

Anima Automata:  
On the Olympian Art of Song  
By  
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Anima Automata: On the Olympian Art of Song  
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## Abstract

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Dominant explanations of the power of song, in musicology, sound studies, media theory, and our cultural mythologies about divas and pop singers, follow a Promethean trajectory: a singer wagers her originary humanity through an encounter with the machinery of music (vocal training, recording media, etc.); yet her song will finally carry an even more profound, immediate human meaning. Technology forms an accidental detour leading from humanity to *more* humanity. In an alternative, “Olympian” practice of singing, humanity and machinery constantly and productively contaminate each other. My readings, centering around the singing doll Olympia from Jacques Offenbach’s 1881 opera *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, illuminate the affective and ethical consequences of the confrontation between Promethean and Olympian song.

I first demonstrate our contemporary techno-ideological world’s fixation on Promethean song. Reading Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan alongside electropop music, I show that a sustained, iterative process of falling in love again with the Promethean fantasy structures our everyday encounters with omnipresent vocal technologies (telephones, iPods, radios) and with the form of the Real that they imply and instantiate. I next turn to Theodor Adorno and the simultaneously technological, ideological, and psychoanalytic establishment of a Promethean world. Adorno’s lesser-known works on pop music propose an affective and epistemological model of “fetishism” that I unfold through a reading of Serge Gainsbourg’s pop songs of the 1960’s. Adorno radically revises Freud’s specular fetishism by discovering an auditory, vocal fetish-object. Adorno’s theory requires the disciplinary program Gainsbourg develops in his masochistic relationship with the young singer France Gall: forcing her to become a Promethean robot, Gainsbourg endows her with a phallic, prosthetic voice, inserting her in a homosexualized (since universally masculinized), indifferent circuit of desire.

My central chapter turns to Olympia herself. 18<sup>th</sup> century automata, music theory, and fantastic literature all define a thermodynamic, mathematically irrational force that their imitative and speculative powers cannot yet represent: Félix Vaucanson’s famous defecating duck and pipe-playing automaton imitate everything except the chemical process of digestion or the adjustment of aperture and breath speed needed to compensate for harmonic resonance within the flute; music theory and the practice of tuning negotiate

between calculable rational-number intervals and their irrational, incommensurate remainders; and E. T. A. Hoffmann carefully distinguishes between realizable engineering and magical technologies linked to acoustics and thermodynamics. When 19<sup>th</sup> century media generalize the manipulation of these forces, all based on the calculation or circulation of mathematically-irrational energy flows, in everyday reality, Olympia enters this empty space *as* a fantasy, enabling a denial of the omnipresent electromagnetic flow that had appeared fatally destabilizing to the rational order of 18<sup>th</sup> century technology and thought. Freud's reading of Olympia's "uncanniness" fetishistically avoids the troubling complex of affect and automatism central to feminine desire to exorcise the "fantastic" potential of figures such as Olympia. However, in a recent performance at the Met disseminated clandestinely online (challenging us to reconsider the place of "liveness" in the reception of opera and the strange pleasure of the opera "pirate," often considered as an aberrant or marginal form of opera spectatorship), the understudy Rachele Gilmore rediscovers this fantastic dimension of Olympian song, dissolving a rigorous distinction between fantasy and reality.

Two chapters investigate fin-de-siècle responses to Olympia. In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future*, Thomas Edison constructs the android Hadaly not to satisfy a positive male desire but instead to forestall the apocalyptic threat to male subjectivity embodied by fin-de-siècle women, who are already androids. Edison's "modeling" of Hadaly influences both future science-fiction texts and the practice of science itself, notably Alan Turing's theory of artificial intelligence. Gaston Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* textually situates the Phantom at the female pole of a homosexual love-triangle between the ostensibly heterosexual protagonists. The properly masculinized and prosthetized Christine and Raoul – along with their audience – abandon the opera house, and the specter of femininity entombed within it, entering a glacially transsexualized world of desire without difference.

My conclusion focuses on the Australian pop star Kylie Minogue, who performs Olympian song from within the universalized Promethean system. Her work defines affective intersubjectivity neither as impossible nor as indifferent sympathy. Kylie develops a practice of "telepathy" feared and desired by Freud, Turing, and Lacan. Playing on the "earworm," Kylie minimalizes immediate or profound affect to highlight the constant circulation of productive mechanisms between bodies both "technological" and "human." In this human-machine voice, we rediscover our difference from each other, and from ourselves, in the singular ways we execute the most homogenizing of programs.

*Aux amateurs,*

*Aux automates.*

**Table of Contents** (ii)**Acknowledgements** (iii)**Prelude: Technology/Feeling/Humanity** (1)

Some Questions Concerning Fembots (1)

Towards an Olympian Art of Song (8)

**Alarm-Clock Dreams: Sound, Technology, and Ideological Fantasy** (23)

How Soon Is Now? (23)

I'm Waking Up To Us (26)

**La Baise Hyper-technique: Serge Gainsbourg and Theodor Adorno's Ballads of the Fetish** (39)

Sea, Sex, and Sun (39)

SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ! (46)

Poupée de son (66)

**Hoffmann, Fantasy: Olympia's Uncanny Song** (80)

Vocal Breakdown, Technical Breakthrough (80)

Interlude (84)

Divas, Dancers, Dolls, Ducks: Figuring Automation in the *Contes* (86)Thermodynamic Poetics in the *Contes* and the Tales of Hoffmann (95)

Olympia's Negative Magnetism: Stella and Antonia (107)

Unheimlicher Fetischismus, oder Fetischistische Unheimlichkeit? (115)

Re-fantasizing the Fantastic (125)

**Science-Fictions of the Fembot: Edison's Super-Modeling** (131)

Engineering Equilibrium, or, The Balance of Terror (134)

Super-Models: Villiers's Hyper-Realist Science Fiction (145)

**Orpheus Out of the Underworld: Silencing the Noisy Ghosts of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*** (155)

In which the "Amateur des Trappes" Loses His "Maîtrise" (156)

On Unfortunate Sequels (169)

**I, X: Kylie Minogue's Telepathic Pop** (173)

I. (173)

II. (177)

III. (178)

IV. (180)

V. (182)

VI. (194)

VII. (203)

VIII. (215)

IX. (219)

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## Prelude: Technology/Feeling/Humanness

“You can define it as you want – sci-fi music, techno disco, cybernetic rock – but the term I prefer is robot pop. It fits in with an objective which consists of working without respite to the construction of the perfect pop single for the tribes of the global village.”

Ralf Hütter of Kraftwerk, as imagined by Paul Morley in *Words and Music*

## Some Questions Concerning Fembots

“I’ve got some news for you / Fembots have feelings too,” chants the Swedish electro-pop artist Robyn on “Fembot,” the first single off her recent *Body Talk* series of EP’s.<sup>1</sup> Why does Robyn present this declaration – linking fields feminine, mechanical, and affective – as “news”? If it is “news” to us, Robyn implicitly signals that we find it difficult to receive this statement as denotatively true: it doesn’t feel right to us, a fact revealing that we are already caught up in some form of resistance to – viz., transference with – this voice. What is this news, and how does it feel to hear it? And if we hear it, how do our feelings prevent us from registering its potentially insightful force? Robyn’s song, a jingling dynamo ceaselessly regenerating epistemological and affective troubles, gets stuck in my head, going round and round, turning me into a malfunctioning phonograph. Fundamentally, this dissertation represents my efforts to respond to Robyn’s couplet, and to the double paradox at its center.

First paradox: how is this news? Robots, and female robots in particular, have been revealing their affective side ever since their invention; Karel Capek’s *RUR (Rossum’s Universal Robots)* – the 1920 play that introduced “bot” into our stock of morphemes – concludes with a heterosexual pair of automatons discovering true love in each other’s arms (as good a way to celebrate their massacre of the humans as any other, I suppose). The title of an important recent text in the history of science insists that we, in our humanity, have always been *Natural-Born Cyborgs*<sup>2</sup>; meanwhile, feminist cyborg theorists such as Donna Haraway and Jack Halberstam have remarked on the way that the *female* cyborg in particular, by reshuffling pairs of stereotypical oppositions (human/machine; emotional/rational; female/male; original/copy), implicitly announces an originary entanglement between these terms.<sup>3</sup> The family tree can be traced back much further, however, as the title of Richard Powers’s 1995 science-fiction *Galatea 2.2* observes: Galatea, matriarch of the fembots, came fully to life to reveal that she had loved us, her human creators, all along.<sup>4</sup> Robyn herself dramatized the affective lives of robots, addressing a love song to a “Robot Boy” on her eponymous 2005 album. Seemingly implicit in “Fembot”’s pattern of address is a certain division of emotional labor and knowledge: the fembot reveals the secret of her soul to an uninformed other, presumably human and male; this revelation in turn shatters the division between robot and human by locating a little too much humanity in the soul of the automaton. Indeed, the neatness of this division has been called into question so many times

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<sup>1</sup> Robyn, “Fembot,” *Body Talk Pt 1* (Konichiwa: 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> On the problems of translation between these categories, see Jack Halberstam, “Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine,” *Feminist Studies* 17.1 (Fall 1991): 439-460.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2* (New York: Picador, 2004).



that this calling-into-question has itself become a well-worn trope, Philip K. Dick's rhetorical question "Do androids dream?"

This couldn't be news to Robyn, who has herself worked wonders with this trope. On the Röyksopp track "The Girl and the Robot," Robyn plays a woman neglected by her lover, a "robot" who lives only for his job: "Fell asleep again in front of MTV / God, I'm down at the bottom / No one's singing songs for me."<sup>5</sup> In the chorus, however, the robot's masculine, electronically-manipulated voice (which could be the voice of MTV, singing a song for her that she does not necessarily recognize or bother to acknowledge) rebukes her: "So you want to understand me / You just see what you want to see / There's no way I can help you out / You don't know what it's all about." This unlocatable, technological voice declares something very similar to the opening line of "Fembot," trying to deliver the "news" to Robyn's "girl" that she, perhaps, is the myopic one, not seeing in the "robot's" very labor a form of expression, a kind of song-singing performed just for her, the traces of an inner affective life. To shift mythologies, the television, tuned to MTV, attempts to confess its love for her, by sneaking the lyrics of its mechanically-reproduced hits into her dreams, to awaken her to the reality of its feelings, playing the role of Echo to her modern navelgazing Narcissus. Or does this fantasy-song emerge as the mechanical fulfillment of her autoerotic desire, its lyrics expressive of what she wants her boyfriend to say to her or to say to her boyfriend – the fact that these two declarations are the same revealing the extent to which she is trapped in an echo-chamber of her own solipsistic desire? The genius of the song lies in its unwillingness to decide in favor of any of these interpretations, and as our understanding of the source of the voices in the song changes our understanding of the meaning of "robot" changes as well. The song's title, which we read at first as an opposition, becomes a hendiadys: this is the song of a girl-robot, trapped by the automatism not of her unfeeling circuitry, but of her emotions.<sup>6</sup> If the girl is a robot, it is not *in spite of* her feelings, but because of them. So if fembots have feelings too, the statement of that fact certainly isn't *simply* "news."

