridicule, and parody its own content, serves to the listener an abstract model of the voice. This abstract figuration of the voice, itself a form of compressing voice into a diagram, splinters into multiple
personalizations; the form invades social space as it were, and enters into multiple discursive relationships with other forms, other discourses stabilized within their institutional-social settings. Two songs from the album, “Stinkfoot” and “Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow,” I discuss in more detail as examples of the way voice bleeds into discourse. In “Stinkfoot” through the use of the subaltern voice Zappa plays around with the master/slave dialectic as revocalized and rearticulated within the discourse of the recording industry, advertizing, and the comic. In “Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow,” specifically in the so-called “Mar-Juh-Rene” monologue, Zappa offers the listeners a parody of orality in its theological orientation as centered on the voice of god and its mediations through scriptures and sermons.

The last section of the chapter turns to Zappa’s rock-opera Joe’s Garage as a case study of the rhetoric of the voice in its dramatic multiplications becoming a polity. The multiple voice of populations is considered here more in the context of the system of power, as domination, submission, surveillance, and the utopic and dystopic dreams about freedom of expression. Joe’s Garage through conflated parodies of biblical stories and comic cartoons tells a story of a deindividuated self situated against the backdrop of random noise, all composed on the operating table from feedback, overdubbing, re and de-sychronizing, and the layering of multiple tracks.

4.2. Image and Sound: Toward the Zappa Composition

Zappa’s proclivity for constructing a public self, indeed a series of selves, may be variously interpreted, for example, as a tactic of hiding the real self from the public, of keeping it to itself. More provocatively, and in my view more accurately, one could say that the line distinguishing a private and public self is no longer clearly drawn. This shift within self/selfhood I observed earlier with regards to Stein’s experimental texts as well as Beckett’s
poetics, whose aim, not unlike those of Foucault, is to trace and theorize the notion of subjectivity and the process of subjectivization.

Populist, ecological, machinic, human, animalistic, melodic, and spoken elements coexist in Zappa already at the outset, as starting points. The available materiality faces the composing agent, who individuates by virtue of composing, otherwise possessing no particularly differentiating characteristics, but a system of collective appetites and kicks. The multiple personality behind the trade mark and official name ‘Frank Zappa’ finds its iconographic representations serving well devotional proclivities of rock fandom, in the form of multiple images of Zappa as sheik, Santa Claus, little girl, corporate magnate/government official, blackface, in all cases distinguished by his so-called ‘imperial’ facial hair. In this series manifesting the various pieces of the American dream puzzle, it is easy to imagine Zappa impersonating Gertrude Stein or John Cage. Indeed, one can imagine many images of Zappa, as his multifarious work takes the listener on a complex voyage.

Let me begin with a peculiar image of Zappa that has to do with the reception of his work and the aesthetics of FZ bootleg artwork; I say ‘peculiar’ because it is composed with no Zappa presence, on an album released posthumously by the Zappa Family Trust, yet comprising the material — guitar solos — put together for release and titled by Zappa: Trance-Fusion. One can think of “trance-fusion” phonetically as transfusion, and so as transformation, morphing, change. This initial association isn’t quite accurate, though the word fusion may be partly responsible, since it implies a new entity that emerges as a result of a fusion or blending of two or more things, something of relevance in the context of ‘fusion’ as a blend of jazz and rock of the late 1960s and early 70s involving bands like The Mothers of Invention; and the word ‘trance’ too works on the imagination in a similar way, suggesting
a certain hypnotic fluidity. There’s an obvious slippage between what one hears and what one
sees/reads in print, transfusion as in a transfer of donated blood or other liquid, something that
can give a person a new life and something that in a way transforms the person; and the actual
title that surprises with a word taken apart, split into two, yet oddly fused into one as well
with the hyphen bridging the parts. Zappa had a fling with hyphens in the summer of 1973
when he stuck two of them in the word ‘margarine,’ suggesting they could be used for sexual
gratification, among other things. What could we use this hyphen for? Perhaps it is a key to
unlock the mystery of this artwork?

Figure 1. *Trance-Fusion*, Frank Zappa Album Cover Art
This cover is not just an image but a carefully constructed statement. Here are a few things that catch attention. The image is a marked departure from his style of artwork (leaving aside *Civilization Phaze III*), which tends to be non-perspectival, relying on montage/collage as ways of arranging different elements on a page but also of bringing them all to one dimension. By comparison, we have a quintessentially perspectival representation, which makes us think of all lines converging into infinity and god. At the very top there’s the god and sun, the source of light and the opening through which light can filter in, inscribed in gold radiating letters. It’s this light that somehow brings everything together, making it all visible, and yet makes it all immaterial, fanciful, suspended in mid air, as if there were no gravity (no flooring for the sofa?). The second point of notice concerns multi-dimensionality, manifested in a certain space-time depth suggestive of evolution, process, and mutation. The image invites a mental journey through different dimensions and elements, and there are correspondences between them, a fluid movement between air and water, heaven and ground, light and shadow, one being reflected in the other, this reflectivity fusing them all. Starting at the top and the farthest point, there is the trade-mark, “Zappa,” posing as god and vanishing point, though it’s only a weird configuration of light dancing on the surface of the water as seen from below. The same applies to the clouds that could very well be only a play of light, an illusion of something distant or of another register. The light pierces the surface of water, permeating the boundary which, looking from the bottom up, seems like an absolute border that couldn’t be crossed and yet it is crossed, as if by visibility itself.

The centre... but let’s stop: there’s an interesting doubling here and a superimposition of additional perspective, the one no longer concerned with viewing things vertically, from the bottom (of the ocean floor) up, but operating as it were in a horizontal perspective,
concerned with the surface, or perhaps viewing things in time, as one life form replacing another. The centre then is occupied by life, its material form, though highly structured. It’s a swarm or a dance, a ceremony and celebration, a mystery and a society of sorts, and it goes on in succession, one swarm after another. And then there’s the ground itself, barren, but serving as an excellent projection screen for another kind of inscription that corresponds to the one on top. Here we have the other side of the trade-mark, the imperial moustache, projected. Of course, it’s the dolphins in their weird trance that form this shape and cast its shadow on the ground. What happens here is an interesting transformation from the material (life form) to the semiotic (sign form), something that also operates on the level of the logo itself, which translates the material (hair) into the semiotic (picture). The sun could only be an illusion of something far away, and it’s coming from the other side of things; the ground slips away too, giving the viewer only a little semblance of itself, a little patch to stand on. And why would one even want to stand on it if something really weird and exciting is taking place just above? We are suspended nowhere.

This nowhere is yet another location, the radiating with presence nothing of Cage, a kind of virtual location of the composition itself, the work of art as a container of sorts. If image corresponds to the immediacy of the sign/trace, then composition, by contrast, examines a systemic synchrony of signs. The hinge between the two is the concept of articulation as stratification, the emergence of strata, the movement of the self-articulating earth. And so the hinge is the statement as the space of composition, for the statement has to do with distribution. The statement has its different manifestations; on one level it manifests as writing and text, as the Roman capitals of How It Is, though not meant to remain in this form but meant as transcriptions, projections, recordings archiving the murmuring noises of
the innumerable. On another level, it signifies rebellion, defiance, independence and freedom in the very American spirit of the pursuit of happiness.

The explosive emergence of sound and music in the Twentieth-Century marks a peculiar confinement of music, but confinement as a metaphor that itself extends beyond prison as a model of containing dangerous others. It’s a prison of another dimension, in the form of a jukebox or top 40; in the form of critical discourse debating/labeling — containing — the social aspects of the jukebox; in the form of such a conceptualization of sound as ultimately to contain all sound inside a jukebox, large enough to include a range of different musical tastes, though un-complex, reducible to a set of homogeneous elements. With his pronouncements of the “top 40 as unethical,” Zappa enters the scene of rock as a revolutionary attacking the establishment, storming the institutionalized apparatus of music, the standardization along with the labeling and hierarchization of musical expression in terms of specified styles and pre-set sets of steps. The Mothers of Invention’s early concerts, which may be best exemplified by the Garrick Theater shows from 1967, practice, in contrast, a performative synthesis of diverse elements, involving, both through improvisation and planned compositions, musics spanning the contemporary experimental electronics of Stockhausen, musique concrete, R&B and Doo-Wop, classical popular repertoire, the various shades of jazz, cabaret and spoken word experiments, all mixed in with solid, mesmerizing, psychedelic fusion rock.

Zappa consistently declares himself to be a composer, but composing for him is not limited to working with strictly musical elements. Musicality or music making extends beyond the dealings with musical elements per se, or, put another way, musical elements, insofar as being stuff that can feed into a musical composition, are not limited in range and
type to specific sort of entities. In the scene from *Uncle Meat The Movie*, a then member of the Mothers of Invention, Don Preston, arranges foodstuff on a table, explaining to the audience and viewers that the arrangement itself is a musical composition, an attempted hit record that failed to make it to the top charts. Preston’s plate of foodstuff constitutes music not merely in a pictorial representation — a hamburger patty resembles in shape a 45 rpm disc used at the time to promote two selected tracks from an LP — but in the very nature and dynamic of the musical pieces it consists of, the concrete materiality of the artifact of music making, meat, bread, vegetables, the way these could, in fact, should be played.

These comical and seemingly outrageous ideas concerning music are methodically smuggled into the realm of popular understanding within the rock cultures of the late 1960s by Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, in response to, or in tune with, the modernist legacy of sound expansion dating back to the sonic experiments of Edgar Varèse and others. The scene from the unfinished movie *Uncle Meat*, insisting on the musicality of common objects and food can be traced back to Zappa’s 1963 appearance on the Steve Allen show where, as a young aspiring talent, Zappa demonstrated how to use a bicycle as an instrument in a musical ensemble. By the early 1960s, these kinds of ideas, and the incorporating of unusual raw sonorities into songs, thus creating new extended forms of popular music, were nothing particularly new or innovative, yet they did effectively shock and, judging from the response, entertain the TV viewers for they were unusual to the medium of television and new to this line of cultural consumer. Zappa is both shrewd and well informed about the workings of the avant-garde. He is shrewd about the ways in which a certain set of ideas, limited to selected audiences or experts, could be a valuable commentary on the nature of music as expression in a different context. He is shrewd in yet another sense, of gesturing toward the
public, in fact operating entirely within the public setting, in response to collective tastes and ways of thinking, but at the same time not willing to compromise in catering to those very tastes. In thanking the young talent for his entertaining musical performance involving the bicycle — featuring a clean-shaven Zappa clad in a suit and tie — Steve Allen inadvertently utters a prophetic “as for your music, don’t do it again here,” a comment concerning the problem of playability of his musical statements on mainstream media, especially relevant for Zappa. (To his credit, Steve Allen went on to invite Zappa and the Mothers Of Invention back to his show on June 24th 1968.)

In asking about the nature of composition, one may be tempted to start by formulating first a simple what question: “what is a composition?” This kind of inquiry expresses at once a presumably straightforward call to define the term in question for clarity’s sake but simultaneously a metaphysical inquiry of the highest level of abstraction, concerning substances and essences. Simple questions of the what order are hardly innocent philosophical beginnings, for from the start they commit us to adopting a conceptual framework of inquiry which isn’t neutral. First philosophy is hardly what happens first; rather its principles tend to be presented a posteriori as formulations stripped of empirical content, preceding actual data, preceding even the research situation itself calling for a particular analytic approach, predetermining the steps of inquiry and strategy of approaching its subject matter. This positing of a prori as an epistemic possibility is the fiction of first principles preceding actual matter, of ideas guiding events. A different line of inquiry would involve bracketing off the question concerning what a given phenomenon is, and adopting an ecological approach, a type of probing into the dynamic of a situation involving a phenomenon at hand. We can call this approach a ‘field approach,’ ultimately mapping the field itself, without having to pose
‘field’ as a closed object that at some point in time could be looked at conveniently from outside, offering a reliable point of observation. Even the notion of observation with its ocular bias can be set aside for the time being, leaving room for a different kind of rapport. Here we are asking, taking a hint from McLuhan (stop asking whether something is good or bad, and start asking instead what’s going on), not what a composition is but what is going on, what is at work in the work of composition. What I am alluding to are the models of the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari as well as the mosaic of McLuhan, interpretive-composing fields that recognize immanence as a form and content of compositionality and where all various matters are related to one another in an auditory all-at-onceness and copresence.

The question of composition is essential to the spirit of the age and Zappa understands well the urgency, declaring himself for all posterity an America composer, perhaps to echo forever Varèse’s “modern-day composer refuses to die” cited proudly by the young Zappa on the cover of *Freak Out!*. His first albums exemplify this line of critical engagement, offering cartoon-like artifacts and comedy stuff intercut with astonishing avant-garde pieces and sounds as meditation on the nature of compositionality; they are all, as perhaps all Zappa’s albums are, concept-albums. The so-called hippie opera, *We’re Only In It For The Money*, Zappa’s foray into social commentary on the American counterculture of the late 1960s, dissecting it piece by piece with the critical eye and ear of an observant, and featuring a parody of the Beatles’s *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*’s cover, gatefold and insert, is a perfect example of what critics and commentators described as ‘political theater.’ The album features a score of ‘little’ songs, short, catchy, wistful, melodic, anthem-like tunes — some of the most memorable Zappa numbers — intercut with jarring *musique concrete*
sounds, tape manipulations, and bits of conversations, and ending with a longer and challenging instrumental, “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny.”

“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” composes a musical allegory of the technologies of inscription as a potential tool to seeking social justice and as an archive of the speaking/articulating socius, the voice of the people, disembodied, as in the voicings of the innumerable, the imaginary multiplicity of How It Is. The piece and its very composition process involving building a complex musical apparatus, (“a box that we built at a studio called the Apostolic Vlorch Injectoris”) is described by Zappa in the radio interview on WDET-FM Detroit, November 1967. Parts of the interview were reprinted in Rick Davis’s “Father of Invention” article in Music Technology in February 1987. Zappa’s colorful description of the apparatus designed to generate “gross square-wave distortion” resulting in the “technicolor noise” conveys the spirit of experimentalism, engineering, as well as a degree of improvisation, for the output, though ultimately carefully edited and so composed, is ultimately unpredictable in the way Cage’s prepared piano works. The actual megaphone used on the recording of the track, a styrofoam cup with a punched out bottom placed in front of a microphone, a peculiar technical assemblage of the mass media system with its barrage of voices and messages, represents at once the corporate takeover and the emancipatory potential of the popular voice. The ‘megaphone’ voices its judgment in the form of a collective laughter uttered by the members of the rock orchestra taking turns. The ‘megaphone’ in this sense is part of “the technicolor noise” and takes the listener beyond the verbal means of communication, into the cosmos of noises, the auditory chaosmos of sonic machinery.