Secondly paradox: what feelings do fembots have, and how do we feel about them? The fembot speaker of the song claims that "You split my heart in two," situating us in a register of serious, tragic affects, but the rest of the song almost dares us to doubt the richness of a fembot's inner life. "Fembot" is unilaterally exuberant: brimming with bright tones, tinny bleeps, shiny syncopations, the song is a candy-colored music box without any trace of bathetic "breakdown."<sup>7</sup> True, the chorus does assert, over and over, each time exactly the same as the last, that "fembots have feelings too," seemingly linking these "feelings" to heartbreak. But the main body of the song is instead a happy half-rap that revels not in the sadness of loss but instead in the technical pleasures of machine intercourse, as well as the punning mechanicity of a well-turned double entendre. "Fresh out the box, the latest model / Generator running on full throttle," this "Fembot" describes in

<sup>5</sup> Röyksopp, "The Girl and the Robot," *Junior* (Wall of Sound: 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Robyn played with this idea earlier; one track on *Robyn* celebrates the stupidity, thoughtlessness, and dangerously repetitive structure of falling love as identical to its emotional exaltation and possibility. She sings, sweetly, happily, and without irony that "My new favorite thing to do / Is wasting my time on a bum like you." Even earlier, Freud called the *Wiederholungszwang* "uncanny" for uncannily similar reasons. See Robyn, "Bum Like You," *Robyn* (Konichiwa: 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 199. Hereafter cited as *ISO*.

gleeful detail all of her various features (“got a lotta automatic booty applications / Got a CPU maxed out sensation”) before inviting the listener to take her for a spin: “My system’s in mint condition / The power’s up on my transistors / Working fine, no glitches / Plug me in and flip some switches.” Robyn’s song perversely exemplifies the fembot’s “feelings” through an affective experience – that of enjoying the perfect technical production and consumption of one’s own body – that is not exactly considered as one of the most classically expressive emotions, or as an emotion that would express that much human depth.

Tracing Robyn’s song through a wider history of Western music, we do find similar moments where female vocalists are allowed to revel in their pleasurable command of their bodies and instruments. Marguerite’s “Jewel Song” from Charles Gounod’s *Faust* comes to mind, with its exultant “Ah ! je ris de me voir si belle dans ce miroir.” This intertext, however, merely demonstrates the seeming bizarreness of Robyn’s choice of affect. If Marguerite, or the diva playing Marguerite, displays her *technical* skill in the flawless performance of the Jewel Song, the audience does not therein witness the *humanity* of either of these characters. Indeed, in the world of opera, it is the pathetic/bathetic song of the heroine’s death that proves her to be a (contagiously) feeling being. Just think of the poor diva Bianca Castafiore: in the world of Marlinspike Hall, the Jewel Song always on Castafiore’s lips metonymizes her *failure* or *incapacity* to form human connections with the real heroes of the tales in general and Tintin, the only character with a demonstrably human inner life, in particular. Castafiore’s enjoyment of her Jewel Song may constitute a feeling, but it may be a feeling that prevents her from engaging in the “right” or “authentically human” sort of feeling. Indeed, in Hergé’s world, the comic aria is a universal turn-off. More generally, the distinction between the typical emotional responses of characters in comedies and tragedies provides the main justification for the demotion of comedy as a minor genre, in opera in particular but indeed in most classical aesthetic systems.

“Fembot” seems to declare the “wrong” kind of feeling in terms of its producer’s own pop-divadom. As the fable has it, Robyn emerged as a studio-system pop singer with her 90’s hit “Show Me Love,” but quickly became disillusioned with her lack of creative autonomy and with her given role as a puppet of marketing imperatives. She came back on her own terms, founding her own label, acting as her own producer, choosing her own collaborators – certainly a recognizable narrative of “creative control” emerging from disillusionment with the music-industry machine, but a remarkable one nevertheless, particularly for a female artist. So why, then, would Robyn choose, as the consolidating gesture of her self-determination and independence, to inhabit the role of a fembot, the product of someone else’s design? For Naomi Schorr, the fembot epitomizes a male fantasy of control over the female body;<sup>8</sup> as Lesley Gore suggested, for a woman to declare “You don’t own me,” she must also refuse to be “one of your little toys.” Thus Robyn’s performance of engineered automatism appears as incompatible with the emancipatory-feminist narrative of her career: the song would not constitute “news,” but regression. Meanwhile, the obvious delight and pleasure she takes in speaking in the fembot’s voice would suggest that Robyn herself feels wrongly, or even perversely – if she manifests enjoyment in this antifeminist role, does she prove herself to be a self-hating antifeminist, a masochist in politics and passions?

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<sup>8</sup> See Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Woman, Theory, and French Realist Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). Hereafter cited as *BC*.

When taken together, however, these two paradoxes open onto a possibility. If we have always known that robots can love and suffer loss in recognizably human ways (even if we haven't always remembered that fact), and if we've simultaneously always been suspicious of the kind of feeling associated with the pleasurable accomplishment of technical tasks, perhaps what really is news to us is quite simply that getting plugged in and having one's switches flipped by some anonymous operator (or even by oneself) is just as much a "feeling" as the exaltation of true love or the pain of heartbreak – *and that the feeling of suspicion produced by this argument itself maintains the apparent self-evidence of the human/robot distinction*. Being operated on or operating as a machine could be a fundamental part of the *human* experience – even, I might argue, the very *functioning* of the (in)human experience of being passionately *moved*. We look for feeling in robots by examining them *in extremis*, searching for evidence of affect along Romantic lines, defining the truth we are searching for as the abysses and triumphs of the human soul. But perhaps baseline functioning – precisely what we, as biological devices that, fundamentally speaking, consume and transform energy to interact with and navigate through the world in which we find ourselves, share with all mechanisms, from pulleys to toasters to phonographs – is itself a field of affective experience, or even *the* field of potentiality of affective experience. To feel the kind of feeling celebrated by Robyn's fembot would be, fundamentally, to enjoy feeling one's own body as a machine, to enjoy being able to feel feelings at all.

But the statement of fact ("Fembots have feelings too," "Bodies are machines," "Humans have always been natural-born cyborgs") clearly does not achieve its desired effect. Robyn's (potentially perverse) feminism reminds of this: these statements are always perceived as news "for us," no matter how many times we've heard them before. Therefore we are not in a simple situation of false-consciousness that could be relieved by the delivery of truth; the epistemological problem of defining, or defining between, human and machine must be supported by a different economy, belonging to the affective problem of a resistance or a denial. Consequently, the animating question of my project will not be "Do fembots have feelings too (and what might they be)?" but instead "What has prevented us – over and over – from recognizing or registering the truth of the statement 'Fembots have feelings too'?" How does our denial of this truth emerge and take form across a certain history of the distribution of humans and machines, and of ideas about humans and machines? What are the affective forces leading us to phrase the evidence and knowability of our humanity in the form of a denial of feeling to machines?" My dissertation may appear to be a genealogy of a trope, as it will indeed trace the figure of the singing female robot, lately incarnated or animated by Robyn, through a series of other figurations in other media: taking as its center the singing doll Olympia from Jacques Offenbach's opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, it will radiate back and forth in time, through the pop songs of France Gall and Serge Gainsbourg, Dntel, and Kylie Minogue, to the Enlightenment robots of Félix Vaucanson and E. T. A. Hoffmann, to Olympia's fin-de-siècle sisters in novels by Jules Verne, Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Gaston Leroux. But this is certainly not the history of the *emergence* of a trope, a truth, or an emotion. Instead, I want to give a genealogy of the way in which the fembot's voice *fails to become news*, does not happen in a historical sense, only emerges through failing to emerge, by investigating the cultural forces that ensure or desire this non-occurrence. In an ironic or special case of new media studies, I'd like to investigate the bizarre situation in which a medium whose novelty has long been dreamt of is nevertheless never allowed to become "news."

In germinal form, the genealogy I would like to provide here traces its origin to another Classical moment: the invention of mathematics in ancient Greece. Greek

geometers, notably the Pythagoreans, measured value through ratios of discrete units, measured in whole numbers. As demonstrated by Plato's recasting of this accomplishment as the myth of the harmony of the spheres in *The Republic*,<sup>9</sup> this innovation allowed for the vast and unruly field of quantities to be reduced to a unique form that could, it seemed, measure anything and thus everything. Plato leaves out, however, the other discovery of the Pythagoreans: within the most seemingly ideal shapes, such as the circle or the square, there lurked values that could not be assimilated to the system of measurement by rational numbers. The circumference and the diameter of a circle are incommensurate, for example, as are the diagonal and the sides of a square (nowadays, we call these two ratios that are not rational "pi" and "the square root of two"). But the Pythagoreans didn't merely develop the proof of incommensurability, properly speaking the proof of the existence of irrational numbers; they also made a fundamental decision about the relationship between the rational and irrational numbers, by deciding to make the existence of irrational numbers into one of the central taboos of their cult. Again, as Plato's Myth of Er, in which the planets harmonize into a celestial, musical unison, suggests, this condemnation of irrational numbers as that which must not be known was informed and haunted by the fantasy of a privileged unity – and it was simultaneously caught up in broader ideas about music theory and practice.

Rational numbers became the basis for Western tonality, informing the construction of musical instruments as well as musical training, composition, and performance, even as the privileging of rational numbers as the foundation for mathematical thought (and thus the scientific and engineering languages that employed mathematical principles) made itself felt in other arenas as well: for instance, mechanical engineers were limited in their constructions, for the most part, to the calculable world of rational numbers. (This is not to say that rational numbers are *a priori* more calculable; instead, it is to say that the algorithms of calculation were designed around the rational numbers. Many people can intuitively divide three by two; not many people can intuitively divide the square root of three by the square root of two. I think this is more a result of the way we frame the grammatical operation of "division" than by the latter operation's inherent occupation of a higher mathematical realm.) So in time the rational/irrational distinction, itself already informed by the unity/disunity distinction, grew to include two other binarisms: "perfect" intervals as a basis for composition and performance/intervals outside the preferred tonal system, and techniques to minimize their interference with classical intervallic music; and the science of simple mechanics and mechanical engineering/the science and engineering of those systems that could not be modeled or calculated with rational numbers, notably acoustics, electromagnetics, and thermodynamics. Of course, as we will see, this multimedia character of the rational/irrational binary, which integrates mathematical language, musical practice, and the engineering of specific media forms, was already operative in Pythagoras' time, as visualized in Plato's transposition of Pythagoras' theory as well as in Pythagoras' own use of the monochord, an ancient string instrument, to generate and model rational numbers and harmonies simultaneously.

But irrational numbers, and their associated concepts, hardly remained taboo. To the contrary, they formed the basis for various tuning strategies that produced the Baroque theories of *Affektenlehre*, which linked certain emotional colors to various keys; they also became, as the flows and interferences of energy in sound, electronics, and thermodynamics, the desired representational content both of celebrated Enlightenment automata and emergent theoretical and practical sciences. So when, around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 615e.

irrational numbers became practically available for use in science and engineering thanks to advances in mathematical theory and to the computation of massive logarithmic tables, one might well expect that the stage was set for a grand reconciliation. In some sense, the fin-de-siècle did witness an explosion of irrational technologies: Richard Wagner and Claude Debussy experimented with overtones and non-tonal resonances, developing the vocabularies and moods of what would become electronic music; telephone wires, radio waves, and electrical currents swept across continents and oceans, penetrating domestic spaces and integrating post-mechanical technologies into everyday life on an unprecedented scale; dynamics of energy flows, differentials, and transfers became foundational in science, allowing for the development of complex systems theory and a constellation of other models such as information theory, cybernetics, cognitive neuroscience, and even Freudian psychoanalysis, all of which focus on the relations of energetic states within the human body and across the boundary separating a body from its environment, taking these abstract and logarithmic dynamic relations as the fundamental ground for the emergence of apparently “higher” forms of affective, phenomenal, and epistemological meaningfulness.