The idea for the track is a protest song, popular at the time, blasting in the liner notes the then governor of California, Ronald Reagan, for building “concentration camps” for
hippies, though the musical form of the track is a cacophonous instrumental sounding like Stockhausen’s tape experiments, most notably his early 1960s Kontakte, utilizing an aggressive approach to composition, privileging sudden juxtapositions, jarring noises, sharp attacks and contrasts, industrial noise, the overall abstract, atonal, and intensity-oriented musical expression. The track is a curiously fitting finale of this hippie opera, adding to it a chilling, grotesque element; it takes the listener quite literally to another dimension of consciousness, beyond the rock album, into the stratosphere of experimental avant-garde, offering a set of sounds difficult to stomach for a listener used to Bob Dylan or Joan Baez’s protest songs; it is curiously cleansing — cleansing the ears of the excessive verbalizations of the album, cleansing the mind — the social mind — of its intentionality to hear computable messages.

If the statement here is a non-verbal voice, marking a departure from the logos of the judiciary/legal account, the judgment as so compositionally uttered by Zappa, the master of ceremony on the performing stage and in the recording booth and editing room, outlines yet another destiny curve: the voice of the machine, the gramophone, “His Master’s Voice” of the medium that transcends through its tribal tubers into a dimension of statement beyond the word. Here the account — the statement — traverses into another register, difficult to pinpoint and theorize, that of sound, sounding out the auditory multiplicity of the voice.

As a resonating subtext, “In the Penal Colony” of Kafka as adopted by Zappa — who instructs the listener to read the story before listening to the track — may be one of the key insights into the operations at the interface of sound and text. This interface has to do with the creation of a ‘plane of immanence’/immediacy as a copresence of elements in a musical composition however effectively juxtaposed with radical asynchronies and multi and micro-
temporalities. Zappa’s interpretive take on Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” is ingenious, staging a kind of interpretive transposition, an interpretive-creative commentary on the story, directed against interpretation, meaning, and the signifier, but experimenting instead. Zappa’s sensibilities are close to Deleuze and Guattari’s experimental analysis of Kafka in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* where they vehemently oppose the notion of interpretation based on “the Signifier” (3) and advance their experimental schizoanalysis. Zappa captures the essence of Kafka, at least in a Deleuzoguattarian sense, a great problem of modernism, of turning literature toward intensities, assemblages, immanence and away from meaning and the signifier, particularly of the psychoanalytic, Freudian type. This fantasy of the immediacy of communication is here translated into another idiom, of a popular culture expression as vocalizing the multitude, shaping a certain type of the popular/populist self, in the case of Zappa performed by and illustrating an improvisatory call for the expression of the collective voice. The collage form and layers of tape as the mechanicals of the composition symbolize the multi-layering of the voice itself, no longer contained within grammatical-lexical language but caught up in a swirl of linguistic and sonoric debris. At work here we can witness an implementation and practice of auditory improvisatory poetics of Stein and Beckett, manipulating different modules to compose/create statement.

“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” takes us back and forward to the poetics of the statement in Beckett, put in a Deleuzoguattarian way, back to the system of stratification — articulation as sedimentation — on the abstract machine/plane of consistency, as in the hermeneutic pulp of *How It Is* where material chaosmos delimits the range of possible materials that can be logically organized, as well as delimiting the tactics/combinatorics of composition: only from within the swarming copresence of the
various forms and matters with no recourse to a transcendental authorship that can control the materials from outside. In Zappa, the shift within the poetics of statement is engaged in the decisively auditory setting of a rock concert and rock album. The avant-garde sensibility and the rock aesthetics open up spaces for novel experimentation with the statement, in the context of a synergy of times, a multi-temporaneity of musical layering as practiced by Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, exploring the synergy between synchrony (of compositional systems and epistemes) and simultaneity, the all-at-onceness of the electric age that characterizes sound. Sound in this sense, explored and experimented with by Zappa scientifically, in the manner of a chemist interested in explosives, as he describes himself in his *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, taken both as a figuration and material presence, forges a new level of understanding, a new consciousness. Everything is happening all the time, all at once — this is what defines a sound composition.

“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” as a *musique concrete* number smuggled into a rock opera based on a literary text, dramatizes a moment at the historical confluence of the systems of writing and speech, of orality and literacy, where the inscription of the word renders the word immediate, coexistent with its meaning, understood without mediation, but where the word and its attendant logos are dismembered, dismantled, rendered non-verbal by the very medium of the ‘megaphone’ carrying the voice from the private to the public realm. The premise here lies in the paradox of a writing machine — in Zappa’s case the gramophone, or specifically the process of the pressing of the vinyl record as a form of print culture aimed at reproducing and mass producing the communicative idiom of the multiple voice of the people, the medium here presented as capable of immediate mode of rendition or translation of the meaning of the word, the embodied law, but also capturing the
coming together of meanings and feelings, for affects and words are again immediately copresent. The judgment of the ‘megaphone’ is inscribed in a peculiar field, in a public inscription, a recording. In his story, Kafka plays deliberately with the slippage between literal and symbolic meanings of words, but so does Zappa following his logic, when he chooses to use a record to underscore the dimension of recording as a form of inscription and being itself an artifact, being itself — there is no need to separate the message from the medium of the recording itself, as they are both simultaneous, always already copresent — a virtuality. Let’s propose a question, or rather a series of questions to pursue: Is the voice virtual, real, embodied; on the inside or on the outside; murmured in the mud as in Beckett’s *How It Is*, murmured to the self, meaningless, or, as collective forms of expression deindividuated in the social dimension of speech, both transcendent and immanent, a materialization and an event?

Around the same time as The Mothers of Invention were working on the *We’re Only In It For The Money* album, Zappa was composing his solo piece, *Lumpy Gravy*. Both albums belonged together, and subsequently were released together on one CD by Zappa himself in the mid 1980s, and rereleased in a four-disc package with unreleased tracks from both sessions along with different mixes and miscellaneous stuff by the Zappa Family Trust as *Lumpy/Money*. *Lumpy Gravy* was, by Zappa’s own admission, one of his favorite albums and it occupies the central role in untangling the various musical and conceptual threads of Zappa’s oeuvre. In his analysis of *Lumpy Gravy*, Bernard convincingly stresses that “there is far more to *Lumpy Gravy* than could have been apparent to any first-time or causal listener in 1968. Extending across the often disorientating juxtapositions of mutually incompatible materials are long-range progressions and continuities that eventually turn out to be promoted
by the surface discontinuity” (5). Bernard’s description invites a reading of the album as a mediation on composition in terms of continuities and discontinuities constitutive of it, and so a composition more inclusive in incorporating issues and dimensions of immediate concern to a modern-day composer at work.

The album contains several of his key compositions that reappear in different guises on subsequent albums, thus manifesting in the oeuvre as individual works intended to be part of a larger system, what Zappa refers to as Project/Object. Figuratively speaking, *Lumpy Gravy* is a treatise on composition, Zappa’s own way of delivering a lecture on “Composition as Explanation.” And, to take a clue from Paul Carr, for example his *Frank Zappa - A Case Study in Musical Research*, the album expresses Zappa’s ‘big note’ philosophy. I take composition here alongside the logic of Beckett’s *How It Is*, and in the Deleuzoguattarian spirit of the ‘plane of immanence’, in two senses: as in composing-creating but also as the composition of matter, the structure of things. *Lumpy Gravy* implicitly comments on and even performs this doubling.

The question of composition, which Zappa engages as a theoretical problem and performative practice on *Lumpy Gravy*, resonates with a structuring of musical matter, and ultimately in a cosmological formulation, the structure of stuff. This intense sound collage relies heavily on a series of spoken parts, themselves edited from improvised random talks between a group of voices known as the piano people, as a meditation on the nature of composition in these two basic meanings. (Bernard’s article traces at length and in close detail one of the strings, the extended monologue of James Euclid “Motorhead” Sherwood, member of the band at the time.) But there are other parts and dimensions. The various forms and contents interpenetrate. A rhizomatic synergy of forms, dimensions, and expressive contents,
*Lumpy Gravy* operates simultaneously on different levels, as a cosmological farce about the Big Note and as a constitutive metaphysical/universal oneness splintered into a chaosmotic multiplicity of voices and half voices imprisoned inside a dark piano, in the veritable manner of Beckett’s late plays where the physical space is limited to a minimum, arresting movement but releasing an imaginary-vibratory plethora of twitching, spasmimg, and convulsing; a musical collage blending different styles of music and sounds, combining the orchestra with a rock band, and utilizing a range of editorial techniques and tape manipulation in piecing together the final artifact; a technical treatise about the structure of matter both in the sense of the building blocks of the universe and the cognitive capacity of the mind to conceptualize this immanent outside as a system of interrelated forms or media: waves and particles and a meditation on the location of the disembodied and fragmented voice of the socius. The ‘piano people’ as the voices of the multiple, the voices caressing and tormenting one another and ultimately enclosed within their own, arbitrary system of voicing, imprisoned — contained — inside the piano are a metaphor of the containment of the voice but also a tremendous capacity for release in the form of verbal and semi-verbal outbursts of lumps floating amidst the musical gravy of intercut styles.

Addressed at all these levels there is the relationship between inside and outside, echoing the thought of outside as in Deleuze’s analysis in *Foucault*. Zappa’s theory of composition implying virtual and real time frames is likewise grounded in Stein’s germinal essay on “Composition as Explanation” which addresses timing and temporality as essential components or forces at work on a compositional field, for example in Stein’s distinction between the time *of* and *in* the composition. The question of the role and uses of voice in improvisation is featured strongly on this album and it resonates with “the voice of Suzie
Creamcheese” on the *Freak Out!* album; as well it will return in a series of different Zappa works, providing a bridge between the problematic of composition and the question of the voice: voice in improvisation.

At the level of deterritorialized expression and its fragmented discourse and words, *Lumpy Gravy* connects effectively with the experiments of Gertrude Stein capturing the disembodied voice of the collective in her landscape plays, emphatically connecting performance with geography, the copresence of landscape markers as markers of articulation. In both Stein and Zappa, we witness an extraordinary production of statements through the multiplication of the banal, repetitions, nonsense words and sounds, arbitrary mutilations and variations of recorded/pre-existing texts, all of which, despite a seemingly aleatory approach, not only preclude but often demand absolute precision in dealing with words, even as they are tweaked or adjusted in quite unpredictable ways. For both Stein and Zappa, every moment, whether within or outside the autonomous piece in the making, is somehow a part of it, incorporated into its complex structuring, despite the absolute banality/inanity of some, and as such it maintains an equal importance in the overall conceptual whole. Be that an accidental dot or comma or a whole carefully constructed novel or opera, every element of the work constitutes an equally complex composition organically connected/related to and juxtaposed with a whole series of others; each emerges from the series, constituting its structuring element, propagating it further; each passes between its outsides, curiously leaving only a trace of subject and author behind. Every element bears the authorial signature and the author alone is responsible for it, but at the same time every element is free from authorial intentions and from signification, remaining as free particles in the world, though it would make little or no sense to take it out of the context of the work itself and place it back into the world.
While the works of both Stein and Zappa are grounded largely in their immediate environment — consisting of external objects, references, materials, quotations, voices, sounds all woven together and making up the material presence of art — there’s barely a trace of the author left and the works essentially lack reference. They are disengaged. This disengagement is what makes them personal: there is no anecdote or story, no secret information necessary to effectively explain a given work. This materiality of the work, its soundness at the level of ‘social energy’, is what makes these works functional and compositional in the highest degree, asserting and repeating the logic of their own organization, the intensity and interconnectedness of their parts. They extract from their environment a readily available element that serves a specific simple function, and the work as a whole becomes a collocation of such ready-made functions. Zappa repeatedly asserts that the nature of his work is personal. This testimonial admission is to dismiss effectively any claims other than the purely operational elements and systems of relations that enter the compositional field. There can be no transcendental signifiers, deep or hidden meanings, no values that transcend the material presence of a commercially available, mechanically reproducible art-object with its limitations and inadequacies. This ready-to-hand approach is what Zappa calls serving to entertain only, as if building and rebuilding a rock combo jukebox machine that spits out music for the people were the ultimate and only real purpose of art.

4. 3. The Three Functions of the Voice in *Apostrophe (‘)*

I now turn to Frank Zappa’s 1974 album *Apostrophe (‘)*, taking it as an abstract model of voice, comprising lexical, typographic, as well as author/image functions. This thematic model of the voice is pursued to its further extension of the rhetoric of rock with an example of 1979 rock opera *Joe’s Garage*, whose framing narrator, the Central Scrutinizer, speaks
through a megaphone, orchestrating as if from a recording booth the proceedings of the narrative, delivering its different messages alongside xenochronously compiled musical material. The *Apostrophe (')* album and its conceptual material, specifically its creative manipulations of TV commercials, serves to probe the efficiency of the voice in composition and improvisation, and to discuss the problem of the mediation of voice. I am interested in tracing the so-called natural voice as a hollow, silent, and ghostly phenomenon; voice as staged, and so as a boundary demarcating the self; voice as a medium enabling the passing through of different contents. I then turn to Zappa’s spoken word performance as a medium of improvisation, showing how an improvised part of the Yellow Snow narrative may exemplify the politics of statement, offering a field of possible permutations for the solo performer to engage in. Drawing on the uneasy relationship between composition and improvisation in Zappa, I examine the creative use of language not as a vehicle to deliver a message but as compositional material in its own right to be manipulated in a musical piece, relatively free from verbal significance. In *Apostrophe (')* the abstract model of the voice serves as the ground to address the applied case of the voice along with its mutations of the Central Scrutinizer in the *Joe’s Garage* opera, in itself a peculiar commentary on George Orwell’s *1984*. As I subsequently demonstrate, the kitschy story of Joe and Mary’s failed relationship in the background, replete with intimate details, *Joe’s Garage* comments on the dimension of voice as a surveillance mechanism, a case of oral/aural panopticon.

Figuratively, the *Apostrophe (')* cover artwork takes the listener to the core of the argument of the album, presenting no less than the image of the voice. What we see in a close-up of Zappa’s face, looking larger than life, is a peculiar diagrammatic representation of the voice as a complex phenomenon, spanning three media orientations at a point of crossing:
statement as distribution. A simple semiotic reading helps to identify, in no particular order, a system of writing at work, symbolically manifested through the arbitrary usage of the typographic prime as a marker of apostrophe in the sense of omission/possession. In order to make the prime readable, as well as to ensure that it is detached from the word itself, Zappa has to place it inside round brackets, inadvertently creating a poetic statement in the form of (‘), marking a kind of silent writing insofar as the symbol cannot be vocalized: apostrophe amplified but also excised, silenced, omitted.

Figure 2 *Apostrophe (’),* Frank Zappa Album Cover Art
An image of the voice is individuated in the form of the authorial/authored persona, manifested by the face. Here Zappa seems to be pointing to the author function of the voice analogous to Foucault’s notion of the author function of the name, where the name of the author operates as the function of a written text, providing the text with its authorial voice. In the essay on the author function, Foucault argues that certain kinds of text make sense only if there’s a name attached to them, the name delimiting specific interpretive procedures around that particular text. Analogously — pictorially — the voice of text may be represented by the face manifesting the authorial persona behind it (or is it in front of it?), without which the text would not be interpretable alongside the presence — symbolic and silent — of the author. But the face likewise operates as a sign marking an artifact, a convention attached to speaking and taken for granted, a tired old way of explaining how and what speech and literacy are about; if in fact, the nature of speech puts it outside the self into the realm of the social, the voice’s destiny, if we were to imagine here a kind of metalogic, is to reach its outside, to resonate in the ‘acoustic space’ of the public of one kind or another, perhaps to operate entirely on its outside, within the collective forms of expression, imbricated with the collective voice, and so ultimately faceless. The face here, curiously silent, passes into the multitude of other faces.

Finally, one notices systems of meaning represented by the word — apostrophe — as a carrier of the direct, denotational meaning of the word, of the lexicon and semantics, expanding toward the various understandings and cultural ways of using this term/concept, and so referencing common knowledge. An apostrophe teases us with interpretive possibilities; as indicating possession, but also an absence when used in contraction; an apostrophe is also a figurative language involving a mode of address, addressing an interlocutor in the symbolic presence of a third, often a divine entity, an overhearer who
purportedly records, inscribes, memorizes, archives, and circulates the address, the case of “the ancient voice in me not mine” of Beckett’s *How It Is*.

Let us note that all three symbolizations or figurations of the voice, the prime, the face, and the word, are inherently silent. They are abstract assemblages of vocalization. We may note a comical paradoxicality of the ‘symbol,’ itself an auditory metaphor that makes sense only insofar as it’s no longer heard. Symbolization, initially indexing a sounding out of two registers coming together or crossing paths, is not audial but rather constitutes a form of dematerialized materiality of sound/voice, for example in the way the voice becomes text. (Any material object could be a symbol but not all of them are symbols; in order to become symbolic, an object has to be transposed to another register, and enter the sphere of non-material semantics.) It is in this spirit, resonating with McLuhan and media studies and semiotics that Zappa produces his own communication/information/mediation ‘treatise,’ choosing, in his usual fashion, the cartoon and folk-philosophy as the mode to deliver his communication.

The image on the cover of *Apostrophe (’)* performs something extraordinary despite — indeed thanks to — its banality. An image of a rock band or solo rock musician on the front cover of an album: what could be more banal? The face operates here as a signature of a commodity, testifying, for example, to the authenticity of the product. The fetish doubles as a commercial gimmick — for many an album would not successfully sell unless a carefully staged photo of an artist appeared on the cover — and a devotional token, asserting for the consumer and fan of the album his/her uniqueness and individuality against “the murmur of the innumerable voices” of Beckett’s *How It Is*, the non-individuated mass as primary consumer and producer of mass media messages. Zappa’s face here is fetishism, offering his
devoted fans an opportunity to reproduce — bootleg — it on t-shirts and photos to sell, spread, and promote. Not unlike the industry standards would recommend, Zappa falls into this fetishistic trap, though amusing himself mightily, enlarging the auditory statement offered inside the album with the image-statement of the artwork. And so, Zappa amuses himself with creating an image-statement that corresponds to the audial/auditory distribution of it in the form of a recording, in this particular case commenting on the relationship between sound, text, and image, picturing for the audience — in a manner befitting an Italian medieval allegoricist presenting to the public an allegory of the voice of the mass media — the message of the media in its abstract form.

The meaning of *Apostrophe (')* as a type of figurative language has not been discussed by Zappa scholars. In his tour de force reading of the album in *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, Ben Watson compares it to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, emphasizing nothing, absence, and zero as the main themes of the album, and so taking the apostrophe as the mark of omission. Indeed, one can point to available interviews and other comments of Zappa explaining the meaning of the apostrophe to see no evidence that he might be thinking of the figure of speech in this context. I am willing to concede that my interpretation is theoretical fantasy, but I want to argue that the prime as a typographic component, the word as a semantic component, and the silent face as the embodiment — the performative staging of — the authorial voice — altogether manifest the apostrophe as a mode of address. If there is an omission, invisibility, or absence here, it’s the absence of a clear and specific referent restricting the reading. The apostrophe appears in its complexity as a rich concept, suggesting different interpretive dimensions: dramatic, farcical, devotional, populist, linguistic, culturalist coexisting within the same field. It references speech and communication, revealing an insight
regarding the meaning of communication as a social act, grounded in and projecting a certain sociality, polysemic and multitudinous in nature. This sociality could be described in a principle/dictum: one does not speak to an other without the absent presence of a third. Moreover, the proper receiver of the communication is not the second to whom the speech seems to be directed, but the absent third, manifested differently, for example, through a personality split within the self forming this self’s conscience, this labyrinthian memory cluster where the timeless past, present, and future meet. And so the apostrophe indexes consciousness at work and its being, specifically its peculiar modality of communication, its capacity to resonate through the dark matter of cosmos: the apostrophe as descended to the ground, staring at a modern day consumer of music from the cover of an album with its price tag attached.

\textit{Apostrophe (‘)} is not the first or last example of a Zappa album with his photo greeting the audience from the cover. On many other occasions Zappa dazzles his audience with the authorial face, presenting as it were a different public domain. (Among many others \textit{Sheik Yerbouti} and \textit{Jazz From Hell} are examples.) In some sense, specifically in the sense imposed by the author himself — Frank Zappa — claiming with this authorial stamp the authorial control over his work, life, and artifacts, Zappa’s faces as a public persona speaking in the public realm manifest a way of being of sound-voice-text. They are a channelling of the non-authorizable — intersubjective and so technically unnameable — discourse, the way of speaking and thinking, a case when collective forms of utterance are re-enacted by an individual — individuated to manifest that individual’s momentary expression of themself, momentary copresence and participation in the \textit{sensus communis} of the social multitude around.
As a concept album, *Apostrophe (')* takes the listener to an imaginary-impossible place, the farther oblivion, a place where temporal and spatial orders are confused, a hyperbolic space-time of extremes manifested through the 100 degrees below zero environment of the opening “Yellow Snow” suite and the displacement of language toward non-human forms of communication on the closing track “Stinkfoot.” Zappa seems to be interested here in the then-popular notion of the medium, propagated by McLuhan and exploding into a new discipline of media studies. Time, space, vision, spirituality, cognition, and communication are brought together into an absurdist musical cartoon for several characters and voices. The cartoon is a medium of communication; musically, this approach translates into a form of comedy music, syncretic, never quite committed to a particular musical idiom. Generally a rock or progressive rock album, it mixes in different styles; the oneiric, parodic orientation of Zappa’s lyrics makes the album oddly unserious by comparison with the mainstream rock output of the early 1970s, dominated by groups like Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath aiming at a much more sincere communication with their audiences.

The pastiche and satire attitude of Zappa has always been a test even to his most devoted fans. At the time of recording *Apostrophe (')*, Zappa had at his disposal a group of highly skilled musicians interested in playing progressive music befitting his compositional and performative skills, like the rising stars of fusion violinist Jean-Luc Ponty and keyboardist George Duke. The former reportedly felt uninterested in Zappa’s scatological sense of humor and his farcical attitude. During various periods, Zappa audiences showed impatience with Zappa’s humor, complaining that there were not enough instrumentals showcasing his musical skills. The 1981 North American tour promoting the *You Are What You Is* album is
an example of fans getting tired of his cabaret comedy stuff. Social commentary resulted in a music not often compatible with the band’s capacity to dazzle the listener with musical expertise and cutting edge content. The so-called ‘Flo and Eddie’ period of 1970-71, with its cabaret style of rock with skits, stories, and narration — whose more known example is Zappa’s narrative epic, “Billy the Mountain” — is another case in point of close fans complaining about the output not adequately representing the musical capacity of the band. *Shut Up ‘N Play Yer Guitar* was Zappa’s bow to those who preferred strictly instrumental music; it showcases his troupe’s musical dexterity. The album comprising three discs of guitar solos has a title that sounds like something Zappa might have heard shouted out from the audience in response to his skits and excessive talking.

Whether in the context of his compositional divagations or when composing the abstract model of voice, Zappa brings into rock a Brechtian alienation effect, insisting on creating forms and types of communication that raise awareness about the medium of rock itself, testing its boundaries, exposing its limitations and biases, exploring and interrogating its politics. His emphasis on the artifact, the artificiality of the construct of rock and the constructed nature of social things, is dialectical. Watson, in his monograph *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, applies Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics as a theoretical framing of Zappa’s discourse. The dialectic element is certainly present in the form of excessive talking and drama, showcasing a dramatic-performance approach to music. If music as a system of sounds, a way of organizing and composing them as an absolute dimension of the material immediacy of sonic movement, a raw power of sound beyond verbal-logical signification, the way Schopenhauer regards music, then, in Zappa’s peculiar take on music, this absolute dimension manifests in a record album and/or rock arena, with all their
restrictions and imperfections, likewise revealing their public, polysemous, and multiplicitous auditory character akin to Shakespeare’s *Globe*.

The voice then stands in a special relation to discourse; which is to say that speech stands in a particular relationship to the way of speaking, stitching together, or stringing together the personal and the social. This dynamic relationship is no opposition between the self and the other but a series of connecting tissue. In its materiality, in direct social application, the voice represents the spontaneous presence, immediacy of social life, immanence *vis-à-vis* a discursive distance, reason, and logos of the lexicon. A screech of an animal or child, from fear or ecstasy; a scream of life as in Beckett’s *Breath*, which reduces life to a brief scream over a pile of rubble; a simple repeatable melody that protects the child from chaos around, as in Deleuze and Guattari’s explanation of the *ritournello*. This performative, audial voice is itself a noisy pollutant that corrupts reason, a noise that disrupts — subverts — the logos.

Already at the level of sounding out, the voice appears as a complex phenomenon, in multiple ways interconnected with the social field. Discourse, voice, subjecthood, and sound form a cluster of terms that offer interrelated lines of enquiry. For example, Judith Butler reminds us of the relationship between legal boundaries of discourses and the limits of speakability, locating speakability simultaneously along legal, social, and material lines. Foucault, for example in *The History of Sexuality*, advances a related claim pertaining to discourse and its powers over the body, specifically in the context of voicing/silencing, and so outlining a set of dynamics between voice and discourse. Here discourse is what in fact silences speech, by limiting it not only to what can be said — the limits of speakability — but
also how, in what manner, within which institutional setting the act of speaking can take place.

In this context, Zappa’s “Stinkfoot” presents a particular institutional dramatic setting for discourse and communication to take place, for the voice to manifest, an odd voice captured in its condensed, diagrammatic formulation. The setting is an average living room in America, with its sofa facing a TV, with its man coming from work or non-work, taking his shoes off and placing his stinky feet on a coffee table. More accurately, this is the setting of a TV commercial for foot odour spray picturing this very domestic scene. When the man removes his shoes, an odour repellant appears magically as a quick solution to the embarrassing problem of “stinkfoot” in the manner befitting TV commercials. (The song was inspired by a Dr Scholls TV commercial.) As the dog keels over and recovers a moment later after a stinging guitar solo, proving the miraculous operations of the market and its commercial message-voices, it curiously proceeds to engage in a comical philosophical conversation with the man, needless to say, stunning him. As the dog reports to his master a conversation it was a part of, “once upon a time, somebody say to me, what is your conceptual continuity…,” adding “I told ‘em right then, it should be easy to see, the crux of the biscuit is the apostrophe,” the man looks at the dog “in disbelief” and utters his: “you can’t say that.” The apostrophe joke lies here in the use of a whole series of contractions, indicating an array of the prohibitive masterly no: “it doesn’t, ’n you can’t, I won’t, ’n it don’t! It hasn’t, it isn’t, it even ain’t, ’n it shouldn’t… it couldn’t” (“Stinkfoot”).

The legal-social-material voice cluster implicates the voice in the power discourse. Leaving aside whether power operates as a strictly repressive regime, and so as something prohibitive, or in a constructive sense as a vital force, a biopower, the discursive dimension of
voice implies an advanced level of what Butler refers to as linguistification, a level of
discursive investment far more complicated, indeed more pernicious in how effectively it can
say no; in fact, the prohibitive can be articulated effectively and can penetrate deeper thanks
to having multiple discursive ties, a case in Foucault’s History of Sexuality of discourse being
“a more devious and discreet form of power” (11) than direct prohibition. This dynamic
understanding of silencing in Foucault opens up ways of theorizing silence not in terms of
absence but rather as presence, indeed a presence teeming with a complicated social life. One
of Foucault’s tasks in The History of Sexuality is to trace this presence with regard to practices
of sexuality, already splintering through the crust of speech, to that other strange mediation of
it in the form of discourse, and probe in the process the limits, the natural markers of
discourse of sexuality, the boundaries of what can be said, how, by whom, and to whom.