If ever there was an environment that would seem to favor the discovery that humans were natural-born cyborgs, it would have been the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which brought what Marshall McLuhan would describe as the final prosthetizing of humanity by its media, with electric media turning the human body inside out and stretching its internal ties to the non-human world. “With the arrival of electronic technology, man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself,” McLuhan writes.<sup>10</sup> Suddenly the very technology providing “man” with his identity and consistency was replicable, and thus his definition was not implicit but itself iterable and secondary, a quirk of technology, a technology which, even worse, so dramatically penetrated the envelope of his body. “For the first time,” McLuhan declares, man “has become aware of technology as an extension of his physical body”<sup>11</sup>; he hears the news that he feels as an extended and distributed cyborg body. But I would argue that this awareness of the interpenetration or, to borrow a Darwinian term, the entanglement of human and machine, human and *other*, bodies did not become universal. First of all, the reconciliation of man and his prosthesis wasn’t always a happy one, even when it was described in apparently glowing terms – it could be shocking as well. Luigi Galvani first made the bodies of dead frogs respond to an electrical current in 1771; by 1798, Johann Ritter was hooking up batteries to his own ears, eyeballs, and genitals, in a prolonged experiment that would eventually aurally castrate him and that he described as a “marriage” to the battery,<sup>12</sup> in order to demonstrate that human sensory responses were the result of electrical flows that pay no heed to the limits established, imaginarily, by humans as the boundaries of the physical body. These experiments, as Veit Erlmann describes them, suddenly rendered Alessandro’s Volta’s electric pile all too palpable as “but one element in a long chain joining the organic and the inorganic.”<sup>13</sup> That is, the concretization of a long dreamed-of technology must have appeared as something of a nightmare, the Cronenbergian vision of an “extension of man” that dramatically reconfigures the integrity of man’s body: no longer was man an entity unto himself, but instead was the endlessly penetrated, resonant

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) 43. Hereafter cited as *UM*.

<sup>11</sup> *UM* 47.

<sup>12</sup> Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (New York: Zone Books, 2010) 191. Hereafter cited as *RR*.

<sup>13</sup> *RR* 191.

object of the energy flows that until that point had seemed, and had been verified by science, to be other to him. But this nightmare face of man's honeymoon with the machine did not function to shatter the stability of man's self-definition as integrally human. The unity of the human body, if anything, would become a still more privileged ideal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it seems to become more and more universally available to a field of actors (women, non-whites, sexual minorities, persons with "non-standard" bodies, animals...) who had previously been defined solely in terms of their divergence from an ideal "human" unity.

How, then, did "man" (even if "man" here applies stripped of his usual trappings – maleness, whiteness, heterosexuality, unmarkedness by physical injury, etc.) survive what should have been the death-knell, the "news," of the end of "man"? I will argue that nothing less than a massive and global re-orientation of the practice of desire occurred, inexorably and at a subterranean level, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – precisely when Olympia re-emerges as the vanguard of a vogue of representations of singing female robots – enabled the formation of a fetishistic structure of double consciousness that allowed for the fundamental unity of "man" as an ideal concept, a technology of self-perception, to outlive the evidence of its dispersal or dissolution that became all too legible in the everyday media world of the fin-de-siècle. I am thus proposing a new interpretation, or a new dimension, of theories of the fin-de-siècle reorganization of desire inaugurated by Michel Foucault and pursued, in various veins, by thinkers as varied as Friedrich Kittler, Thomas Laqueur, Mark Seltzer, and Terry Castle.<sup>14</sup> (Kittler and Castle are of particular interest here, since they both argue that the fin-de-siècle transformation of technologized desire forms the culminating twist to a process of negotiation and compromise with new epistemological, affective, and phenomenological pressures emerging in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.)

I see the overall transformation in these terms: In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, males, as avatars of an ideal humanity, react to the impending, already-present revelation that their bodies have always been open to the destabilizing forces that had previously been contained in images of the female and the mechanical by striking a Faustian bargain. Abandoning the certainty of a link between the male body and a natural, originary unity, and thus by accepting the "news" of the end of man at the level of denial or denegation, they instead re-create a conscious certainty of the integrity of the "human" as a theoretical and practical construct by engaging in a promiscuous and constantly-iterated supplementation of their bodies, mediated through the consumption and production of an endlessly available and endlessly enjoyable fetish-objects. The obsessive and pedagogically-stimulating figuration of female, mechanical bodies endowed with fetishistic vocal supplements, representations of the "missing" phallus, both testifies to and enables this transformation of desire to the mode of perfectly performing or simulating humanity. "Humanity" now becomes an ideology constructed on a double consciousness: we know that our bodies and desires are intimately entangled with a procession of technological supplements, but all the same we stand apart from them so that we need never hear the news of this event. And I do mean "we" – because this ideological reconstitution of "humanity" depends on the primary, if denied, knowledge of the fragmentation or destabilization of the "human," the operation of unifying, fetishistic recreation of human unity is now open to anybody, and any body, not just the male bodies who, obeying the logic of an earlier distribution of genders, had something to lose when confronted with disunity. Masculine desire, relying on the prop of

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<sup>14</sup> Kittler will be discussed at greater length below. See also Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

the voice as fetish, becomes the only paradigm for identity. To save masculinity from the technological apocalypse of humanity, it is universalized as a general field of fetishistic simulation, completely evacuating difference from the world of desiring subjectivity – even though this universalization rests upon the rickety foundation of a fetishistic split consciousness.

Hence the Pythagorean decision to exile the irrational makes its final turn, with the rational foundation of the human as meaningful, unified ideal insisting on itself through an ever-widening extension of fetishistically-managed irrational technologies. Perhaps we do arrive at the utopian global community McLuhan dreams of when he asks “might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?”<sup>15</sup> But perhaps that’s exactly the problem: in this Platonic spiritualization of identity via the “current” medium of electricity, there may be no room for the differences that we used to hear in women, machines, and other others. Another conception of the relation between rational and irrational numbers might see them as epiphenomena of each other, noting that the field of the irrational was first produced through the interference of the rational domain with itself, the identity of two sides of a square opening up the irreconcilable difference of their diagonal. (And vice-versa.) Why, then, must we view the irrational as a detour between the rational and its “spiritualized” form? Is there any way to follow the entanglement, the mutual constitution, of rational and irrational, identity and difference, human and machine? To the obvious counterargument that such an operation just doesn’t feel right, I would again refer to the reading of Robyn above, and confess that I want to make no claim to truth. Instead, I can only offer this dissertation as news for you, the reader, and hope that you find its fantasies – of difference, transformation, and seduction – more seductive than those marketed elsewhere. It’s up to you, now, to plug my text in and flip its switches.

In the next section of this introduction, I would like to review in closer detail three theoretical models I have developed to trace, organize, evaluate, and perhaps set into motion the historical (non)event at the heart of my dissertation. These are, roughly in the order they will appear below (although certain critical entanglements impossibly link all three): a distinction between a Promethean aesthetics of vocal performance, which teleologically programs “humanity” as the final word in the dialectic of human and machine, and an Olympian one, which attempts to engage in the oscillation and interpenetration of these opposites without reducing their difference; the model of fetishism as it appears in Freud and as it is radicalized in post-Freudian thought; and the general universalization of a unified field of “homosexual” desire that eliminates all divergence from a masculine pole of phallicized enjoyment.

### **Towards an Olympian Art of Song**

Michel Poizat, reviving a sometimes-neglected psychoanalytic formal procedure, bases his investigation of the operations of operatic desire, *The Angel’s Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, on a case study. Poizat, however, leaves the confines of the clinic and interviews several opera fans waiting all night to buy tickets for the première of a new production of *Tristan und Isolde*. The box office will open the following afternoon. As Poizat’s interview draws to a close – he does not say whether dawn is breaking, or whether his subjects are

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<sup>15</sup> UM 61.

finally about to be able to buy their tickets, but only that the tape in his cassette recorder has run out, since we're on technological time here – his subjects discuss the nature of opera:

*Guy:* I feel that opera is a little like Plato, who turns to myth to explain things and stumbles upon the truth, who was able to explain the truth only through myth. I feel a little bit that opera is the same: a sort of higher truth that can't be expressed any other way, a sort of metaphor that is truly... It's because it's the most artificial of all arts that it is the truest.

*Claude:* The simplest, too. The voice... In the beginning, the first musical instrument was the voice.<sup>16</sup>

Guy and Claude here give a rather efficient summary of the entire history of Western thought about opera (and about technology and femininity as well). Plato “stumbles upon” the truth that he's already “turned to myth” to be able to express; the truth was thus already in the mode of truth before it needed to be clarified, motivating the turn to fiction. Truth is thus the truth of *logos* before it becomes, accidentally and surprisingly, clarified (but not challenged) by the detour into *mythos*. We go to the opera, then, not to hear *different* truths, but to hear the truth of our everyday lives rendered more clearly in this only accidentally different fictional field – and we all know that everybody becomes an opera lover accidentally, that opera is something we stumble upon in life, just like our perversions. At the same time, the specific nature of opera as a technology is highlighted as both the extreme case of mediation (“the most artificial”) and the zero degree of mediation (“the first instrument”). Reassuringly, a venture into the farthest reaches of “artificiality” returns us to the most natural artificiality imaginable.

I will describe this particular understanding of opera as the Promethean narrative. The myth of Promethean not only focuses on the *first* technology, but it turns all of technology to the ends of the human. Here, technology makes us more human than we ever were, expresses more human truth than we ever could all by ourselves. Prometheus gives humans the culture that had always been proper to them, after all, the culture that had just (for various political reasons) not yet been delivered, human culture *en souffrance*. Technology is a great time-saver (and labor-saver): opera helps us assimilate more human meaning, faster. Technology has nothing to offer in and of itself; instead, it merely clarifies human meaning and renders the production of human meaning more efficient. Finally, it's only in engaging in technology as a distraction or detour that we “stumble upon” its actual benefits. This notion determines much of our thinking about opera. In one expression of this idea, the singer submits to the rigors of vocal training and operatic performance, a painful, rupturing imposition of a foreign, arbitrarily mechanical form onto the natural integrity of his or her body as a way of expressing the truth that was already present in that body (and, for that matter, in all bodies).

This is, in fact, “a little like Plato,” who turns all of the *work* done in what Socrates at first describes as various detours or distractions into opportunities to capitalize on what had obviously always been Socrates' original program. It is also a problematic that has long been associated with opera, represented perhaps most famously in Nietzsche's searing critique of Wagner's “redemptive” aesthetic. In other words, opera exemplifies (and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century serves as the nucleus for) a peculiar dodge familiar to deconstructive critique: the others of man, which seem to be strongly troubling or problematic to the very definition of “man,”

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) 209. Hereafter cited as *AC*.



are instead turned towards the ends of man, placing “man” as the origin and endpoint of what becomes, safely enough, a journey from man’s triumphantly emergent identity to man’s even more triumphantly reasserted identity: nothing and no-one can get lost in this “forest pierced by a multitude of straight roads all converging on the same point”<sup>17</sup> (to abuse, slightly, McLuhan’s example of Alexis de Tocqueville’s prophetic vision of the electronic universe). The elliptic geometry of this world ensures that any seemingly divergent line will in time return to the line from which it departed, and that the point of origin and the farthest point on the projective horizon are mathematically equivalent. For this reason, the structure of a Promethean ideology leads inexorably to the complete and radical *closure* and *self-consistency* of the universe it describes.

In contrast to the dominance of the Promethean model, I would like to discover another dynamic at work in opera – in the electronic/robotic female voice – that cannot be reduced to these structures. After the famous singing doll who, as Freud says, “finds her way” from E. T. A. Hoffmann’s story of *Der Sandmann* into *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, and from there on into Freud’s *Das Unheimliche* and the rich tapestry of texts it inspires, I would like to call this model “Olympian.” (Note that Freud’s voice here grants a power of independent, wandering action to a thematics of mechanization – surprisingly, given that he is about to introduce the paradigm of mechanical *insistence* of action in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.) Olympian singing is not monodic, as in it one single voice or mode of singing does not triumph to “characterize” the song; as such it blossoms in those moments, described by Michal Grover-Friedlander, in which “singing grows independent of character and utterance.”<sup>18</sup> Oddly, then, Olympian singing might have some affinity for solos, and Promethean singing for duets, where the existence of two differentiated bodies allows us to assign specific and explicable roles to neutralize the voice’s interference with itself. Olympian singing instead opens us up to “des voix dans la voix,” in Roland Barthes’s hallucinatory phrasing:<sup>19</sup> it encourages us to see the voice as in a constant, sustained, creative negotiation *with itself*. In Olympian singing, identity is a mode of auto-criticism that plays no favorites and hedges no bets. As such, instead of assigning the binaries of human/machine, human/woman, and even animate/inanimate a neat, teleological organization (as in the Promethean model), Olympian singing pays attention to the ways in which these opposites never cease to inhabit, imitate, refine, reject, and in so doing produce each other, in a work of creation that never contains within it a particular destination or fated end-point. In short, Olympian singing is simultaneously the invention of the technological by the human and the invention of the human by the technological.

Adriana Cavarero formulates this as the form of invention most proper to love, the invention *of* love, when she writes that in the voice, “insofar as in the voice there resounds a singularity that can leave speech aside, the voice itself is the active, reciprocal communication – we could say the bare, reciprocal communication that has not yet been vested in the semantic – of this reciprocal passion” between lovers.<sup>20</sup> But here, what the lovers have in common is not the shared set of their defined qualities, but their shared *difference* from

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<sup>17</sup> UM 14

<sup>18</sup> Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Operatic Afterlives* (New York: Zone Books, 2011) 15. Hereafter cited as *OA*.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, “Le Grain de la voix,” in *Roland Barthes: Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV (Paris: Seuil, 2002): 148-156, 152. Hereafter cited as “GV.”

<sup>20</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, trans Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005) 240. Hereafter cited as *FMV*.

themselves and from each other. Mladen Dolar makes a similar point when he argues that the voice is what the body and language share inasmuch as it is not possessed by either of them: “*What language and the body have in common is the voice, but the voice is part neither of language nor of the body.*”<sup>21</sup> This kind of voicing – this identification of the voice as the locus of all sustained, creative differences, including the voice’s difference from itself – does not allow us to “characterize” the various different entities brought together in singing. Instead, it should lead us into an impassioned, reciprocal, constantly redefined encounter that prolongs and extends the kinds of impossible duets communicated, radiantly, by the voice.

Of course the Promethean model is all too aware of the Olympian art of singing. In the Promethean model, Olympian song is categorized as all that distracts from – while simultaneously enabling the clarification and generalization of – the originally and purely human voice. In fact, as we will see, the Promethean model relies upon Olympian singing to drive its inexorable movement towards the ends of man: the endlessly, mutually regenerative energy of Olympian singing is redirected, canalized towards one conclusion. For this reason, Olympian forces must be generalized even as they are neutralized – they become the dynamos of their own neutralization. In other words, an increasingly successful ideology of indifference or sameness (of an individual’s coincidence with him- or her-self, of the coherence of an idea or characterization, of the general exchangeability of various characterizations, even between what once seemed like an idea and its others) imposes itself upon an ever-more-widely-extended field of difference: Olympian singing, unbelievably enough, must be everywhere, and everywhere that it may be it must open up some slight eccentricity that is not reducible or recuperable within the elliptical space of the Promethean.

The relationship between Olympian and Promethean modes of knowing, thinking, feeling, and being now appears as, in Freudian terms, properly fetishistic. Dolar identifies this fetishism as the dynamic proper to opera: singing appears to aim at that which cannot, in the voice, be reduced to speech, but in fact it is only a means of extending or generalizing the power of speech into an arena that it would not otherwise be able to colonize, discipline, and control. Singing “[lets] the voice be the bearer of what cannot be expressed by words,” but simultaneously reduces this extra-meaningful capacity of the voice to a form of communication that is defined by speech: “the voice appears to be the locus of true expression, the place where what cannot be said can nevertheless be conveyed.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, “Expression beyond language [becomes] another highly sophisticated language,” and “singing, by focusing on the voice, actually runs the risk of losing the very thing it tries to worship and revere: it turns it into a fetish object – we could say the highest rampart, the most formidable wall against the voice.”<sup>23</sup> But this fetishism isn’t just a peculiar *risk* of singing, it is also the defining fault – and the source of the spectacular success – of opera in specific and contemporary, technologized voicing in general.

Remember, what first shocked Freud about fetishism wasn’t its perverseness or its theoretical complexity; it was how happy, how successful, how highly-functioning fetishists could be in the practice of their perversion: “usually [the devotees of fetishism] are quite

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<sup>21</sup> Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 73. Italics in original. Hereafter cited as *VNM*.

<sup>22</sup> *VNM* 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> *VNM* 30.

content with it or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life.”<sup>24</sup> Freud must restrict himself to a small sample size in his essay because, quite simply, fetishists don’t (think they) need psychoanalysis – fetishism accelerates and extends the scope of their pursuits of psychic gratification. Indeed, fetishism only appears in psychoanalysis as “a subsidiary finding” of the clinic;<sup>25</sup> it appears as an accessory, if a peculiarly interesting one, in the history of metapsychology. (This is our first clue that the theory of fetishism might play a fetishistic role in psychoanalysis, or in our more vernacular theories of desire, and an early call that we must strongly seek to reactivate it qua fetish in order to turn it to different ends than those assigned to it.) Freud provides a famously ingenious rationale for the workings of fetishism: the young boy glimpses the female genitals for the first time, and, unable to bear the idea that he, too, may lose his beloved penis, the linchpin of his identity, needs to “refuse” the fact that the penis can so spectacularly be lost.<sup>26</sup>

We may already be rather skeptical of Freud: why does the boy’s subjectivity inhere so absolutely in the penis? why does the boy understand the vision of a body differing from his own as a body *lacking* a penis? why must the opening onto something different than oneself (no matter how one is defined) be so decidedly terrifying, mortifying, and paralyzing? doesn’t the way Freud chooses to read this scene suggest that somehow it has already been decided that a penis would be a proof of sameness and identity, or a ward against the possibility of difference? wouldn’t that mean that Freud himself was relying upon the fetishistic functioning of “the penis” in his analysis, and that the peculiar and recognizably pathological desire of the fetishist was just an intensive version of the epistemological desires underlying Freud’s entire enterprise? and how can one know that a woman “lacks a penis” anyhow, without assuming that the ideal form of all human bodies possesses one, and how could you ever see this so clearly, at a glance? These questions reveal the extent to which Freud was already operating within a certain optics of the child’s sexual investigations (themselves the model for any epistemological investigation of sexuality) that responded to certain imperative desires about what should and should not be known.

But, putting these concerns aside for a moment, let’s get to the end of the myth that Freud so Platonically has stumbled upon: “It is not true that, after the child has made his observation of the woman, he has preserved unaltered his belief that women have a phallus”; instead, “He has retained this belief, but he has also given it up”<sup>27</sup> by establishing the fetish as “a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) penis”<sup>28</sup> (Freud has called it “a particular and quite special penis”) “which the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not wish to give up.”<sup>29</sup> The fetish, then, functions as “the vehicle both of denying and of asseverating the fact of castration” – it, as a medium (“vehicle”), generalizes an extreme version of castration (that version of castration scrawled as a mathematical formula in

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<sup>24</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 21, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001): 147-157, 152. Hereafter cited as “F.”

<sup>25</sup> “F” 152.

<sup>26</sup> “F” 153.

<sup>27</sup> “F” 154.

<sup>28</sup> Strachey’s translation is doubtful here; notice the oscillation between phallus and penis precisely where we should be most certain of which is which.

<sup>29</sup> “F” 152-153.

Freud's notes on the "Medusenhaupt": "to decapitate = to castrate"<sup>30</sup>) while rendering it negligible, by making it quite literally unbelievable. That is, it sows castration everywhere, because the success of the particular form of blindness it facilitates is only blind to castration; this universalization of castration thus renders the problem of castration all the more fatal, since it is now inescapable, and even more unbelievable, since everything in this world is cut precisely to the specifications of our one and only tool for denying its threat. Fetishism is a means not only of dealing with the world, but a means of building a world that you'll have a lot of fun dealing with. Abraham Maslow might have said that "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," but if all you have is an Allen wrench, then IKEA is a garden of earthly delights.

Although it may seem like introducing the theory of fetishism here is merely a critical expedient on my part, in fact Freud's (belated) development of a theory of fetishism is implicitly and explicitly tied to his encounter (or lack thereof) with Olympian singing. After all, his notion of fetishistic oscillation is a pendant to his theory of uncanniness, as described in precisely the same essay where Freud – who elsewhere declares that he is uninterested, unmoved by music<sup>31</sup> – nevertheless seems not only to admire but also to grant a surprising independence to Olympia. Nevertheless, in that essay, as Hélène Cixous, Samuel Weber, and a century of other analysts have pointed out (more, even, if we want to include here the words of Freud's earliest patients, who level equivalent criticisms at him from the beginning of his theorization of the psyche), Freud somewhat arbitrarily chooses not to examine Olympia and her fascinatingly ambiguous animation – is she a textbook robot? is she the perfect woman? or is she somehow both, and neither? or, even more troublingly, is she neither an ideal robot nor woman, but instead an example of the ideals of automaticity and femininity (and their others, humanity and masculinity) establishing each other through a promiscuous exchange of oppositions? Instead, Freud focuses on the struggle between the hero Nathaniel and the various father figures that either threaten him with or protect him from castration. For Freud's *Das Unheimliche*, as a research-text and an argument, Olympia is the fetishistic medium that both provokes an analysis of the text – Freud's colleague Ernst Jentsch had previously published an essay on Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* that focused precisely on Olympia – and allows Freud to ensure that that analysis, in the end, has nothing to do with Olympia, and instead centers on a drama defined not only by castration, but in particular by the specific castrating threats posed by various explicitly Promethean, even Modern-Promethean, fathers – an alchemist, an oculist, and a robotics engineer. If, in the story, Nathaniel's fathers eventually doom him to an explicitly castrative death, this is all the better for Freud, who can thus establish that the *original* and *terminal* motif of the story was castration, and all this Olympia business (precisely what grants the story its fame and popularity – and perhaps even make it more alluring and distressing to Freud as a subject of analysis, since we can assume, thanks to his mention of Offenbach, that he was somewhat familiar with the operatic Olympia) is just a convenient distraction.

The relationship between the Promethean and Olympian models of song, then, also reveals and enables a fundamental hierarchy within psychoanalysis as it emerges from the media constellation of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, it becomes determinant for our entire paradigm of desire: what Freud wants to find in the story – and the rationale he offers for

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<sup>30</sup> Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *Standard Edition*, vol. 18: 273-274, 273. Hereafter cited as "MH."

<sup>31</sup> For a good overview of Freud's "antipathy" to music, see Oliver Sacks, *Musophilia* (New York: Vintage, 2008) 320-321. Hereafter cited as *M*.

the desires of the story's characters and readers – is not the seductive “intellectual uncertainty” about the figure of Olympia, whose animation is so pleasantly and agonizingly in doubt, but instead the concrete answers posed by Nathaniel's tragic encounter with castration as a binary system, as an all or nothing game. We must ask what it is that Freud might not want to encounter, that he might want to “asseverate and deny” in favor of the much more easily resolvable critical model of castration. I think that precisely what Freud fetishistically refuses is Olympia's fembot voice – remember, he doesn't like opera.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the asseveration of this voice imposes itself most forcefully, as Kittler demonstrates, in Freud's method, which is founded on the production of an automatic female vocal flow, the free-association that Freud and Breuer, ventriloquizing their model hysteric Anna O., name “the speaking cure.” Kittler shows that Freud will not phonographically record his sessions because this might, all too palpably, demonstrate that the “nonsense [that one utters into the phonograph microphone] is always already the unconscious.”<sup>33</sup> The modes of psychoanalysis and of the media technology that develop and increasingly propagate the electronic, feminized voice are *too* uncannily similar to be allowed to converge. But, although we will see that the electronic female voice does indeed play a central role in psychoanalytic theory – although it might at first seem to be a very strange kind of fetish-object – I think it is more important to consider how Freud's fetishistic missed encounter with Olympia has extreme ramifications for the way that we, after him, think and practice desire.