Not surprisingly in the context of Apostrophe ('), an album programmatically
engaging the relationship between ways of knowing and its attendant communicational
technics of speaking, showing culturally constructed forms of seeing, hearing, smelling, and
so on, Zappa chooses cynically and calculatingly to deliver his message in the voice of a dog:
Zappa literally playing the cynic. The message is the famous teaser “the crux of the biscuit is
the apostrophe” uttered as part of an elaborate performance involving a mix of direct and
reported speech, a multiplicitous splintering of the voice, trance-fusing into an animal-human
form, an anima animating a social field. In my interpretive take on the album aimed at
exemplifying the dramatic coming together of voice, text, and image, I place this statement at
the crossing of oral and literate media systems, heralding the return of the ‘secondary orality’
of Ong as manifested by the recording technology and its capacity to voice, the biscuit spot at
the crossing of sound and sight where the understanding again manifests in its instantaneous
immediacy of the auditory word come alive, where the word becomes embodied as it is uttered, indeed pitched as it is sounded out, entering a domain of sounds, resonances, auditory communication, and echoes.

How bonding is the power of discourse over speech in that capacity of embodied voice? In Foucault, they seem to be reciprocally connected, mutually constituting each other. The eruption of speech and even a total transgression of laws do not necessarily shatter discourse by offering some sort of return to a pre-discursive investment with language, but rather no matter how eruptive, speech already folds into discourse. “The affirmation of a sexuality ... is coupled with the grandiloquence of a discourse purporting to reveal the truth about sex” (8), the truth already understood as something countable, subject to quantification and measurement. Power in Foucault operates by displacing, fragmenting, pulverizing at the same time as it merges and forms complicated complexes: power-knowledge-pleasure (11). So much for free speech in any case, and so much for the voice perhaps too; this initial noise is channelled and discursively taken over, forced into a grid of prescribed social positions, dispositions, and displacements. Power becomes a means of subjugating the self with its idiosyncrasies, forcing the self into a conceptual grid, into a grammar of speaking, acting, and understanding. It is in this sense that we can say that language speaks us rather than the other way around.

The voice of “Stinkfoot” speaks through the subaltern dog mesmerized by the megaphone — speaker — sounding out from beyond the grave his master’s voice, as in Edison’s articulation of the idea of the gramophone and its immediate social function of preserving the voices of the dead. Perplexed, his master asks from beyond the grave how it is possible for the dog to verbalize, to which the dog responds casually with its: “I do it all the
time. Ain’t this boogie a mess?” Gayatri Spivak in her influential “Can the Subaltern Speak?” asks this very question. Through his Fydo, Zappa replies that subalterns not only can speak but do it all the time. Zappa reveals in his cartoon, comedic way, that when it comes to speech it’s not the question of a capacity to speak but of the ability to hear, to locate this voice, and so consequently to know how to read it, how to record and play it back. In a funny way, Zappa is telling us it’s the dog that speaks us. Stein famously credits her poodle dog Basket with discovering the difference between paragraph and sentence, the former as emotional, the latter not, by listening to Basket lap water from a bowl. Zappa ‘discovers’ a field of possible communicational maneuvers by listening to the dog from a TV commercial. In Foucault’s view, discourse has no proper content insofar as it is only a technology of organizing various materials, of selecting, and organizing them into larger formations. It is in this sense that discursive production is a production — and distribution — of power and as such it propagates knowledge. Any will to knowledge resolves itself in discursive production, which does violence to knowing by bringing it about and into the open.

“Stinkfoot” in live performances was often played as an opening track. The Apostrophe (’) album opens, however, with the “Yellow Snow” suite, consisting of a series “Don’t Eat the Yellow Snow,” “Nanook Rubs It,” “St. Alfonzo’s Pancake Breakfast,” and “Father O’Blivion,” a well-known piece of dadaesque absurdity that invariably became part of urban folklore myth about blindness caused by contact with snow peed on by dogs. Replete with sexual innuendos, the story of “Yellow Snow” takes place in a dream-like landscape under extreme weather conditions (“a hundred degrees below zero”), hence turning to a somewhat unusual assortment of sex paraphernalia: a fur trapper whippin’ on a baby seal with a snow shoe; the circular motion of rubbing the snow cone on the fur trapper’s eyes by an
angry Eskimo boy; the parish of Saint Alfonzo someplace beyond the tundra, housing a miraculous cure for blindness in the form of margarine; the frock and socks of one Father Vivian O’Blivion; and the orgiastic pancake breakfast complete with whipping up the pancake batter and sausage abuse. This masterpiece of oneiric rock comedy was carefully engineered in a recording studio and it occupies most of side one of the album, setting in motion a sequence of pseudo-philosophical investigations concerning the place of ‘man’ in the universe. In a live setting during the US and Australian legs of the 1973 tour, for a limited time of some dozen performances, Zappa used the suite as a space for an improvised spoken word performance. In this expanded live version of “Yellow Snow,” when the fur trapper gets to the pantry of the Saint Alfonzo’s parish to find there a box of margarine, and as he is about to rub the margarine on his “deflicted” eyes, in a parody of a jazz poetry lounge reading Zappa spells out the word as “mar-juh-rene,” creating a double-hyphenated assemblage. This performative scheme sets off a series of improvised narratives that involve making up on the spot a story associated with each letter of the word, allowing about three to four minutes of composing in the moment. This composing in the moment is what Watson — in the general context of Zappa improvisations — calls a piece of structured improvisation, for Zappa a chance to bring about the ultimate creative reality: a piece of pure absurdity, structured enough to require discipline and yet unburdened with significance.

“In two existing interviews, from 1989 and 1993, Zappa reiterates the same story about what the inspiration for the song was: a conversation with an English teacher in Kansas about proclivities of societies for using language that suits cultural and social functions specific to a culture” (Charles Ulrich, in private correspondence with the author, September 27, 2007. In the same email, Ulrich cites pertinent passages from these two interviews:)
I had a conversation in approximately 1972 with a schoolteacher in Kansas. She taught English. And she was talking about the way language works. And her point was that any language develops for a culture based on the things that the culture needs to talk about. And as an example she said in Eskimo language they have, you know, a whole number of different words for snow because snow is their life. And she was the one who said maybe they even have something for yellow snow, which you wouldn’t want to eat it. And that’s what gave me the idea. (FZ, interviewed by Jim Ladd, August 1, 1989)

And:

as an example she talked about the Eskimo language, which she said had twenty words for snow because it was so important to them. And she actually made the comment that probably in the Eskimo language there was some sort of warning for children not to eat yellow snow. And that’s where the idea came from. (FZ, interviewed by Allan Handelman, East Coast Live, June 6, 1993)

Notice the mediation taking place here, involving the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis being related to the audience via the gramophone record on behalf of the Kansas English teacher relating the Sapir/Whorf’s theory of language to the artist who used a rock album as a medium to ‘apostrophize’ the problem to the audience.

The “Mar-Juh-Rene” monologue showcases Zappa’s improvisatory verbal dexterity, captured also on the related Roxy & Elsewhere album, featuring the smaller, more intimate setting of the Roxy club in Hollywood. The released version of these live shows, heavily manipulated and overdubbed, has four sides, each beginning with a preamble, an extended spoken part not just introducing the group of songs occupying the side but providing a conceptual context for the sequence spliced together to appear as a seamless 18-20 minute track comprising various musical material, typically starting off with a standard rock number
followed by quirky, complex instrumentals and featuring performative banter, audience participation, and solos. In *No Commercial Potential: The Saga of Frank Zappa*, David Walley describes *Roxy & Elsewhere* as

[t]he most visually audial four sides he’d released to date, [highlighting] the rapport Frank has always enjoyed with his fans. It’s especially obvious during a peerless rendition of ‘The Be-Bop Tango’ where George Duke tickles the keys and the backbone of onstage fans who dance to illustrate the seductive qualities of the music. (162)

Deliberately loquacious at times, Zappa does what he loves doing: stand-up comedy with elaborate musical accompaniment.

A recent release of *One Shot Deal* by the Zappa Family Trust featuring “Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow” complete with the “Mar-Juh-Rene” monologue may sound like the only or at least the definitive version of this piece, but in reality there is no reason to assume that there should be one such version. What I claim here is that the “Mar-Juh-Rene” monologue exemplifies a set of variations without the original or leading theme so that the monologue functionally operates as a grouping of performances, structuring a series that ought to be considered as a series of variations. The theme lies in a conceptual framing of a sequence of potentially endless duration though aesthetically and compositionally limited. There is then a line of exhaustion of the series, a line that signifies a certain saturation of the planned effect on/within the collective ear of an archive. The premise of the monologue reminds one of Beckett’s *Quad*. Speculatively though reasonably one imagines Zappa recording — whenever possible — all of his live performances as a way of fishing for something special there, as
stated in the liner notes on the *You Can’t Do That On Stage Anymore* series as criterion of selection for the pieces of the Project/Object to be chosen.

The “Mar-Juh-Rene” monologue is obviously part and parcel of the “Yellow Snow” suite, indeed a somewhat inessential part considering that Zappa didn’t bother to release this material. The closest he came to making the monologue public aside from a dozen or so live performances was a tape prepared for radio sometime in 1974, which features one of the two Sydney recordings. The suite itself plays around with the relationship between parts as constitutive elements of a whole. And so “Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow” is actually the title of the first movement, but also refers to the whole suite, for example on the *You Can’t Do That On Stage Anymore, Vol. 1* release. The title of the part “Father O’Blivion” seems to be derived from the title of a musically unrelated instrumental “Farther Oblivion.” Related musically but not always part of the suite is “Rollo.”

The central joke of the monologue is a creative manipulation of the Imperial Margarine TV commercial. When the voice of “Yellow Snow” — a combination of first person voices, notably Nanook’s and the fur trapper’s in the opening of the suite — reaches the line “at St. Alfonzo’s pancake breakfast where I stole the margarine,” the 1973 band launches a spoof of gospel music with a trembling organ to facilitate Zappa’s confessional impersonation of the fur trapper in the form of “I admit it: I did it.” This fake confession evolves throughout May and June of 1973 into a fake sermon praising the healing powers of margarine for restoring the fur trapper’s “deflicted” eyesight. The margarine has healing powers, but this healing power is not inherent to the margarine itself but rather has to do with its placing. (Indeed, one would say this power has to do with the peculiar spelling of the word.) ‘Placing’ could be distinguished from ‘location.’ The latter involves determining the
spatial coordinates of a fixed object in a fixed space. The former has to do more with setting up a series of concentric frames where one thing can lead to another: the tundra, the parish of St. Alfonzo, the pantry, the box of margarine, all of which form a sequence of conceptual frames, a sort of obstacle course for the fur trapper to go through as part of his penance for clubbing to death Nanook’s favorite baby seal. This system of concentric frames in the context of the majesty of the margarine — a reference to the crown on the logo of Imperial Margarine — heralds itself as a signifier split syntagmatically into individual letters, each reintroducing other words, each offering its own play of signifiers. The first sermon has the opening M standing in for the majesty of the margarine, which appears to be a rebus reading of the crown on the logo for the product where the crown represents both majesty and margarine, thus producing a double M, also visually resembling the crown. By the time the band gets to Brisbane the M in margarine becomes marsupial, “because that’s what’s happening around here.” The word, this supranatural fetish of the Christian tribe returning comically in advertisements and psychoanalysis as endowed with the power to explain the universe residing decisively outside language, to cover it over with its culture here understood organically as a contagion of signifiers spreading their difference throughout particulate localities, returns to bite one in the ass whenever they insist on inquiring about its meaning as a possible singularity. The world and the word (bpNichol too found the word disjunctive in nature, spelling it as “w or d”): their juxtaposition produces a comical confusion that shows the primacy of melodic waves, resonances, vibrations, and becomings rather than logical singularities.

What’s the purpose of setting up a series? On one level a series is a hooking device, offering a narrative continuity (making one go to another concert and/or buy another record,
book, poem, toy). On another level, this is a playful meditation on the composition of stuff, what the Greeks called *hyle*: matter. Matter was for the Greeks associated with wood, something that can be manipulated creatively, something that can be the start of a poetic project, as in poiesis understood as the art of making. This materiality of matter as a conceptual framing was the premise of *Lumpy Gravy*: the lumps of content against the undifferentiated flow of sound waves, a way to negotiate between particles and waves, hetero- and homogeneity. It could be noted here that Beckett was also an indefatigable explorer of series and seriality, for example in the celebrated sequence in *Molloy* of Molloy appeasing his appetite by sucking pebbles systematically in turn, or the convoluted line of dogs necessary to take care of every bit of soup left over from Knott’s dinner in *Watt*. Similarly, “They repeat” was Gertrude Stein’s fundamental truth concerning human nature. How things are conceptually related/connected becomes a fascinating way of talking about the world of things from a cultural point of view. On another level, the genome project shows the fundamentally sequential nature of life, as a string of DNA codes. How to theorize this system of concentric frames? What kind of manipulative (musical) possibilities does the language offer us? What kind of hooking devices, hyphens used for sexual gratification and supplemental e’s, dwindling at the end of the word, are out there to explore? Vitamins? Life sustaining forces? The mysterious as stuff that keeps us sufficiently curious to go on? The absurd as stuff that keeps us laughing a little between tedious tasks? The seductive as stuff that keeps us loving the fellow human?