The electronic female (or feminized) voice, as it passes between opera and psychoanalysis, exists both as an object that appears both highly charged with feeling and value but that also is generalized to the point where it passes almost unobserved. Slavoj Žižek describes this kind of object as “sublime,” capturing its double function: the sublime object is both impossibly compelling and absolutely evanescent.<sup>34</sup> I will argue that the particular modality of “the voice” that I want to identify here is the precise model for all such sublime objects, that the fembot's voice is *the* sublime object of our epistemo-technologic ideology. Roland Barthes writes: “La voix: enjeu réel de la modernité, substance particulière de langage, que l'on essaye partout de faire triompher.”<sup>35</sup> This maxim recapitulates McLuhan's suggestion speech is the medium-content of modernity's media, but itself contains pure thought or electrical flows (as we will see, the voice almost always occupies the *penultimate* position in lists or series; fixating on the voice – as the contemporary world does – is one powerful way to avoid coming to the final position). But Barthes puts a

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<sup>32</sup> Even if we view Freud's text as a specifically literary work of scholarship, restricted to the *text* of Hoffmann's tale, Freud, as many commentators have pointed out, reduces the scope of the text's *literary* voice dramatically by leaving out any discussion of its odd structure, its leaps between genres and tones, Hoffmann's style, etc. – in short, by eliding the *textuality* of his object. (This is all the more surprising given that the first section of *Das Unheimliche* is a peculiarly close textual encounter with an object not normally granted the status of text, the dictionary; thus, if Freud does not read the style – which Barthes aligns with the grain of the voice – of Hoffmann's story, it is not because he is *unable* to do so in general, but because he is for some reason unwilling or unable in this peculiar instance.)

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) 86. Hereafter cited as *GFT*.

<sup>34</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1999). Hereafter cited as *SOI*.

<sup>35</sup> Barthes, “Leçon d'écriture,” in *Roland Barthes: Œuvres complètes*, vol. III (Paris: Seuil, 2002): 33-39, 37.

bit of his own spin on things: the voice is described as “particulière,” thus both absolutely specific and peculiarly indefinite, and the particular but hard-to-pin-down form of its “triumph” is not the natural consequence of its physical organization but the result of some, presumably titanic, cultural labor. The voice as an “enjeu” is something that must constantly be played and re-played, and this constantly-iterated *work* is another name for the ideology that surrounds the voice, allowing us to play (pleasurably) and in so doing leading us to follow the rules of the game. In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Psychoanalysis and the Oedipus complex gather up all beliefs, all that has ever been believed by humanity, but only in order to raise it to the condition of a *denial* that preserves belief without believing in it (it’s only a dream: the strictest piety today asks for nothing more).”<sup>36</sup> Psychoanalysis plays a fundamental role for and in contemporary ideology: by developing the technologies of self-consciousness that enable us to function precisely *as if* we believe in the consistency of our world without having to acknowledge that we so believe (or that enable us to simultaneously acknowledge and deny as unimportant or peripheral the existence of the unconscious and our overdetermination by ideological structures), psychoanalytic theory inaugurates our contemporary ideologies by pretending to be – and thus by being – their harshest critic.

After all, what Freud misses in considering women as defined by the lack of a phallus/penis (the issue isn’t quite decided yet) is the opportunity to consider women as something not reducible to the presence/absence of the penis. Which is not to say that woman has a “real small penis,” the clitoris,<sup>37</sup> or some organ that would define her – just less intensively, since it’s so little – than the penis would define man. (One of the main projects of 20<sup>th</sup>-century sexology was to prove that the clitoris was in fact a “real small penis,” that clitoral orgasm was identical in structure to penile orgasm, that vaginal and clitoral orgasm were one and the same thing, and thus that women were, biologically speaking, indifferent from men, accomplished at last by Masters and Johnson in 1966; nowadays we are hooking up those rare treasures, “orgasmic” females, whom science has such difficulty finding, up to MRI machines to prove that their orgasms are the same as those of men, not on the basis of anatomical resemblance or blood flow, but on the basis of electrochemical energy patterns in the brain. This is the aggressive re-imposition of a one-gender system at its most insidiously, even biopolitically, invasive.) Instead, there may be a way to define woman as not defined in the same way – that is, characterized – by the possession of something, or by the non-possession of something, that defines man. Speaking charitably, or maybe hallucinatorially, this may be what Jacques Lacan meant to say when he notoriously defined the feminine as the field of the “pas-tout”: not the *not*, but the *not entirely* captured by the binary logic of the phallus. And indeed, (re)imagining this reading of Lacan has been one of the most interesting and productive methods of feminist followers of Lacan and Freud. Obviously, my idea of an “Olympian art of song” self-consciously joins in this tradition, in that Olympia is what is *not entirely* subsumable in a Promethean aesthetico-technics of vocal performance.

But I can only hallucinate or imagine this meaning of Olympia with a general context defined by Freudian desire, which presents an audacious solution to the dialectic of the genders by suggesting that the difference between the genders can be measured in terms of one absolute and universal yardstick: the phallus. Freud thus makes the genders

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<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Œdipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 304. Hereafter cited as *AO*.

<sup>37</sup> “F” 157.

commensurate in their incommensurability.<sup>38</sup> In a radical economic leveling, the phallus thus becomes the measure of all genders, and the possible *difference* of woman just becomes a difference of valuation within one identical system. Thus the corollary to the Promethean/Olympian hypothesis: if, as Foucault shows, the 19<sup>th</sup> century bears witness to the first contemporary ordering of human sexuality and desire, we should not define this form of sexuality (that becomes radicalized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) as “heterosexual,” but instead as fundamentally *homosexual* – even if, in its defining form, it is expressed as the homosexual desire between a man and a woman, that is, a homosexual desire passing between, defining, and binding two apparently differently-gendered bodies. Eve Sedgwick presents one form of this claim by arguing that women are merely the medium by which men circulate and generalize desire amongst themselves;<sup>39</sup> Luce Irigaray goes further to specify that “*women’s role as fetish-objects*, inasmuch as, in exchanges, they are the manifestation and the circulation of a power of the Phallus, establishing relationships of men with each other” is particular form of mediation enabling this system to keep profitably turning.<sup>40</sup> Irigaray goes on to give the argument one more turn, arguing that we must also ask the question of “*to what extent are [the needs/desires of men] the effect of a social mechanism?*” themselves.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Irigaray suggests that *masculine* desire (and thus the male body that expresses it) is itself just as much a product of a certain technologized ideology as the role that *feminine* bodies play within that system: “by submitting women’s bodies to a general equivalent, to a transcendent, super-natural value, men have drawn the social structure into an even greater process of abstraction, to the point where they themselves are produced in it as pure concepts: [...] they themselves are reducible to the average productivity of their labor.”<sup>42</sup> Masculinity turns out to be just as much a (fetishistic) product of a generalized, indifferent law as femininity (at least as both of these terms are legible from within this system).

This portrait of what Irigaray describes as “homosexulité” is echoed by Jean Baudrillard, who views the media constellation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as imposing a “Phallus exchange standard” upon *all* bodies, regardless of their “original” sex or gender. In this world, we can all buy new genders to play with, since both masculinity and femininity are defined *as* phallic, fetishistic prosthetics that supplement fundamentally lacking bodies: the male gender is purchased, bartered, re-negotiated, and resold just as much as the feminine. The idealization of two forms of the body, male and female, transforms the female body into “un phallus vivant qu’est *la véritable castration de la femme* (de l’homme aussi bien, mais selon un modèle qui cristallise de préférence autour de la femme)” – fetishism radically equalizes male and female, but so as to turn the difference of the female to the profit of the male.<sup>43</sup> But Baudrillard reminds us that “Être castré, c’est être couvert de substituts phalliques”; the man most convinced of the consistency with which he penis adheres to his identity can only be

<sup>38</sup> Lacan lays out the structure of this proof in Seminar XVII, although he gets the math a little bit wrong. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007) 150 et passim. Hereafter cited as OSP.

<sup>39</sup> Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 183. Hereafter cited as *TS*.

<sup>41</sup> *TS* 184.

<sup>42</sup> *TS* 190.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *L’Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 168. Hereafter cited as *ESM*.

such inasmuch as he is castrated, fundamentally different from the model of the ideal body that insists on his phallicization, and thus marked by an anxiety constantly asseverated and denied. (And what is woman's only possible response or recourse, besides taking on the phallic objects designating her as woman in the phallogocentric economy, according to Baudrillard? It's to "se [faire] *poupée*," to Olympianize herself, and in so doing to become "son proper fétiche et le fétiche de l'autre."<sup>44</sup>

Notice the uncomfortable overlap here: if the woman may never be able to escape her role as "the fetish of alterity," the fetish-object that stands in for and thus convincingly covers up the difference of woman, she may resist by, almost invisibly, becoming the fembot, which here is a fetish *of woman*, an object that may allow us to believe in, fantastically enough, the possibility of a sexual difference irreducible to the homosexual-fetishistic system.) For Baudrillard, all bodies are radically and originally leveled in our current culture so as to become endowed with a tantalizing assortment of fetish-objects, of which gender is but one. Fundamentally, the fetishization of gender entails generalizing the "fact" of castration as an external standard of judgment, so that neither man nor woman can consider their identity as intrinsic to their bodies: both genders must be grafted onto bodies that are defined as *a priori* castrated; however, the smooth functioning (super-smooth, since fundamentally frictionless, the forms of the underlying bodies having been neutralized in this new technological regime) of this exchange more than makes up for its Faustian foundation, particularly since everyone can now join in the efficient enjoyment of fetishistic desire.

Thus, in my dissertation, if Olympia's song speaks of a different way to conceptualize the relationship between man and machine, it also tells of a form of *heterosexuality* that is in peril in our current culture. I certainly do not intend to valorize the paradigm of male-female desire over other forms of desire or at the expense of different modes of heterosexuality between differently-gendered sets of bodies, nor do I mean to indict same-sex or same-gender desire by critiquing contemporary culture as fundamentally homosexual. To the contrary, in using these terms I seek to denature them, to divert them from their customary meanings, and as such to challenge our most "natural" understandings of various forms of sexuality. I also want to play on the paradox of declaring myself, as a "man" who loves (and does other stuff with) "men," in favor of a paradigm of heterosexual desire – about which, I might say, I accidentally find myself in a peculiarly appropriate position to fantasize. But, historically speaking, it has been queer desire that has stood in as the "other" desire – suggesting, perhaps, that queer desire has always been the properly heterosexual desire, or that properly heterosexual desire has always been doubtfully queer within Western culture. My intention is that my claims about various modes of heterosexuality and homosexuality, as an instance of the perverse practice Jacques Derrida calls "paleonymy," will instead open these terms, and these methods of desire, up to a critical and practical reconsideration; revalorizing "heterosexuality" may be one mode of "queering" it. This may also constitute the only appropriate mode for attempting the critique of a fetishistic system. Sarah Kofman, in her exploration of the epistemological fetishism that defines psychoanalysis, does not attempt to find a space outside of psychoanalysis, free of its pathology, from which to critique it – and we cannot assume that any such spaces exist, in our culture that is everywhere saturated with ideological fantasy. She instead *intensifies* the fantasy of psychoanalysis<sup>45</sup>; Schorr calls this "*Refetishizing the fetish*."<sup>46</sup> Since a vacillation

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<sup>44</sup> *ESM* 169.

<sup>45</sup> I examine this characteristic operation more closely in my reading of Kofman's "Ça cloche" below.



between knowledge and non-knowledge defines fetishistic success, by radicalizing the fetishist fantasy we may reveal precisely that which it seeks not to reveal. I would frame my encounter with psychoanalysis, like my encounter with art and technology, as a form of such radicalization: if the voice is a fantasy object, then, as Barthes writes, “n’est-ce pas la vérité de la voix que d’être hallucinée ?”<sup>47</sup>

But to return to the point: the Promethean/Olympian struggle is not only an epiphenomenon of aesthetics, but is instead itself expressive of the way in which sexual difference in Western culture has been turned entirely towards the ends of masculinity, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If women were never allowed a functional equality with men, at least they were granted an ideal equality: woman was considered *absolutely*, “symbolically” as Baudrillard would say, different from man, and not exchangeable with man, *in the same manner as man*, in the context of a generalized masculine economy, and thus the sexual relation was founded on difference and not on equivalence. Lacan calls the acknowledgment of this fact the foundation of the most “elegant” way to fail at the sexual relationship; Stanley Cavell calls it the basis for a comic definition of monogamy as sustained flirtation and metamorphosis. But if femininity is considered merely a detour of masculinity towards a fundamentally “human” meaning, if it becomes an accessory grafted – phallically and fetishistically – onto the feminized body, then any possibility of a different meaning of the feminine has been eliminated (consequently “woman” cannot today be explicitly or epistemologically *grasped* or *comprehended* as a theoretical object of study, again motivating my recourse to a hallucinatory or creative mode of thought). This is certainly one form of the equality of the sexes, but one in which “equality” is not defined as the comparable validity of different modes, but instead as the imposition of a neutralizing sameness. Furthermore, it is a form of eroticism that brings a premature end to the erotic; without any otherness, any difference, how can there be any seduction, any surprise, any transformation – anything to learn or become in the pursuit of desire? In this world, Plato could finally be happy, since sex no longer has anything to teach us.

A consideration of the Olympian art of singing leads us to realize that our contemporary understanding and practice of desire establishes itself as a fetishistic maneuver to avoid the message offered by fembots such as Robyn and Olympia: that we are bodies not defined as or destined to be defined as human, but instead bodies that include our others, such as machines and women, constantly inventing ourselves in an extended conversation with these other existences, always becoming something unknowable, something other than what we know ourselves to be; as such, femininity, vocality, technology are not expedient detours, not simple points of origin, but ever-present, ever-changing works of creation. But for this very reason, Olympian singing offers us the possibility to take its destabilizing fantasy seriously, for once not to hedge our bets, but instead to risk all of our human capital by engaging in a truly transformational encounter with that which we have always denied to be a part of ourselves – since only in so doing can we reverse the suicidal (since mortifyingly preservative, neutralizing, stabilizing) effects that abandoning that part of ourselves has caused on our own identities and desires.

Before presenting an outline of my dissertation, I would like to comment on the almost promiscuously eclectic set of texts it will investigate: clockwork machines, operatic performance, pop songs, literary fictions... McLuhan observes that “the ‘content’ of any

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<sup>46</sup> BC x. Italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> “GV” 152.

medium is always another medium,”<sup>48</sup> and the singing female robot is indeed a medium, oriented towards the production of the techno-fetishized voice. So my readings follow those other media that take it as their content, following the logic by which “the mediation of the medium is the message.” The continuity I draw between opera and pop music may seem especially shocking, given the apparent discontinuities between their associated taste levels and forms of consumption. But the boundaries of “operatic” singing are not as firm as they appear.

Catherine Clément’s influential thesis links operatic singing to “the undoing of women” – a removal of femininity as a potential attribute of both women and men.<sup>49</sup> This evacuating operation is most effectively mobilized in what Grover-Friedlander describes as “the death song,” the moment of affective intensity that pushes composers and performers to their ultimate limits.<sup>50</sup> However, as Poizat shows, the death song is not necessarily linked to opera per se; in his survey of opera from 1597-1973, he discovers that the death song only acts as the structural core of opera during the 19<sup>th</sup> century – the Romantic period, the age of grand opera.<sup>51</sup> The death song, then, enters opera at a specific moment in its history, becoming its medium content; consequently, we may surmise that it also leaves opera, perhaps to be remediated elsewhere. Just as Kittler shows how grand opera was deeply imbricated with the electronic media even in its most classical age,<sup>52</sup> Grover-Friedlander and Cavell, among others, have turned their attention to migration of “operatic” effects and structures after the end of opera’s era of dominance. My work here extends these critiques by tracing the techno-fetishized voice as it enters opera in the beginning of the Romantic period and then following its trail through pop music after it departs opera.

My dissertation will not follow a chronological trajectory from earlier events to later ones; instead, since the history it attempts to trace is itself strangely double, it will move parabolically from the present day, back through Olympia’s emergence at the fin-de-siècle, and back again. First I will rapidly sketch a media-based ideology theory that includes the sublimity of the fembot voice as its secret core. Then I will demonstrate how vocal fetishes are thinkable within (and against) a Freudian theory of fetishism, by examining how they are produced and reproduced. Next, I turn to Olympia herself, to show how she intercedes in a history of imaginary and real technologies in a double way: first, by examining how her performance enters into the place prepared for it by 18<sup>th</sup>-century models of humanity and technology, and second, by radicalizing her performance so that it destabilizes and undoes those models. Tracing Olympia’s inheritance in fin-de-siècle literature, I show how her generalization responds to the apocalyptic threat to masculine humanity posed by technology; then, I investigate textual strategies for re-gendering and properly disciplining the reader and his or her performances of gender and desire. Finally, I investigate a powerful and unexpected contemporary practice of playing the totality of this fetishistic system against itself, not by finding a space outside of it, but by pushing its strategies into overdrive.

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<sup>48</sup> UM 8.

<sup>49</sup> Catherine Clément, *Opera; or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 37. Hereafter cited as *OYW*.

<sup>50</sup> OA 16-18

<sup>51</sup> AC 134-135.

<sup>52</sup> See Kittler, “Opera in the Light of Technology,” trans. Anja E. Belz, in *Languages of Visuality: Crossings between Science, Art, Politics, and Literature*, ed. Beate Allert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996): 73-88.

My first chapter uses a 2002 song by the art-pop band Dntel to demonstrate the way in which the techno-fetishized voice weaves its way into the ideological consistency of our world and our consciousness thereof, becoming the call of reality, a call to wake up from the world of pop music and into the everyday. I explore a few ways in which media theory and psychoanalysis have conceptualized this “auditory real,” showing the precise continuity between the song’s dream of pop music and the telephonic world it encourages its listeners to accept as reality. Our world is not something we awaken from pop music into; instead, our world is held together by the constant buzzing of precisely those sounds that define pop music. To fall in love with pop music, to fall in love to the tune of pop music’s siren song, is to participate in the fantasy of our ideologies of gender and technology – and it is what we all do every day, starting when our alarms go off, and plug our dreams once more into the technological networks that keep fetish-sounds in constant circulation.

Next, I turn to an unlikely coupling: Theodor Adorno, who perhaps more than anyone resisted the attractions of pop music, and Serge Gainsbourg, the French pop auteur who perhaps more than anyone made the dynamics of desire implicit in pop music into the foundation of his psychic and professional life. And yet Adorno and Gainsbourg construct surprisingly identical narratives of self-formation; for this reason, they become ideal respondents for each other, with Adorno’s polemics bringing out the radical dimensions of Gainsbourg’s music of the 1960’s, and Gainsbourg’s work illuminating and completing the partial, fragmentary critique of popular music that Adorno could perhaps never allow himself to follow to its logical conclusion. For Freud, an auditory fetish-object would be a contradiction in terms, since the fetish object ought to be located strictly in the visual field. Adorno and Gainsbourg collaboratively fill in this Freudian blind spot, defining what an auditory fetish-object sounds like, and how it enables new practices of desire as well as new and terrifying frustrations. Gainsbourg attempted to respond to this frustration, first, through the form of asceticism – Freud’s “moral masochism” – that Gainsbourg called “l’anamour,” and second, through the violent pedagogy of masochism and fetishism that he offers to the young yé-yé singer France Gall as he made her into a Eurovision-winning star. Gall becomes, as the lyrics of her famous song state, a “poupée de cire, poupée de son” – a certain kind of well-fetishized fembot.

The central sections of my dissertation turn more directly to the singing doll Olympia. I begin by more explicitly considering the confrontation between Promethean and Olympian modes as they have been expressed in opera criticism. Then, I examine the sources of Offenbach’s 1881 opera, both the texts of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s tales and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century musical automata that inspired both Hoffmann and Offenbach. I examine the ways in which the division between rational and irrational numbers – informing both the forms of engineering that constructed the automata and the logics of magic and fantasy in Hoffmann’s tales – constitutes a mode of preparing for the arrival of Olympia, of warding off her importance in advance. Next, I turn to the reception of Olympia, both by feminist critics of opera and by Freud in his genre-defining essay on *Das Unheimliche*. I show how these readings seek to stabilize or define the imitative games played by Olympia both in and beyond the opera, or how they avert their gaze from the moments of Olympia’s singing that cannot be reduced to their frameworks. Finally, I investigate a recent performance of Olympia’s famous “Doll Song” at the Met that subsequently gained fame on the internet; in this performance, and in its peculiarly technologically-mediated afterlife, the divisions between human and machine, live performance and recording, and autonomy and automaticity break down, fulfilling the promise of Olympia’s song and suggesting a model of uncanniness that exceeds the Freudian model.

But Olympia's song was not immediately put to such revolutionary ends. Instead, as my next two chapters show, Olympian singing is marshaled towards the generalization of homogenized, fetishized desire. Both of these chapters focus on literary and scientific texts that take the techno-fetishized voice as the basis for their plots, developing it as a fantasy-object and participating in the generalization of certain ways of desiring such a voice.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *L'Ève future*, commonly read as the apotheosis of a self-sustaining masculine fantasy, is instead an apocalyptic fiction, motivated not by the concerns of what men want but by the immediate threat of total extinction posed by technologically-adept females, and by the emergence of electronic media, to masculine subjectivity. Villiers defines the machine as absolutely reproductive, without any creative potential, and also proposes (as will become vitally important in the history of cybernetics) that human thought, in particular in its affective dimension, is radically unknowable, outside the reach of mechanical imitation. I then locate Villiers and his heroes within a larger effort in fin-de-siècle literature to institute a fetishistic epistemology that salvages what it can of "man," by sacrificing "woman" and by redefining gender as the attenuation of fetishism.

To explore what love feels like in this homosexualized universe, I turn to Gaston Leroux's 1909-1910 serial *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*. Its characters live in a peculiarly transgendered universe, in which the roles they play in the story's fabled love triangle do not correspond to the sexes given by their names. This paradoxical universe, in which the hero and heroine are both masculinized and their love follows the most stereotypical paradigm of homosexual-narcissistic autoeroticism, represents both a triumph of one of opera's most cherished desires (the emergence of a voice beyond the limits of the human body) and a triumph over opera. Once the difference between the genders is denaturalized and then re-naturalized as a difference between acceptable and unacceptable performances of gender identity, the lovers of the text, both its central couple and its readers, can finally leave the opera house and enter the perfectly stabilized, glacially neutral world awaiting them outside. In a conclusion, I consider the sequel to *The Phantom of the Opera* written by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, the 2010 flop *Love Never Dies*. This sequel, which follows the superficial logic of *Le Fantôme* to its ultimate conclusion, erupts as a perverse, and much-reviled, demonstration of the fetishistic split at the heart of Leroux's novel. If Lloyd Webber's failed project suggests that popular media forms can provide the kinds of radicalization of fantasy called for by critiques of fetishism, it defines this radicalization as necessarily failed, wasteful, unpleasant, and neglected, thus reinforcing *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra's* argument that there is nothing left for us in the opera house, and nothing left for us in femininity as well.