Framing brings to mind Zappa’s definition of the work of art as the frame. In *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, he says: “If John Cage, for instance, says ‘I’m putting a contact microphone on my throat, and I’m going to drink carrot juice, and that’s my composition,’
then his gurgling qualifies as his composition because he put a frame around it and said so…
Without the frame-as-announced, it’s a guy swallowing carrot juice” (140). And so framing,
however invisible or inaudible, in the manner of conscious attention breathes aesthetic life
into gestures, actions, words, sounds, and things that otherwise pass by unnoticed. Conscious
decision implies a careful control of the compositional process, which, paradoxically, only
when controlled can effectively open up the space of chance and non-intentionality that
allows impulses to intensify and exhilarate a piece of music or poetry. A highly controlled
environment chances upon improvisatory opportunities, but these are indeed turning like a
gramophone record around its own centre rather that returning to the point of origin of
intention. Chance is not an escape into the freedom of nirvana but a meditative focusing of
attention on the possible dimension of the moment as an impulse, a pulsation of that moment,
its own deep meaning of being and immediacy that would not exist outside compositions
because it requires the compositional framing that can release it into the world. Impulse
conjures up immediacy, an immediate spontaneous art-life event, a pulse, a short duration, not
an abstraction. The pulsing element of a short impulse is melodic in its basic form, a signal-
wave, a little melody or *ritournelle* as Deleuze and Guattari understand music.

In Zappa’s “Mar-Jur-Rene,” the performative spelling of the word produces a comical
tension within language as a system of communication. This tension is reminiscent of the
usage of words in advertising, which after all Zappa explicitly pokes fun at, where a group of
words are intensified and deterritorialized, operating seemingly as pointers suggestive of the
thing they advertise though in reality having nothing to do with the object they refer to. In a
commentary on the cultural framing of words and concepts in language, Zappa plays with
words as inherently populated with the dramatic-comic immediacy of language wiggling with
its own cultural life, and deconstructs the word into a particle-sign entity resembling language and speech but in fact operating musically as the piece of the sound sculpture that music is. The particle-sign signifies the completion and autonomy of expression in its particularity, but by this very token it is immersed entirely in the logic of its conventional usage, connecting with other arbitrarily selected words the way each moment in music, each frame/bar, bleeds into another.

Since the monologue is a piece of spoken improvisation embedded in a narrative poem with music, it makes sense to consider it in the context of Zappa’s contributions to the practice and theory of improvisation. In the closing of this section, let me offer a brief overview of the improvisation question in Zappa. I ask two related questions. How does improvisation enter the area of composition in Zappa? And what is the exact relationship between composition and improvisation?

Under Improvisational Practices/Events we could enumerate the following: guitar solos, conducted band improvisations, audience participation, theatrical staging, tape experiments, and lyric mutations. The first on the list, guitar solos, are of course widely recognized as key improvised compositions, but the form of solo itself is not innovative; rather, it is grounded in a longstanding tradition of jazz soloing. Lyric mutations consisting in creative chance manipulations of set song lyrics, and related skits, dialogues, and narratives present a more complicated case, as they involve creative input from other members of the band. Although lyric mutations and related items arguably occupy a less important position in the oeuvre, they are a concern to fans hoping for further posthumous releases. The 1974 versions of “Dupree’s Paradise” frequently coinciding with elaborate improvised narratives — “The Continuing Stories of the Boogers of Marty Perellis” and “Moon Trek” by George
Duke — are a case in point, offering an example of performances that fit some of the eight criteria of selecting material for the *You Can’t Do That On Stage Anymore* series, for instance of having conceptual continuity clues, but authored essentially not by Zappa. The released snippets “The Booger Man” and “Smell My Beard” reveal the presence of fascinating material sitting in the vault.

Considering, in this connection, the status of the Project/Object as a meta composition, would this mean that both the idea and practices of improvisation in Zappa should be subsumed under composition, that the improvised segments too are ultimately composed or more specifically incorporated into a released composition in such a way as to render them one of the predetermined building blocks of the oeuvre? There are arguments in favor of such a non-improvisatory position, the main reason being the problem of authorship, of the creative/artistic control of the oeuvre. Would it make sense to postulate here something like controlled improvisation then? And further, if improvisation means composing in real time, what are the possible and actual modalities of the ‘reality’ of time? Zappa’s interest in *xenochrony* has a certain improvisatory flair, as it involves various random procedures of selecting tape samples and manipulating them across the time and space of his various bands and lineups, but manipulation here involves studio work and not real time composing, with occasional exceptions like the use of the synclavier on the 1988 tour. The question remains: to what degree can tape manipulation and/or arrangement be regarded as improvisation, a form of improvisatory *xenochrony*? As we can see, the question regarding the relationship between improvisation and composition in Zappa’s music and musical practices remains an open topic of scholarly debate.
4. 4. Logos, Pathos, and Ethos: The Rhetoric of the Megaphone in Zappa’s Joe’s Garage

Although the title of this section references the three rhetorical appeals of Aristotle’s rhetoric, I am not proposing an Aristotelian reading of Zappa — say as accompaniment to Watson’s Platonic reading of Apostrophe (’) in The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play. Logos, pathos, and ethos are taken broadly, at times interrogated, possibly reconfigured. My take on rhetoric does not purport to extend scholarship in the field of rhetoric. The notion of rhetoric is taken in its broadest sense as language situated in a performative context, and logos, pathos, and ethos serve as three mediations of such situated language. More specifically, logos is to be understood as a dominion of the word and word systems, and consequently of systems of writing, print, and grammar with their attendant knowledge and literacy. At the first level, then, we have the operations of the word, the formations of writing systems and epistemes, systems of knowing with their legitimacy and hegemony. Logos is represented by the Central Scrutinizer, technically speaking the omniscient narrator and agent provocateur behind the story, a voice placed outside the recording arena in the recording booth, controlling the actions and operations of the narrative, its textual legalistic theoretical rationalization, a textualization of the voice, if I may propose, represented through the doubly mediated aspect of it, speaking through a megaphone, broadcast into the public.

The second mediation, pathos, pertaining to sensibilities, to sentiments and affects, concerns the politics of the word and the way words have to do with us, how they are implicated in the affective operations of intersubjective passions; how they are constitutive of subjectivities and degrees to which they enter collective forms of perceiving and feeling: the distribution of affects. The third mediation, the character, is taken here as a dramatic peopling, an ethos, the population as human potential within structured social blocks, implying regimes
of dominations, macro politics taking us back to the starting point of the word and the way words shape us. This tripartite division implies that there is no foundational medium, orientation, or articulation — written, spoken, or otherwise imaged as a certain grouping, perhaps a consciousness — but a fluid movement between the three mediations of the socially situated language, what words do to us and what is done to them and through them. Put another way, logos, pathos, and ethos concern the operations of deindividuated words, affects, and populations.

In this context, I read *Joe’s Garage* as a rock-play of the voice in its various guises and mediations dramatizing for the listener the rhetoric of power that the voice as an abstract regime of articulation enters into, the case of voice negotiated across the various domains of expressive body politic. Taking conceptual control over a couple of tracks the band went into the studio to record, Zappa, the master of ceremonies in the recording booth, armed with a plastic megaphone, weaves a story, grandiose in its narrative scope and convolutions, and full of absurdities — of power and corruption, domination and submission, surveillance and freedom. The voice as the musical essence of speech and logos passes through the tracks of the opera. Embodied in its splintering personalities, caught up in the legal discourse of the law, straying outside of the law, caught up in its own affective swarm, the voice, like the needle of a gramophone, is seeking its place in a synchronous space of the people and is at last liberated in its ‘peopling’ capacity of the chorus on the closing track. In my reading of the opera, I propose to listen to this closing track, “A Little Green Rosetta,” as a dramatic-auditory rendition of the popular voice in the form of musical pluralizations enacted through the polyrhythmic ‘let the people sing at once’ spontaneity of the voice.
The rock-investigative-opera in search of the voice finds it in the word and words spoken by the community, represented by the busy peopling of the song, the way Beckett’s *Company* finds the voice at last alive and well distributed among the company of individuals caught up in cogitating the same life narrative. At the point when the voice emphatically abandons its plastic megaphone, and the plastic authority it represents, to speak authentically, this honest unmediated outburst of thought pulls into the mix a whole extended family of voices, speaking and sounding, producing a musical collage-like form, a palimpsest, or lasagna, of interlayered pieces. This interlayering done emphatically through the studio manipulation of tapes, which is the premise of the opera constructed initially out of guitar solos lifted from a different, live context, reminds the listener of Zappa’s taste for the sound of two or more marching bands passing one another in the street. Inspired by Charles Ives — who in fact experimented with writing music that sounds like two marching bands passing each other on the street — Zappa creates a semantic, polyrhythmic mash-up as an ongoing aesthetic context and goal, aiming at capturing some of this polyvocality and polyrhythmicity and transposing them into the social dimension where individual bodies live their daily dramas.

While the opera, as immersed in sound and voice, addresses issues of the technology of the voice, its recorded form, and recordability, in relation to this set of thematic considerations, there appears the problem of the written word and of writing as a technology of shifting words, generating speech with a voice transposed to another dimension, that of text, as again dramatized in the figure of the Central Scrutinizer who is the voice and scripture behind the story, operating as both sound and text. *Joe’s Garage* is a story of that technologizing of the voice, mocking the biblical story of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus and the
embodied voice of god with a tragicomedy of an ordinary couple, Joe and Mary from Canoga Park, California, some 60 miles from Cucamonga where Zappa grew up, and their failed love relationship told through the disembodied voice of the megaphone attached to the record player in the act of listening/reading its aural scriptures. The words as signs, dots on a piece of paper or perforated tape, are a mediation of language that transposes them into text, symbolically represented by xenochronous manipulation of sound, juxtaposing and combining unrelated events in time, operating across time. The other notable mediation of language concerns the sound of the word, the word as sound, and specifically as a melody of the half-spoken half-sung word.

The theme of the rhetoric of the voice is an ongoing preoccupation of Zappa. His interest in the voice can be placed in relation to the vocalizations of the shifting body dating back to the United Mutations manifesto and included in the liner notes on the first album, *Freak Out!*, and the “discorporate” body of the *Absolutely Free* and *We’re Only In It For The Money* albums dating from the same period, 1966-68. Looking at the artwork and listening to the early albums, one feels that the Mothers Of Invention come as a grouping of voices, individuals fused to become a plurality of sorts, The Mothers, inviting more freaks to join the movement of this social consciousness mutation. In “Absolutely Free,” a track on *We’re Only In It For The Money*, not to be confused with *Absolutely Free*, the Mothers Of Invention’s second album, the voice explicitly invites the listener to “discorporate and then we’ll begin.” The jacket of *Freak Out!* credits dozens of influential names as if they were constitutive of the Voice of this mutation already speaking, broadcasting, the communication having begun. The list alone is a type of manifesto, pointing to and acknowledging a certain ethos taking place.
and gaining power, a multiplicity forming a critical mass, echoing through the all-at-onceness of the auditory as proposed by McLuhan around the same time.

Opposed to socialist, anarchist, political or religious revolution, Zappa pushes for something akin to Deleuzoguattarian molecular revolution. Mutation here is a call to change, a call for social change but also for the change within the self, to reach a higher level of consciousness, as Zappa facetiously claims, to be the aim of the program in a live version of “Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow Suite” on Volume 1 of the You Can’t Do That On Stage Anymore series. Mutation then has a transformational nature; it’s contagious; it’s epidemic; it’s the spreading difference of Stein’s attack on the centre and its oppressive forms of domination. Metamorphosis in this sense is an exemplary case of the production of a people. Zappa’s attention to mutation/transformation/trance-fusion resonates with McLuhan’s interests in counterculture and mass media, Foucault’s research on bio-power and ethics, Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the molecular revolution, as well as the notion of the post-human condition as discussed by Hayles and Haraway, specifically with reference to information theory and biotechnology respectively, and Braidotti’s Deleuze-inspired nomadic subjectivity, regardless of his actual awareness of the existence of these works.

In Iain Chambers’s article mentioned previously the author employs the term “mechanical eye” to demonstrate the transformation within the social/collective ways of viewing under the regimes of photography and cinema. Locating this transformation in the city, in relation to advances in urbanization and communication technology, Chambers points to a kind of deterritorialized eye, departing from the ‘natural’ determinants of this particular organ of the body, mechanically shifted toward a different kind of body surrounding us via the image-regime of representation and assaulting people from all angles, through the
mediatized modern city, an aural opticon of media messages and general media mesmerization. Chambers refers to this process as “the rise of the urban eye” (71). This mechanization of the eye — its transcending of the natural boundaries of seeing into the megaphonic ocular spectacle of its prosthetic extensions — points to a collective eye shaped by the modern media system. The history of recording technology, the history of sound and voice, particularly when applied to their various manipulations and renditions, reveals the process whereby the voice is increasingly ‘freed’ from the body it occupies, finding different embodiments as it’s literally outered into a recorded medium, outered and othered, beginning to live its virtual life outside itself. This mechanical dimension of the voice becomes the many granular spots of magnetic dust on the recording tape, a voice forced back into the system of writing; it is the voice of the master on a recorded wax tube of Edison; the voice of the telegraph and telephone sent through a zigzagging wire under the ocean on its trans-Atlantic communicating journey; the voice of the radio, separated from the mouth and face of the speaker, like a Cheshire cat’s smile floating in space, massaging the audience from a distance.

From the telegraph and telephone through the radio and phonograph to the digital recording technologies of the 1980s till now, there evolves a mechanical voice and ear analogous to Chambers’s eye shaped by photography and cinema. They are the replicants in the form of talking heads and singing faces pulsing through the collective chest of the mesmerized audience in front of the PA monitors. The idea of music as a sound sculpture finds its exact and physical manifestation in the form of sound waves assaulting the audience, the movement of air blowing the listeners’ mind and hairdo as on the popular Maxell ad. The mechanization of the voice, tearing the voice away from the body, as in Krapp’s reflective navel-gazing at tapes with its archived selves of the past, points to a diasporic presence of the
voice replicated in the auditory spectacle of the recording industry, charging royalties based on the various breaking points of the sine wave of the material voice. This mechanization of the voice, what Murray Schafer refers to as ‘schizophonia’, the process of tearing the voice or any sound away from its immediate body/cultural context in the act of recording, ultimately to provide background music accompanying an unrelated activity, nonetheless marks its renewed socialization rather than disappearance into a simulacrum of self on the album; the mechanical releases the voice, outers it, into the social communicational stream, what the information technology stands for with its social networks.