To respond to this impasse, I conclude by investigating a contemporary fembot, the minor diva Kylie Minogue, whose practice is both radical in its engagement with fantasy and unique in that it resists reduction to the kind of excretory cultural status given to *Love Never Dies* (or, for that matter, the triumphalism of a Madonna or Lady Gaga, another form of neutralization). I will read between Kylie's songs and various practices of being a Kylie fan, including the major work of pop music criticism dedicated to Kylie by rock n' roll journalist Paul Morley, and my own experiences falling in love with her œuvre or, in her words, "coming into her world," of discovering a different world within the one I had come to take for granted. Kylie inspires fantasy; she becomes something that you "can't get out of your head"; but the amplificatory structure of her songs also push any fantasy of Kylie into new and unsettling directions, while engaging us in a process of fantasizing not *about* Kylie but *along with* Kylie, opening up a realm of fantasy beyond fetishism but not without fetishism. By showing how Kylie practices and inspires Olympian singing in all of us, I hope to open up that other dimension within the voice that Barthes argues is the proper realm of vocal

fantasy, and to restore to Olympia the voice that has always been hers – by which I mean the voice that she has always shared with us – but that we have never allowed ourselves to hear.

## Alarm-Clock Dreams: Sound, Technology, and Ideological Fantasy

I'm not living in the real world  
No more, no more, no more

No I don't believe in luck  
No I don't believe in circumstance no more  
Accidents never happen in a perfect world  
- Blondie, *Eat to the Beat*

### How Soon Is Now?

Imagine waking up in the future. For a long time, the history of media tells us, we have had no need to imagine such a thing: instead, our future has been fundamentally coincident with our present. If anything, this observation should be disconcertingly obvious in today's post-futuristic world; every technology that we have desired or imagined, every fantastic object that would stand as a synecdoche for a media universe that is not yet available for us to enjoy (portable televisual devices, for instance, of the kind that pop up in *The Arabian Nights*, in Sinclair Lewis's *The Monk*, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot," and in Jules Verne's *Carpathian Castle*, or other, still more ambitious magic mirrors like Penny's book in *Inspector Gadget* or like Dick Tracy's wristwatch-cum-Skype-device), have finally been incarnated, concretely, in the form of the media Gesamtkunstwerke that are smartphones. Smartphones, meanwhile, are rapidly transforming themselves into "tablets," versions of Penny's book that are explicitly and industrially linked to the book format via Amazon and Google Books – much more overtly in the case of the Kindle – or into the Apple or Samsung wristwatch, a contemporary rebranding of Dick Tracy's TV/CB radio. And just as the Wagnerian opera stood as an apotheosis of the art of singing as well as a pretext to push the technological boundaries of its component arts beyond their ultimate limits, so too do smartphones drive the market of media synthesis, bringing the history of desiring technology of the last several centuries to its conclusion, only inasmuch as they take form by coalescing their pearlescent fantasies around the hidden, evanescent, perhaps even irritating or painful, core of the human voice.

But what does it mean that the future we imagine, the future that is "now," the present future that we need heterotopias like Tomorrowland to distract us from, is tied to this object called the voice? Surprisingly, if we consider the very act of imagining a technological future – thus of demarcating and defining a technological past and present – we quickly discover that the voice is already in place at the heart of such an enterprise. We commonly leave dreaming of the future to the modes of imagination known as utopian politics and science fiction (and here, I want to hear "science fiction" in the fullness of its polysemy, not only as the practice of crafting fictions around themes borrowed from science, but also as the creation of scientifico-technical knowledges or artifacts – engineering, perhaps – as the work of *poesis* that takes place within science, etc.). Next, we assume that such modes of imagination are projective, as confirmed both by Marshall McLuhan's seminal claim that the media serve as "extensions" of man and by Jean Baudrillard's reworking of that maxim according to which the Imaginary is that which is located "at a

certain distance.”<sup>53</sup> The future, it would seem, must be at arm’s reach, just out of touch of the dreamer. (Just where you, the dreamer, might keep your alarm clock, or your cell phone plugged into its charger.)

This claim is, of course, central to and necessary for any media theory, inasmuch as a media theory must rely upon a history of media that in turn requires the differential event of media to be inscribable within a chain of continuity: any medium, inasmuch as it relies upon the technological, artefactual apparatuses particular to it, must have been *constructed and received* within a meaningful social sphere, that is, a network based upon contiguity, of metaphoric difference within metonymic continuity. In its classic formulation, all media theory existed as the theory of the advent of writing and difference within the continuous field of speech, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated; the various theories of media that have occurred since that fundamental version of media theory have either amplified this paradigm (Walter Ong), inverted it (Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Kittler), or recast it, bringing different technologies on as actors to play the roles of speech and writing (McLuhan in his specific studies, virtually all media historians).

Now, when we take these theories to their breaking points – which occur a little earlier on than one might expect – we find one kind of metaphoric difference to take absolute precedence over the others, to serve as the absolute difference against which all the other particular differences between media or technology are to be judged. This difference is that between electronic media and all others (perhaps, as it inherits much from Plato, this is the difference between form and matter). Electronic or electrifiable media differ from all other means of transferring information in that they reach an absolute speed limit; no information (we hear) can travel faster than the speed of light, and thus the advent of light-speed information transfer (or the effectively light-speed information transfer afforded by copper wires and coaxial cables) appears, canonically, as the absolute limit to media invention. This limit was broached in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a constellation of media that include telegraphy, wireless radio, and – of course – the lightbulb, which McLuhan claims “escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no ‘content.’”<sup>54</sup> Instead, the lightbulb communicates a different content: a content that looks like a pure flow of energy, faster than the system of controlled and formalized differences which appear to constitute written language. We fear that “The electric technology is within the gates,”<sup>55</sup> and we are powerless to ward off its effects. But what effects does this penetration of Gutenberg technology by their teleological end in electrification actually produce? And does electricity actually lie beyond the techno-reality of modernity, or does it just function as a stand-in for something more terrifying, a partial representation of what must not be representable? Are we in the future yet, the age of the pure communication of contentless flows, or has something else happened, that “something else” being the non-happening of the event of electrification? Is our world a future world that has been entirely shattered by the arrival of electricity, or are we still living in the past, maintaining the consistency of our imploding universe, attenuating the trauma of electricity or what it represents, holding our world together in fantasy – striving not to wake up to the real world, not to allow the accident of our encounter with it to take place?

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<sup>53</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 121. Hereafter cited as *SS*.

<sup>54</sup> *UM* 9.

<sup>55</sup> *UM* 17.

I think it's worth lingering on the surprising or perplexing insistence on the category of "electronic" media or technology found in McLuhan, Kittler, and Paul Virilio, while supplementing this insight with the various ways artists, technicians, scientists, musicians, etc. have represented this category. Indeed, these means of representation are themselves technologies participating in the constitution of the category of "electronic" media, at the very least by informing the imaginaries that structure the consumption and use of such media. In its purest form, media theory has looked to the advent of the electronic era as a return to the field of metonymic contiguity that speech once ensured. Electrification brings the age of Gutenberg to an end, in McLuhan's schematic fable of postmodernity. The central fantasy of media theory appears as an inverted replaying of its primal scene. McLuhan's stage theory thus presents one face of what I will call the Promethean myth of singing, by which the sacrifice of an originary humanity to technology brings about a more efficient means of distributing, circulating, (re)producing, and consuming this meaningful humanity. Notably, in the history of media as we have engineered it in Western culture, technologies of sound transfer have always worked together to propel the overall drive towards electrification, towards the totalizing unification of all media in a constant and sustained exchange of electromagnetic currents. What appears as a myth of singing is also a myth of electrical technology, the primordial "fire" stolen from the gods, and vice-versa. Apollo is the god of sunlight and music, after all, and Plato's *Republic* gives music and sunshine the same, geometrically-reducible structure.

If the traditional course of media theory is to examine or to produce metaphorical differences in a metonymically self-similar field (that of "history"), I will here endeavor to adopt an alternate approach. My method will be instead to look for the emergence of metonymical differences in a metaphorically self-similar field (that of a certain insistent or repetitive *figure* within the tradition of sound media, something that we might describe as a mathematical invariant across the set of various fantasies of sonic technology). These moments of metonymical difference will appear as eddies or interference-patterns that cannot be reduced to the redemptive and teleological schema of the Promethean myth; at these points, even within the carefully regulated and distributed fantasy of Promethean song, the boomerang movement that detours from humanity through technology and back to humanity breaks down in a peculiar way. I don't want to suggest that it simply fails to work, but instead that it works overtime, turning too far, not ending up where it was supposed to be. At these moments, the controlled and ordered alternation of opposites (human/technology) starts to appear more like a mutual process of resonance, dampening, and amplification.

Particularly when we turn to fantasy, I believe, analysis always begins with the dreams of the analyst. So here is one of mine: As a conference organizer, I have to wake up early on the first day to finalize food service; since I don't have a car, one of the other organizers will pick me up, calling me when he's almost reached my apartment. I set an alarm on my cell phone, which I keep within arm's reach of my side of the bed. Early next morning, the phone alarm goes off as scheduled and I groggily turn it off; I trundle out of bed still half-asleep, choose my outfit as I take a shower, skip breakfast, and go outside to wait for my phone to ring. It does; I search through my bag for my phone; finally grab it in my hand; turn off the alarm; trundle out of bed still half-asleep, choose my outfit as I take a shower (the same one as I had chosen in my dream); and so on. In my dream, the alarm clock and the telephone are one unified force, one electromagnetic and sonorous pulse keeping me tethered to the waking world (while simultaneously disseminating a series of simulations of waking reality, a set of overlapping fantasies). Before moving, in the chapters



that follow, to a set of electro-acoustic fantasies, I would like to take some time to listen to this sound that doesn't quite wake me up; in deference to those readers who may prefer a less explicit auto-analysis, I will turn to the image of this sound developed in the 2001 song "(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan," by the electropop band Dntel. The cell-phone alarm, I think, is precisely the sound of the not-quite-overcome present. The characteristic noise of our modernity, it constantly keeps us imagining waking up in the future *as* a future event; it ensures that to wake up in a future beyond the closure of the present remains an unrealizable fantasy. My goal, then, is twofold: I would like to tentatively sketch one way to reinscribe media theory within a model of ideology by turning to Žizek's concept of "ideological fantasy," while simultaneously showing that the electronically-reproduced voice already lies at the heart of Žizek's model – although he doesn't ever quite notice this fact.