We may want to ‘look’ at the phenomenon of the mechanical voice in the context of Foucault’s notion of deindividuation. In the famous preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus, where Foucault mentions Deleuze as possibly the philosophical patron of the century, he describes the formation of the individual as “the product of power.” And he adds in the same breath, “What is needed is to ‘de-individualize’ by means of amplification and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individuation” (qt in Deleuze’s Foucault, xiv)

De-individuation for Foucault is not a simple return to the collective/collectivist identity. The Twentieth-Century was a battleground of ideologies and social movements centered around the notion of the de-individuated self and ideologies of the people. The rise of fascism in the 1930s similarly was predicated on an appeal of this set of ideas concerning the place of the individual within its rightful social locale vis-à-vis the corruptibility of business and corporations catering increasingly to the perverted desires and appetites of individuals, and contributing to the institutionalization of moralities designed to maintain
coherence within societies. The anti-noise, anti-global self firmly put back into the cradle the ideas of traditional renaissance humanism, returning to the traditions of the organicist wholeness of folk. Fascism, relevant in the context of Foucault’s “Preface” to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, since it famously calls for defeating the fascist within the people themselves, is paradigmatic of the conflict within and around the individual in the new age, paradigmatic and threatening, though in no way original or unique. Fascism itself rises as a form of political ideology aiming at capturing and containing the populist sentiment of the people — a way of containing the socialist revolution — articulating and channeling it for them, though we are deeply aware of the catastrophic consequences. Stuart Ewen’s influential study of advertising and public relations in the early Twentieth-Century United States, *Captains of Consciousness*, shows a kind of fascism reterritorialized as a consumerist society.

The great society of Truman echoes satirically in Zappa’s early songs, “Hungry Freaks, Daddy,” “Trouble Every Day,” “America Drinks and Goes Home,” to mention selected tracks. *Absolutely Free* and *We’re Only In It For The Money*, characterized by Zappa as two oratorios, are mock operas, satires of populist movements and populist appeals entering the complex fabric of the social field. Another populist, Richard Nixon, is referred to in the song about his presidency, specifically the Watergate scandal, “Dickie’s Such An Asshole.” And so is Ronald Reagan on numerous occasions, most interestingly as early as 1968 on the *We’re Only In It For The Money* album, as an addressee of the collective laughter of the members of the MOI (Mothers of Invention) delivered via a megaphone over a disturbing pile of noise on the closing track of the album. The greatest living American, Bob Marshall’s moniker, is given over to one Michael Kenyon, a notorious criminal rapist attacking women on college and university campuses, a villain at the centre of a spoof of
gospel in the infamous “The Illinois Enema Bandit” cheerfully reproduced on various albums and played consistently live by all Zappa touring bands since its first appearance in 1975 to the last live tour in 1988. Social noise makes its way to the vinyl record, for a time a dominating medium of inscription, recording, and circulation of mass consciousness. The young Zappa is a public self, a persona non grata, like a character in a Pirandello play, in search of an efficient medium of expression, searching for his ‘outsiderdom,’ a line of flight zigzagging through the growing corpus of ideological positions which like marketing niches hound the American dreamer.

The Mothers of Invention offer a peculiar sound signature in “Didja Get Any Onya?” by playing on the French personal pronoun *moi* and its similarity with non-verbal nonsense, a moaning sound. It’s as if in a parody of a psychoanalytic session, the collective MOI/self of the Mothers surfaced to the auditory from its inner chora in a process of a methodical auditory massage aimed at dislodging the voice from its depth, and yet the voice mocking selfhood with its animalistic roar sounding at the edge of legibility. The title itself, given retrospectively to a series of improvised events forming a musical composition on the opening track on the Mothers of Invention’s *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* album, “Didja Get Any Onya?” mocks the psychoanalytical procedures inviting the patient to confess (the patient/audience member ‘etherized upon a rock stage’) some perverted abuse trauma pleasure still lodged somewhere in the deep recesses of his/her memory, and yet flattening the gravity of the content of memory to something sounding like ‘onion,’ asserting the vapid emptiness of the entire quest along with the confessional procedure itself. Stories of abuse in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood proliferate, always with the same mocking tone of pity over the self so permanently scarred. *Lumpy Gravy*’s two characters return to their childhood
memories, in a sense unable to get beyond the trauma of the past arresting their development, sounding goofy and yet indicating the gravity of the damage done.

And yet another moi reappears in Joe’s Garage, a parody of Zappa’s self and voice, distorted and disguised as the megaphonic voice of the Central Scrutinizer controlling its subjects by keeping them within the bounds of its messaging system, caught up in fragments of personal tales of growing up in a small town in California, marginalized through the choice of a career in music. The opera becomes a facetious cautionary tale warning would-be musicians about the dangers of choosing a career in music, the evils unleashed in their minds and bodies by the peculiar cocktail of affective lasciviousness and unlawful behavior that result in shame, pain, and lost love.

The problem of the de-individuated self returns us through the garage door, so to speak, to the question of self, a large question in the context of Zappa studies struggling to dissociate their investigations from the biographical and technical minutiae of the oeuvre, but also a large presence in Zappa’s music, imposing his creative control over all its aspects, sometimes unnecessarily. In this context, Zappa’s insistence that random noise inserting itself into a track, be that feedback, the hum of an amplifier, or an audible pop of a piece of sound equipment, is part of the larger work and part of life, generates a comical intensity, the looming presence of an alien body in the recording booth, ordering voices, sounds, gestures, narrating a story and keeping its finger on the mixer’s controls, while at the same time making fun of its own alien/manipulatory presence. The figure of the Central Scrutinizer in the opera resonates with that larger creative controlling self of a semi-god or demiurge. It’s through this discourse that Zappa can expose mockingly the discourse of law, ownership, and control that provides the subtext to the opera commenting on the abstract form of the hegemony of power,
a domination extending through the affective dimension of the people into the darkest corners of sensibility. The figure of a band leader/manager of an entertaining enterprise returning to the recording booth (the same premise we find in the opening of the *We’re Only In It For The Money* album) provides a commentary on the rhetoric of rock, outlining and surveying the spaces of possible vocalizations, the boundaries of what words can do within the genre of rock and its attendant mediations.

The tension between the inside and the outside of the word is central to the way words are social, interpersonal phenomena, and in the way two competing terms, two competing orientations, orality and literacy, combine into literate orality and oral literature as in Ong, as both transformations of the word and social formations having to do with the innering and outering of the word. In the “Preface” to *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Exploration of Walter Ong’s Thought*, the editors of the volume discuss the predicament of the singular voice of Aristotelian classical rhetoric transposed to the mediated voice of the modern media system, the radioed/televised voice pieced together in a process of complex recording and editing manipulations. From a rhetorical standpoint, the new media represent new technological ways of managing the word, of transposing the written word, logos, into another domain, for example of the electronic hypertext. In the spirit of Ong, the editors lean toward a definition of media as “the primary negotiative concept essential to a contemporary theory of human individuality and collective existence” (12).

Put in the spirit of Ong, the new media systems bring about the outering of the word. We ought to understand the notion of outering here as distancing from self in the process of self-reflecting, marking a distancing from the mere fact (thought) of existence. The inside outside interplay, as both abstract dimensions and concrete embodiments, outline specific
vocalizations involving statements and subject positions, ultimately pointing to and grounded
in ethos, understood in its broadest sense as people, a population, their fundamental character,
their spirit or culture. The people as the outside of the word is the proper domain of rhetoric,
concerning collective forms of expressions and subject formations in the context of collective
forms. What the editors refer to as “culturally sensitive rhetoric and communication theory”
(14) concerns this externalization of the word through modern media systems with their
electric speeds and global villages. This externalization becomes the proper domain of the
word in its rhetorical/social appeals. It is in this sense that culture is connected with the
rhetoric of that mediatized voice/self as constituting “a system of communicative practices
situated in psychoculture ... the primary lens through which self is explored in itself and as
connected to others, formed through collectivized others” (Ong qt in Gronbeck et al 48).

We may consider the ‘megaphone’ in this connection as a medium, a prosthetic
extension of the body demarcating the outside of the voice, the intersubjective nature of it, the
amplification of it directed at a group, a gathering, a megaphonic voice having a public,
broadcast form. Implied here is the microphone and recording as well as the gramophone and
archiving. Doubling as the framing narrator, Zappa speaks on the album through a plastic
megaphone, pointing to a nifty image of the voice in its passage from the private to public,
along the inner outer boundary. In a commentary on Ong’s notion of ‘secondary orality’,
William Kennedy in an essay “Voice as Frame: Longinus, Kant, Ong, and Deconstruction in
Literary Studies” responds to attempts to dissolve the concept of the voice in a play of verbal
signs, to reify the voice, by defining voice as “a rhetorically constructed frame for a
potentially indeterminate discourse” (77), stressing instead the social and dialogic nature of
the voice. This rhetorically constructed frame marks a doubling within the voice, a separation
from the immediacy and inanity of the spoken into the complex grammar of the
scripted/recorded archive, a creation of the censor or brain police legislating over all speech
acts. In the context of this abstract dimension of the voice as frame or discourse, the
immediate random vocalization of an individual is just a provisional expression, indeed a
performative wave that involves many similar situations, a case of the voice passing through a
discursive voice of logos. The spoken parts of the Scrutinizer plastered over the music, in
some cases interfering and spoiling the act of listening, dramatize this othering presence of the
voice, the reflective part of the otherwise immediacy-oriented self, immersed in its
sensibilities and affects. This otherness of voice is what we know as the literary voice, this
ongoing simulacrum that accompanies the reading process, whether it’s a reading of text or
clouds, what Kennedy calls “[t]he scandal of literary voice... [which] eludes even the
authority of sensory experience that belongs to spoken voice” (79). Joe’s Garage intuitively
follows in the footsteps of Beckett’s How It Is, presenting the framing of the voice, the voice
of text persisting against the auditory unfolding of text in the process of reading.

In terms of Joe’s Garage’s argument, the voice — already a collective form of
expression — passes through the body as a resonating chamber-garage-cave, a complex
chamber/space, a social space occupied by humans, which implies the enforcement of law,
order, and so various forms of control. The side of voice revealed on the opening track of the
album, the voice of the Central Scrutinizer, is not merely a sound instrument but an
instrument of social control, controlling — through its repeated presence in the form of
broadcast announcements — the idea of expression, as well as dimensions of freedom and
confinement. The Central Scrutinizer is the logos voice. As such, it conveys a larger message,
in the words of Kennedy, the message that “words convey no stable meanings of their own,
but rather multiple, polysemous, unstable other meanings; and [that] allegory, taken as other speech, defines their material mode of existence” (80). Joe’s Garage is the allegory of voice channelled into speech, fallen into the power grid with its regimes of meaning. But so is text in general, for example for Paul de Man, as Kennedy reports in the essay, citing a case of text as prosopopoeia, a figural substitution of the voice by text standing literally for it. Kennedy’s analysis of “voice as a dynamic frame around shared meanings” (86) resituated the voice back in the social, no longer a deconstructivist reification of the voice as a mere figure forever deferring meaning but the actuality of speech in any social/public arena/domain, what Kennedy calls “the frame of voice [situating] material logos in the fully human field of ethos” (88). In the same spirit further in the collection, David Payne in “Characterology, Media, and Rhetoric” speaks of the character/voice as an active rhetorical technology at work aiming at social persuasion while preserving the semblance of autonomy and the self-determination of individual participants in a media affair, a clear case of the voice split off from the body in the form of editorial control/interference/framing from the recording booth.

In his reading of Joe’s Garage, Watson suggests that through the figure of the Central Scrutinizer, Zappa is addressing the issue of morality and its use by the [political] right as justification for repressive legislation [having to do with music and the music industry]. The Central Scrutinizer is a parody of the super-ego or conscience, the voice of social authority in the individual, sneaking up on people when they’re not looking (369). Here’s the case of the voice assaulting one from outside, in contrast to which, or otherwise resonating with it, there’s the garage as matrix womb, unlocking the whole opera as a series of interiors that enclose one. The garage-matrix intensifies the problematic locatability of the self as intimate interior but it also questions its passage into a contrasting utterance, of the material voice released into
the open of the public. The garage intensifies the longing of the self and the voice for the
outside of one’s own body riddled with passions and disease, and leaving the condition of the
cave. This technological aspect of voice is captured — allegorized — through the use of the
specific technique of music, making what Zappa calls xenochrony, strange synchronization.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Watson explains how

> [t]he guitar solos on Joe’s Garage were live playing Zappa isolated on tape and then applied over the studio rhythm tracks (the engineer called it ‘the Nagra guitar’ because all Zappa would do was turn the switch on the tape machine). This use of chance [Watson refers here to the process of finding parts that would fit together, being in the same key but perhaps in a different time signature, etc.] resembles the procedures of John Cage and the fold-in of William Burroughs: although it provocatively challenges notions of intention, it does so in such circumstances that there is no doubt as to the character of the composer. Every element is so original, so patently Zappa-esque, that random recombination merely sparks further possibilities. (366)

Thus isolated solos become the foundations of new songs written around them, or as Zappa himself puts it in the quote below, ‘sandwiched together’ with the added-on rhythm section, changing the time signature of the tune.

In a Bob Marshall interview, Zappa explains the concept of xenochrony as

strange synchronizations… a classic xenochrony piece would be “Rubber Shirt,” which is a song on the Sheik Yerbouti album. It takes a drum set part that was added to a song at one tempo. The drummer was instructed to play along with this one particular thing in a certain time signature, eleven-four, and that drum part was extracted like a piece of DNA from that master tape and put over here into this little cubicle. And then the bass part, which was designed to play along with another song at another speed, another rate in another time signature, four-four,
that was removed from that master tape and put over here, and then the two were
sandwiched together. And so the musical result is the result of two musicians, who
were never in the same room at the same time, playing at two different rates in two
different moods for two different purposes, when blended together, yielding a third
result which is musical and synchronizes in a strange way. That’s xenochrony. And
I’ve done that on a number of tracks. (Marshall, Part 7)

The reference to DNA is no mere comparison but a statement concerning the practice of
music-making as affective combinatorics, approaching music ultimately as no different from
life, as an arena where sensibilities, interactions, and socializations take place. Zappa’s
material creationism manifests here as social biological engineering.

The organic dimension of art doesn’t have to be predicated upon romanticising the
natural voice and acoustic instruments, but rather takes up the realm of expression/articulation
as biochemical combinatorics involving both technics and affects, creative manipulation and
layering for specific effects. The synchronization of elements across spatial and temporal
divides is what in essence comes down to compositionality, a system of arrangements as in
Stein’s “an arrangement in a system to pointing,” where grouping and relationships between
individual parts/particles of the semiotic whole accord themselves a unique, systemic
meaning. Synchronization points to the organic dimension of articulation and art, namely the
dimension of thought and affect as an emerging property of an arrangement of principally
non-organic parts, pieces of tape and sound bites. We may notice analogies with
‘schizophonia’ (Murray Schafer) and ‘participatory discrepancy’ (Charles Keil), in all cases
involving the lifting off and gluing together of different times, different musical moments and
time signatures: a way of creating a plurality, participation across time and space, in a strange
synchronization that brings together a synchrony that includes dissonance, noise, disruption,
and out of timeness. Hence the opera becomes a parable of a disembodied voice, on its outside, in its aural materialization (acoustic material evidence of sound) and artificial, virtual, devoid of life, manipulated, caught in the loop of repetition and playback, machinic, mediated, part of and subjected to technology.

A seemingly contrasting mediation of the word takes place where the word is transposed into a sound, more specifically when the word is pitched. In the Marshall interview, Zappa explains his interest in and use of *sprechstimme*, a technique inspired by and notably used in Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*.

When a person sings a word, the idea that is transmitted transcends the word because there’s so much other data connected with the word at pitch. Understand?

The conversation then continues with

*Bob Marshall:* Are you talking about sound?

*Frank Zappa:* No, the person hearing, receiving the data, is not only receiving the word.

*Bob Marshall:* The “meaning”?

*Frank Zappa:* That’s right, the text of the word. He is also receiving the pitch data at which it is sung. In other words, that same word sung at a high pitch means something different than the word sung at a low pitch. He is receiving the data of the harmonic climate in which the word exists. He’s also receiving the data of the relationship of the pitch of the word to the climate itself. In other words, if you have an A minor chord and the word is sung on a B, then that word is going to stick out because it’s not part of the chord. There are three notes in an A minor chord - A, C, E. If you sing that word on any of the notes which are part of the chord, it recedes into the chord. It’s part of the background. If the word is sung on
a note which is not part of the chord, it steps out from the chord and draws attention to itself and becomes a matter of emphasis. These are the types of extra data that exist when you sing a word. An extra spin gets put on the word if you half say it, half sing it. It makes it even more 3D. It leaps out from the harmonic support and draws even more attention to itself if you’ve been singing along and you hear this melody and you get to this certain part and you half sing it, half say it. And it sticks out even further if you absolutely say it because it’s incongruous in the setting (Marshall, Part 8).

Zappa’s foray into the rhetoric of the word focuses on the relationship between the compositional and communicational aspects of language, constructing a methodology of communication and extraction of data from vibrations and pitches as temporary conditions/states of words, putting forth a vibratory pitched communication theory. Zappa’s observation that pitch changes the rhetorical orientation of a word emphasizes the multiple/relational quality of a word, a multi-formal composition of a word releasing a different set of data depending on its particular manifestation. The relational dimension of a word is captured directly in the idea of the inherent/inner orientation of a word resonating within “the harmonic climate,” suggestive of an ecology that surrounds words and their operations, and where the word takes place, the resonating social chamber that gives meaning to words as communicational endeavors.

If outside has to do with social formations, conventions and positions, part of Joe’s struggle is rebellion against these forms of domination. Having paid his debt to society, having done his time, Joe has a longing for a space outside and beyond temporality, to be atemporal, multi-temporal, collective, perhaps to dissolve in the corporeal collective ethos of “everything happening all the time,” the all-at-onceness and immediacy of the continuous
present that operates outside clocks and other linear devices but through intensity. “Outside Now” manifests the pathos of the voice, the intense contraction of the voice trapped in the self yet freed from the outside frame of logos. Joe’s passionate admission that “all I ever wanted to do was play the guitar and bend the strings” flies in the face of those executives who “plook the fuck” out of a person. Of course, ultimately the voice of the opera can only be freed into the sound of one of those Nagra solos mimicking the voice though no longer articulating through words, thus never effectively leaving the realm of the constructed, with its layers and tactics of mediation, always within the artifact. The mechanical repetition of the voice preceding the wistful guitar, “I can’t wait to see what’s it like on the outside now,” bursting into a guitar wail, marks the mechanization of the voice trapped in its pathos of self-pity, given over to the lyrical depth of the guitar solo finishing it off. As Watson comments,

[t]he meaning of ‘outside now’ drifts from ‘outside the prison’ to ‘outside now’ in terms of time: outside the present. The phrase sums up the net impact of the xenochronous guitar solos, which phrase according to a different time zone than the ‘now’ of the backing... In the jazz tradition playing ‘outside’ means playing outside the chord changes and fixed tempo; ‘inside’ means playing according to the rules. During the bop era the modernists were referred to as ‘out-cats.’ These also correspond to notions of social acceptability. ‘Outside Now’ recognizes the utopian aspect of music, but also its lack of social impact: the guitar solo is ‘imaginary.’ (375-6)

Zappa’s emphasis on the imaginary points to pathos itself as imaginary, that is to say a creative act involving emotion/affect, a composition of affect for the emotional release purpose, what Zappa calls entertainment. This transposition into the affective from the purely emotional marks its passage outside, specifically along the line from the self to the multiple.
Pathos then could represent the lifting of the voice of the self into song, freeing/releasing the word into its outside of resonant vibrations, though frankly only within the logic of the recording, where the liberated word is ultimately looped back into its musical sound form. This circular predicament of the voice, self-referential and at the same time completely immersed in the world which it crosses through as a sine wave of sound, is represented through the repeated voice of the chorus, repeated so many times that it appears as if itself looped, at last breaking up into a talking guitar, becoming non-verbal. The verbal written voice — logos trapped in its own recorded repeated form — is transposed into the realm of the non-verbal, a virtual voice lamenting its own loss and yet, by the same token, celebrating its continuous presence as a recording.

The imaginary realm of dreaming and navel-gazing is what traps the voice in the self; the question remains, though, whether the voice released from the ‘megaphone’ and joining a troupe of voices singing ad hoc on the closing track, “A Little Green Rosetta,” becomes more authentic, if indeed there is a dimension of authenticity outside the artifact, so aptly captured on the front cover image of Zappa in blackface holding a mop.

Obviously, Frank Zappa’s life was dedicated to music, to composing and performing it, to speaking through it, with all other activities seeming at best creative deviations from the established path, though providing important contexts for the oeuvre otherwise striking one as idiosyncratic, out of step with industry standards and consumerist niches. “Music is the best” was one of his slogans, frequently repeated by his devoted fans, though curiously the statement concluded a deliberately clumsy syllogism spoken by the character of Mary in the Joe’s Garage opera, in a piece (“Packard Goose”) dedicated to blasting music critics for their writerly inanities. (The syllogism begins with a reminder that “information is not
knowledge.”) In my view, and as my initial intention of writing this thesis, Zappa exemplifies — or, to be consistent with my conceptual/metaphoric framework, amplifies megaphonically — a deep crisis within print cultures and their ocular epistemes referred to by McLuhan as the Gutenberg Galaxy and studied by McLuhan’s immediate predecessors and colleagues, notably Eric Havelock and Walter Ong. Zappa, I argue in this connection, puts forth a pertinent and systematic diagnosis of the fads and ills of print cultures and print-oriented literacies. His music and voices offer a performative escape from the single-vision problem analyzed at length by McLuhan, an escape from the fetish of the text, into a voice inscribed on a master tape, insisting on sounding out its auditory othering. His statements dramatize the transitory mode of text, passing through media relevant to their historical-social-cultural moments with their own peculiar temporality, stretching for a time through the present continuous, the life time of a person, perhaps the lifeline of an epoch.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD NOISE

What, then, is the megaphone’s destiny and what is the fate of the acoustic? The answer, I claim, is noise. But noise is difficult to define. Is it something material that can be delimited, touched, measured? A configuration of acoustic matter, forming a type of acoustic environment or ambience that can be best studied by engineers and acousticians? Is it a social and cultural phenomenon determined by its specific relation to music, something for
musicologists to ponder? Or is it a theoretical concept that belongs in discursive practices of cultural studies or communication? Does noise belong in a field of literary studies?

As one scholar, Paul Hegarty, argues in “Full With Noise: Theory and Japanese Noise Music,” “noise operates as a function of *differance*.” Hegarty takes *difference* in a Derridean sense and also as related to Lyotard’s “differend,” a type of permanent alterity that is neither a pure abstraction nor exclusively an empirical term. Noise scholars may cherish the idea that noise is not a referential term but a kind of performative: performing itself, its own conceptual heterogeneous noisiness. The alliance of noise with alterity, the other, the abject, the subaltern has its evident social implications surfacing in postcolonial studies and ethnomusicology with regard to various aspects of world music. I hear noise here as a paradigmatic percept that houses the other, and delimits the capacity of this otherness or subalternity to speak or be heard. This problem of noise in the context of subalternity surfaces in Zappa, however playfully, in his play of subalternities as part of his political theatre as a musical farce on domination and subjection, which is what I address in my discussion of “Stinkfoot.” The sub and under-human figures of Beckett also come to mind in this connection. Noise provides a dramatic soundtrack to the drama of power resounding through the auditory avant-garde.

Anne Carson’s poetic essay “The Gender of Sound” offers an insightful poetic meditation on the theme of subaltern voice. Carson shows that discourse on sound not only shatters the multitude but also fragments the voice, puts it in a permanent danger. The voice is muted discursively, and so is connected with or subsumed under other discursive regimes, those of the body-politic of the public, and the law. What concerns vocal chords and their anatomical functioning is part of a larger mechanism already subsumed under a body politic. Vocal chords are stitched to testicles; pitches are assigned to the working of wombs; legal
agendas are formed around “the use of the female voice in public” (120): a proliferation of
texts and documents, formulated, ready at hand, in print. Strange becomings are formed that
only ecocritics can begin telling us about; myths intermingle with scientific data; stories are
enacted in reality and become norms and legal boundaries. Strange anatomical beings
likewise abound: the mouth and vagina twisted in a grammatical knot. What falls outside
discourse, or can only indirectly participate in it, are non-statements: shouts, shrieks, words
that do not signify anything, sound poetry. “Disorderly female sound” (125). In the wide-open
space outside, on the rim of the polity, sound production and control are assigned to particular
social functions. Discourses on sound and the body merge, become ways not only of
assigning social roles but also of structuring patterns of behavior and sexuality. Voices are
linked to secretions of the body, are connected to its shames, its dirt, verbal and sexual
continence, mouth and genitals, connected every step of the way to the knowledge of the body
(130). This body, already discursively taken over and pulverized, is then stitched to the
clinical through a complicated network of medical theory and institutional formations.
Carson’s poetic essay exemplifies a critical take on the problem of the voice, as a presence
and a social phenomenon to be taken into account. We must hear the voice yet, and in order to
hear it we must open our ears to the auditory noise that constitutes it.

We often think of noise in the same breath with modernism and communication, in the
context of these two narratives. It’s a stereo effect: in one channel, there is the growing
awareness of the din of a modern city, an awareness that Cage’s four minutes and thirty three
seconds of silence invites us to listen to, that Beckett’s characters with their mumbling
maddening search for nothing, where we can hear the noises in their heads, call on us to hear,
and that Stein’s megaphonic ear amplifying the redundancies of repetition calls attention to,
along with a celebration of all noises – *all that noise* – associated with the rise of modern civilization; in the other channel are theories and technologies of communication, particularly the practical interest in the problem of the loss of signal in transmission, and so in the context of communication as mediation. But from the early noise experiments of Russolo, dada sound poetry, and the noise-oriented aesthetics of Varèse, to mention three signature points marking the rise of noise as an aesthetic political paradigm of the Twentieth Century, one realizes that insofar as the ‘auditory turn’ is a turn toward noise, and insofar as noise is where the fate of the acoustic lies, one ought to begin to hear noise not simply as a nuisance or obstacle in transmitting something else, but as a complex cultural phenomenon pointing out a whole sonic/sound ecology.

In *The Soundscape of Modernity*, Emily Thompson writes, “When New Yorkers were polled in 1929 about the noises that bothered them, only 7 percent of their complaints corresponded to the traditional sounds that Girdner [author of the influential ‘The Plague of City Noises’ of 1896] had emphasized in 1896. The ten most troubling noises were all identified as the products of ‘machine-age inventions’” (117). As Thompson emphasizes throughout the chapter, noise becomes part of social and cultural fabric; as such it falls under the domain of urban planning, legislation, even zoning laws. At the same time, new understandings of noise contribute to radical reevaluations of the classicist principles of aesthetics and harmony. It is no accident that the Machine Age is simultaneously termed the Jazz Age, jazz not only referring to a distinct genre of music but also being a symbol of the machinery and the music coming together in a plethora of sounds never heard before, and certainly not recognized as meaningful. The meaning of noise transforms both on the scoreboard of a modern-day composer who manipulates various sounds as well as at the
hands of the technicians who manipulate new tools and terminology. It is at this juncture, of technics and aesthetics, of technology and art, that noise comes to signify a shift of scientific paradigms, away from “Newtonian conceptions of inflexible space and immutable time [toward] the supple space time continuum of Einstein’s relativistic physics [and] the Uncertainty Principle of Werner Heisenberg” (133).

The question of noise likewise arises in conjunction with various conceptualizations of listening. In one of the chapters of *The Responsibility of Forms*, Roland Barthes outlines three types of listening relevant to noise studies. Noise seems to belong to all three, as part of the world of sounds toward which both human and animal listening is primarily oriented; the cognitive process of deciphering signs, which is a practice of listening according to codes; and an intersubjective listening that operates within the social as a system of commands, orders, and directives. If listening is a way of orienting oneself in time and space, as well as navigating one’s immediate environment and claiming this space – all this *vis-à-vis* certain recurring patterns of acoustic stimuli – the whole complex world of noise must be imagined as virtually out there, at all times awaiting each one of us as part of the universe of sound, “the whole of phonic space” as Barthes terms it (247). Let’s note that this presence – the idea of the acoustic as this kind of presence – does not imply any particular organizational strategy or order, nor does it essentially imply the need for any. This presence most resembles some old familiar representations of chaos; only here chaos seems to reflect specific material, social, and cultural processes and transformations actually taking place. Noise as a concept, then, carries with it a certain ecstatic potential, a worldliness like the one captured by Heidegger’s *there*: a being open onto the world. Noise is the gate through which one enters the world; and it’s a sonic space that one continuously occupies, for out there in the world – if we are
prepared to follow John Cage – there is no moment of silence, no stopping of this mysterious wave that swallows all and on the surface of which all still floats.

This dynamic approach to noise Barthes associates in his essay with a listening oriented toward deciphering signs, concatenating them into codes and patterns, ordering, commanding, and appropriating the space around one. Noise is certainly part of one’s perception of the spatio-temporal world, part of the ‘acoustic space’ that is the space of signifying in the form of raw sonic materials that can be worked over, grooved, and channeled into meaning. In this sense, noise belongs to what Barthes terms “religious listening,” a listening that operates by decoding the obscure and hearing the hidden, as a hermeneutics – an art of listening between the lines – as language. “To listen is the evangelical verb par excellence” (250), says Barthes. Noise is a kind of transcendent dimension, a totality of sounds, sonic codes, and practices that must be given in order that a hermeneutics of listening, a listening directed toward constructing or fulfilling particular meanings, can take place to begin with. This is then part of a larger tuning of one’s soul to the sounds that can be heard out there, perhaps exclusively within a certain perception and understanding of community, a particular sensus communis that facilitates a deciphering and projects a semantic space as a horizon of the sacred, as that which speaks through the multitude of sounds. This multitude, filling the listening at all times, flows in the form of both exterior voices as well as through the voice of conscience, the constant murmur of the interior that sounds its prohibitions and orders.

If “the injunction to listen is the total interpellation of one subject by another” (Barthes 251), then the order itself is evidence of a certain shaping of the social, of building a kind of texture or fabric where a ‘soundscape’ becomes an organizational plane that functions
intersubjectively according to an auditory distribution of multiple signifying regimes. Noise here is transformed into index, and the listener/participant in this space and process is metamorphosed into a dual subject who from now on relies in their articulations on the two poles: silence and speech. It is at the intersection between sounds and subject formation that voice proper, as a social phenomenon, emerges, not simply as an externalization of the body, the evacuation of sounds into one’s immediate outside, but rather as a methodical channelization of that body, a transference of its functions and possibilities into signifying chains that locate and communicate. Voice in this sense is not exclusively the corporeality of the body that produces audible vibrations, but rather a kind of corporeal comportment toward what Barthes calls an interspace of body and discourse (255). The third kind of listening outlined by Barthes — where a clear boundary between object and subject can no longer be maintained, a form of listening that projects a space filled with “the shimmering of signifiers” (259), directed both inwardly and outwardly, which at the same time marks a move toward composition — requires not only the presence but also a theory of noise that challenges our common understanding of the term as a type of veil or curtain that simply obscures legitimate sounds or meanings. It is perhaps no accident that at this point in the chapter Barthes turns to the ideas of Cage, who already in the 1940s and 50s predicted that the element of noise in music would increase, and that it would become particularly important in the context of a music played by electrical instruments.

Noise opens up the space of listening, of the ear and orality, as critical to human understanding, which was my aim in this thesis to examine using ‘representative anecdotes’ of avant-garde experimental works that enact that space for the auditor/listener/reader. The title of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* consciously or not resonates with related studies of
Berkeley, Locke, and Hume probing the various dimensions of the human realm as part of Enlightenment. To some degree, McLuhan’s is a mock treatise designed in the same spirit of empirical openness to discover a virgin territory, a new unexplained domain and grid of relationships. *Understanding Media*, an extended field trip, becomes the study literally of all that noise reverberating through Twentieth-Century communication and information technologies. My thesis takes on this spirit of openness to communicational/mediational noise as part of the ‘auditory turn’. The ear and the eye, polarized through centuries of scriptural economy of the Gutenberg civilization, fuse in the multi-media age of mechanical and digital reproduction; they merge as body parts and organs, sense perceptions, literacies, subjectivities, and power structures, and this merger marks the farther oblivion of nothing as inquired into in the course of my studies of sound and orality of the avant-garde.

The Twentieth-Century witnesses an unprecedented evolution as part of the collision of senses, a trance-fusion taking place at a social level in the shifting forms of communication, literacy, and behavior, but likewise occurring inside the self/cell, transforming and extending the body prosthetically beyond the frame of the understanding shaped by the technology of print and print-oriented literacy. The trance-fusion at the molecular level becomes audible as if in the act of close-miking, by means of amplification, thanks to the aesthetics of small sounds that becomes part of aesthetics of listening. The aesthetics of noise is the capacity to listen to and care about this molecular mutation taking place.

Jacques Attali’s germinal *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* should be mentioned as a direction that inspired this thesis in its initial phase. *Noise* may be vulnerable to criticism but it is a work openly not afraid of contradictions. The evolutionary model of thinking, which
Attali himself wants to critique, reenters through the back door. Much emphasis is placed on the linear stages of development, and clearly delineated historical periods that happen to be rather large conceptual blocks matching perfectly a typical list of suspects: primitive, classical, modern and postmodern (also post-historical). Attali’s reliance on dualisms or binaries, such as order against chaos, or immanence vis-à-vis transcendence; as well as his schematic, structural thinking, a desire for logic and order which prevail in the end despite numerous subversive moments, a kind of celebration of the state along with powerful pronouncements that echo the Situationists’ political anarchy; they all may seem like contentious points but within the logic of Noise they somehow work, and form a coherent pattern, a kind of sound wave that oscillates between order and subversion, that signifies order and yet prefigures subversion, and which – not unlike the music of the future visualized by Attali – brings one hope in the form of a promise to receive back the voice. However vulnerable Attali’s Noise may seem to some, it is an important work already in its broadest scope, as a Marxist-oriented analysis of music in terms of the relations of production rather than a celebratory work in praise of music in a purely aesthetic sense. This emphasis, like a banner one sees from far off, is right there on the front cover of the book, as well as being stated in the opening pages, which claim that the purpose of the book is to trace the history of relations between music and society on one hand, and the world of production and exchange on the other (19). This particular approach to music and culture in general is already in Adorno’s work, but Attali infuses it with new energy, and certainly with more appreciation toward so-called popular music, such as jazz or rock.

For Attali, noise is a preexisting phenomenon, something that music as a representative and emblem of order sort of steps into at a certain level of social development.
Music here is what shapes and channels noise, what enables a mastery over it. Attali’s argument is intertwined with the logic of progress, and so the arch of this elegant argument is adorned with three major historical phases or conceptual planes associated respectively with *sacrificing*, *representing*, and *repeating*, which are followed by a visionary plane of return to the pre-existing order of things in *composition*. Music and order stand in a dynamic relationship to each other, and are both at the service of the state with the goal basically to censor the multitude. Each phase represents a particular approach or tactic to control this multitude or noise. In the earliest phase, *sacrificing*, music is produced as a symbolic enactment of the ritual of murder and sacrifice, and as such it is offered to the people as a substitute for the real violence; in *representing*, music stands in for the harmony of the world, a way to sing the glory of god; *repeating* serves to silence the multitude through mass production, reproduction and distribution of mechanically-produced music intended to censor all human noises. This noise that is channelled by the state throughout all three phases returns back to the people in the utopian vision of *composition* as the last stage outlined by Attali.

The last stage of Attali’s subdivision of the history and aesthetics of noise is clearly where this thesis starts, which is what explains my focus on composition and its modality of voice and multitude in Stein, Beckett, Cage, and Zappa as examples of the Twentieth-Century auditory avant-garde wrestling with the idea and practice of composition and the auditory dimension of it as a spreading difference, a distribution of multiple vocalizations on the ‘plane of immanence’.

The history of noise as a particular type of formulation of the theoretical question – as, for example, in Attali’s *Noise* – runs into a familiar problem of material evidence. Attali can take us on a tour around noise, which in an extraordinarily imaginative manner stretches
all the way back to prehistory, but one feels that to some degree this is a speculative kind of touring. The material presence of noise of the past has to be recorded or otherwise preserved first to be studied as an empirical phenomenon and further extended to signify specific social processes. Yet noise enters our vocabulary relatively late; it is gradually being recorded, measured, controlled, and along with this process there is an exponential growth in the theoretical investment of the notion, but all this dates back only a hundred or so years, and is largely associated with the growth of cities and the development of both the recording and the transmitting technologies, such as the gramophone, the telephone, or the radio. In this sense, noise is *par excellence* a modernist kind of concept. On one hand, it signals a switch taking place in the aesthetics of sound and music production; on the other, it delimits a new perceptual dimension, a range of new extensions of the body, quite in line with certain modernist avant-garde experiments with sight and vision that stretch from late impressionism through cubism to the abstract expressionism of post 1945. It is there, at the threshold of postmodernity, that noise ceases to be a strictly sonic phenomenon. The noise evoked in Jackson Pollock’s late works, and the awareness of the problem of visual noise in modern cities, are perhaps indicative of that conceptual shift that gradually enables larger audiences to hear and participate in the experiments of avant-garde composers of the early 1900s.

By studying the auditory and asking about the fate of the acoustic, I explicitly draw throughout the thesis on the problematic of noise. If we recognize that, in addition to its technical sense, noise carries a relevant cultural load; if, following Cage, we can hear it as a form of the collective unconscious of music, looming in the dark and mocking the officially available sounds of the mainstream, then noise becomes a way to engage social and political issues; it becomes a way to politicize listening and sound cultures. And if the turn towards the
auditory opens the way to theorize the soundness of the body *vis-à-vis* the rational machine that assigns specific meanings to different pitches and frequencies of sounds encountered within it, then it becomes relevant to ask whose noise is going to count in the end, and how must noise be computed.

Noise is esemplastic, which is what makes noise bring us closer to cosmos, regardless of form, be that faint vibratory solar pulses or a mobile phone vibrating in one’s pocket; for noise returns us to the world of pulses and pulsing. In that sense, noise must be the essence of what McLuhan hears as the resonating interval among particles of the New Physics in his ‘scandal of cubism’ TV statement: the shimmering electric subatomic flow of John Cage’s compositions and “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” on Zappa’s *We’re Only In It For The Money* album. Noise is the haptic visuality of sound grabbing one by the ear; noise is the essence of what happened and the essence of the ‘auditory turn’: a mosaic of dynamic and interactive sensory experiences that electrify and magnetize the social space of listening.

Visual-perspectival noise was the obvious aim behind the first experiments with collage and cubism of Picasso and Braque, who converted the aesthetic visual space of the painting by juxtaposing it with found objects, scraps of newspapers, advertising, and transit tickets to capture the pulsating auditory space of the modern city. This shattering of the visual space of the typographic paradigm of perspective, unity, clarity, and hierarchy provides an inspiration and methodology for this project, a diagram of asynchronous simultaneity *à la* mosaic model of McLuhan, insisting on the immanence as a methodology of understanding, processing, and presenting. And so I trust the thesis offers an extended outline of a larger project; it offers a prolegomena to future anthropology of sound, to take a cue from Jonathan Sterne’s dismantling of the theology embedded in Walter Ong’s ‘secondary orality’ and
calling for a post-Ongian investigations of the social materiality of the auditory in media, language, arts, and culture.

The four selected ‘representative anecdotes,’ Stein, Beckett, Cage and Zappa, taken together, provide a context for raising social awareness to the problem of voice and voicing. These four ‘megaphonic figurations’ belong together because they form a functional quartet to engage the interface among sound, text, and image, and, specifically, to help ask important questions about the fate of the popular voice. Figuratively, the quartet, in its compressed diagrammatic form, comprises four voices outering simultaneously in turn: Stein singing ‘yes,’ Beckett exhaling pure air, Cage giggling, and Zappa exclaiming ‘what the fuck!’

In a way, then, my thesis operates as a theoretical fantasy that imagines auditorily a situation akin to that of Zappa’s *Lumpy Gravy*, where a group of voices discourse about nothing in particular, creating a mosaic of the various lumps and sauces of the world around. This nothing in particular of *Lumpy Gravy* resonates thematically with Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” and Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing,” and the persistence of ‘nothing’ in Beckett, where the ‘nothing’ project continues, finding its remarkable manifestations in each of their auditory renditions of text.

How would it be to live on a string as the only dimension of life, muses one of the voices of the piano people on *Lumpy Gravy*. We hear an audible giggle in response, a comprehensible little laughter at the impossibility of such a thought. But indeed the modality of a voice inscribed on magnetic tape or a digital disc, with its binary coding, is the modality of that string, a one-dimensional line of inscription coiled as it were onto a spool and archived in Krapp’s dusty boxes of memories. The multiple voices of literary texts are thus reduced to lines, sequences, and strings devoid of life and sound. The voice and its attendant noises,
teeming with what Greenblatt calls “social energy,” remain trapped in text, imprisoned on a tape or digital string of numbers. Texts remain to be sounded out and heard, and this is the challenge of literary studies today, the bridge that spans the auditory gap in the universe of writing dominated by the typographic Faustus and his silent analytic cogitations.

The ‘megaphone’ is a trope for hearing the multi-sensorial acoustic dimension of the auditory, a way of understanding the ‘mosaic’ and ‘social energy’ of a listening/silence/text/noise paradigm, a broadcasting medium for the voice, the popular voice, and a complex social assemblage constitutive of it. For the social activist, the ‘megaphone’ is relevant in raising enough noise in response to issues or problems that require immediate action. For the literary scholar, it opens up new ways of reading and sounding out texts.
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