### **I'm Waking Up To Us**

Yes, they're stereotypes, there must be more to life  
 But all you're life you're dreaming, and then you stop dreaming  
 From time to time you know you should be going on another bender  
 - Blur, "Stereotypes"

It begins with static, the song I'd like to consider here. Just shy of a second of static, but it's static nonetheless: random noise scratching harshly at your earphones or at the amplifier of your stereo or through the speakers of your computer. Then, before you've even had a chance to notice the amorphousness of this sound, to remark on its lack of metrical pattern or tonal center, the sound skips. One slightly louder burst of static, and then it starts over again. That one repetition – a repetition that has taken place in less than two seconds, before you have any chance of identifying the sound as music or noise – is all it takes for a rhythm, a pattern, to emerge, for the noise to become a zero-degree music. But the fuzzy, halting sound remains, its volume-level amplified to an unpleasantly intrusive pitch, even as an electronic drum set (artificially harshened so as to sound like the product of blown speakers) and then a series of Aeolian harmonic overtones layer themselves around it, developing a slow, planar prelude. The overall blurredness of the sound is disconcerting, although it coalesces more and more insistently (with the exception of one sound in the lower treble which can barely be heard, and then only if you know what you're looking for – a droning alternation between B-flat and A-flat in duple time) and then explodes into a lush, albeit still static-washed, electropop instrumental. Then there is a short intake of breath, recorded so close to the microphone as to resonate almost physically in your body as you listen – another scratchy, static-y sound – and finally a tenor begins to sing a crystalline, melodically lovely if still difficult to locate line (the song is built entirely on the overtones of a low B-flat) in an incredibly pure voice. Each of his words is immediately ghosted by an almost-inaudible electronic echo that troubles the stability of the song's meter and emphasizes its valorization of the overtone series against traditional key structures, by overlapping notes and tonalities so that the song cannot be heard as a harmonic alternation between the dominant and subdominant of E-flat major, but only as a monody on B-flat without any definite tonal orientation:

It was familiar to me  
 The smoke too thick to breathe  
 The tiled floors glistened

I slowly stirred my drink

And when you started to sing  
 You spoke with broken speech  
 That I could not understand  
 And then you grabbed me tightly

“I won’t let go, I won’t let go  
 Even if you say so, oh no  
 I’ve tried and tried with no results  
 I won’t let go, I won’t let go”

He then played every song from  
 1993  
 The crowd applauded as  
 He curtsied bashfully

Your eyelashes tickled my neck  
 With every nervous blink  
 And it was perfect

Until the telephone started  
 Ringing ringing ringing ringing off  
 Ringing ringing ringing ringing off  
 Ringing ringing ringing ringing off  
 Ringing ringing ringing ringing off

The refrain of “ringing ringing ringing” is allowed to ring, faintly and abstractly, over and over as the static from the beginning of the song returns to the foreground. The drone from the introduction returns, as well, still in duple time and finally allowing you to hear that it is the same series of notes to which each “ringing” is set (although the syncopated “ringing ringing ringing” does not overlap, but rather interferes, with its double). As the repetitions of previously-enchancing melodic material begin to become monotonous, the sounds return to the quality of the song’s opening, music and noise fading once again in and out of each other, and then beyond as “pure” static takes over for an eight-second coda. You have just listened to the song “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan,” composed by Jimmy Tamborello (recording as Dntel) with vocals by Ben Gibbard, from Dntel’s 2001 album *Life Is Full of Possibilities*.<sup>56</sup> But its effect is not necessarily over, as you may find yourself haunted by the final melody (if it is one, since a repeated whole step is barely the zero degree of melody) – Gibbard’s voice liltily delivering the “ringing ringing ringing” chorus – for

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<sup>56</sup> Dntel, “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan,” *Life Is Full of Possibilities* LP (Plug Research, 2001). The collaborative partnership between Tamborello and Gibbard also resulted in their better-known work recording as The Postal Service, named after their practice of sending material back and forth between each other through the mail. The accent put on the technical grounds of their work, and on the communications networks that become homonymous with the electrical or musical melodies whose production they enable, underlines the duo’s practice of exploring and thematizing the media of music they employ.

hours or days after hearing the song. Sometimes I wake up in the night to find myself humming it to myself, or whoever else might be there to hear.

“(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan” exemplifies the pleasures a self-consciously electronically- or mechanically-inspired love song can offer its listeners, but is also more than just a fantasy about love in which heterosexuality, technology, and the human voice intersect. It is a fantasy about the medium of this very intersection. If pop music is simultaneously song and fantasy, “The Dream of Evan and Chan” is simultaneously a song about song and a fantasy about fantasy – a song about dreaming about song, and a dream about singing about dreams. It’s a song about falling in love *to* and *with* pop music. Indeed, even as the song follows the typical format of a love song, it self-consciously foregrounds the sonic environment which mediates or vehicules the act of falling in love that is ostensibly its subject. The speaker finds himself in a kind of Surrealist cabaret, in which song is the only channel of communication, and the performance is that of a radio left on, playing by itself “every song from 1993” – a mix-tape with no structure except exhaustion. The indiscriminate performance of the entertainer is reminiscent of the oddly promiscuous and highly successful mixes sold since 1983 under the rubric “Now! That’s What I Call Music,” which lump together all genres and levels of musical quality – the only criterion for inclusion in Now! is that a song is on the radio at a certain point in time, i.e. Now!

Even the thematic ambience of the song itself hints at its composition out of no material besides (its own) music: the titular “Evan and Chan” could be Evan Dando and Chan Marshall (leaders of the indie acts The Lemonheads and Cat Power, respectively<sup>57</sup>), and there are no particular stylistic or formal links between their work save their contemporaneousness or their popularity amongst a certain indie-rock audience. When the lovers speak to one another, it is certainly not in words, not through any symbolic language, and not even necessarily in speech: the other’s “broken speech that I could not understand” stands in for what happens when she has “started to sing,” and the strange declaration of love, unanchorable either in the figure of the speaker or his object,<sup>58</sup> is merely shorthand for the two archetypal topics of the pop song – love successful (“I won’t let go”) and frustrated (“I’ve tried and tried with no results”). Instead, in the place of lover’s discourse comes

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, both The Lemonheads and Cat Power were best known, at important moments in their careers, for their *covers* of other songs (The Lemonheads for Simon and Garfunkel’s “Mrs. Robinson” and Cat Power for The Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction”). They thus appear in “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan” as stereotyped figures of musical *repetition*, as constructed by and through the replay, emphasizing once again that “The Dream of Evan and Chan” is constituted as a endless loop from musical reproduction to musical reproduction.

<sup>58</sup> Although I simplify by installing a heterosexual dyad of “him” and “her” onto the couple figured in the song, I do not want to foreclose the possibilities of different genderings of the song’s characters. The names “Evan and Chan” certainly do not conclusively identify a heterosexual pairing of “he” and “she,” and the song’s use of “I” and “you” open up many other potential identifications for the listener to explore. The chorus of “I won’t let go” similarly troubles any attempt to locate the two poles of the dyad – is the main speaker recounting his own speech, or is he covering his lover’s song? Even the androgynous croon of Gibbard’s voice allows us to hallucinate otherwise-gendered voices in the enunciation of the song. This dream does not necessarily in itself place explicit limits upon our dreams of interpreting it, although the institution in which it inscribes itself suggests certain discursive decodings.

something else: the songs they sing to each other are musically mentioned but not allowed to come into earshot of the listener. This song – the moment of the other’s speech, located outside of language and even outside of the body of the song, a fantasy imagined as outside of the fantasy that dreams it – thus constructs its fantasy on the place of an excluded fantasy or a fantasy of exclusion.

In so doing, “The Dream of Evan and Chan” repeats the structure of another dream, a dream itself about the structure of repetition. Near the end of Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, we hear the ballad of a bereaved father, who, having lost his son to fever and having left “an old man” to watch over the body of the dead son as it lies surrounded by candles in the next room, falls asleep only to dream of awakening – to the figure of his son, now “standing beside his bed,” who “[catches] him by the arm and [whispers] to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’”<sup>59</sup> The father wakes up, only to find that the old man has fallen asleep and the son’s arm has caught fire from the a fallen candle. Freud explains that the dream was provoked in the dreamer by his (sleeping) perception of increased light from the next room and his anxiety, before falling asleep, that “the old man might not be incompetent to carry out his task” of preventing a fire.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Freud identifies the son’s speech as a remix of an earlier lament – the “I’m burning” of a child “burning up” with fever. (A hundred years after Freud, also in 2001, Kylie Minogue will sing “I’m burning up baby / Can’t you feel it burning me?” on her album *Fever*, and thus short-circuit the father’s visual-epistemological lens of interpretation by posing an affective challenge: she doesn’t ask “can’t you *see*” but “can’t you *feel*.” But we aren’t quite there yet.)

Jacques Lacan’s cover of Freud’s dream-analysis begins with one important alteration: whether by mistake or design, Lacan writes that the father begins to be awoken not by the light of the burning cloth, but by “a noise made to recall him to the real [...] the very reality of an overturned candle setting light to the bed in which his child lies.”<sup>61</sup> Freud is more than explicit in his explanation that “The glare of light shone through the open door into the sleeping man’s eyes and led him to the conclusion which he would have arrived at if he had been awake.”<sup>62</sup> For anyone reading or claiming to read Freud *au pied de la lettre*, and particularly if that reader’s theory involves the definition of gaze and voice as distinct objects, this is no simple misreading or parapraxis. Lacan will go so far as to claim that the dream is “made up entirely of noise.”<sup>63</sup> Just as Freud’s recounting, in Lacan’s retelling, serves to cover over a sonic world with a visual one, the father’s dream work to replace one reality with another. As Lacan explains, the motive behind the father’s dream is the fulfillment of a wish – the “need to prolong sleep”<sup>64</sup> – since almost nothing, except the difference between sleep and waking, separates the dream-world and the waking world. In fact, Lacan begins here to redefine “the waking world,” instead naming it “the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door.”<sup>65</sup> This change in terminology is meant to highlight one fact: everything that happens in the dream is also happening next door (down to the sleeping

<sup>59</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *Standard Edition*, vol. 4-5, 5:509. Hereafter cited as *ID*.

<sup>60</sup> *ID* 5:510.

<sup>61</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 57. Hereafter cited as *FFC*.

<sup>62</sup> *ID* 5:509.

<sup>63</sup> *FFC* 57.

<sup>64</sup> *FFC* 57.

<sup>65</sup> *FFC* 58.

“old man” in whose face the father does not quite recognize himself), and the father’s unconscious desires are just as much the root cause of the dream as of the tableau he staged in the “strange reality” of the next room. “Reality,” then, the waking reality of the father as he has carefully organized it, is only the mirror, and even the prolongation, of the dream.

But Lacan’s goal is not to draw a simple equivalence between sleep and waking in the manner of “some such aphorism as *life is a dream*”<sup>66</sup>; instead, he will insist on the one fundamental, paradoxical difference between sleep and waking, fantasy and reality – the difference that situates fantasy “on the side of reality,”<sup>67</sup> that groups together fantasy and “the strange reality” of the next room, the waking reality of the father as unconsciously constructed according to the demands of his fantasy, on the one hand, and the dream and reality (now understood as “the Real”), on the other. In Lacan’s rendering, it is the dream that supports the emergence of “the Real” object, not as a frame around the unrepresentable, unruly residue of symbolization – not as the “very face” of the Real – but instead and “at least” as “the screen that shows us that [the Real] is still there behind.”<sup>68</sup>

Interestingly, it is reality, the partner of fantasy, that allows us to flee from the Real – not by falling into a dream, but instead by waking up into a world that has exactly the same structure as a dream (except for the conspicuous absence, in waking reality, of the absence of the Real). For Lacan, the absent absence of the real is most directly palpable in the contrast between the “entirely sleeping world” of the “strange reality,” which is a realm of static if immensely affectively-charged images, and the dream made entirely of sonic material in which “only the voice is heard.”<sup>69</sup> Now we see why Lacan invents a sonic dimension in what was for Freud an insistently silent and purely visual narrative: the realm of the gaze, the all-too-visible imagistic machinery of the waking world’s fantasy, serves to extend itself everywhere without a break, in the place of the dream-world which was marked by the suture between a visual tableau and the son’s *voice*. This is not to say that the son’s voice was his own, as both Freud and Lacan emphasize; indeed, the son’s words are put together as a collage of his father’s memories of his previous language – speech broken and glued back together, remixed in an attempt to represent the unrepresentable – and at any rate they speak of something unspeakable by definition.<sup>70</sup> In this way, the child’s speech in the dream functions as the beloved’s speech-song in “The Dream of Evan and Chan”: it serves as the phonic screen which registers as present the absence of a voice without allowing that voice to become present.

What makes Freud’s dismissal of the possibility that a *sound* crystallized the father’s dream all the more interesting is that when he explicitly discusses dreams provoked by

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<sup>66</sup> *FFC* 53.

<sup>67</sup> *SOI* 44.

<sup>68</sup> *FFC* 55.

<sup>69</sup> *FFC* 59.

<sup>70</sup> Abbate gives a moving rehearsal of Lacan’s “no one can say what the death of a child is, except the father *qua* father, that is to say, no conscious being” (*FFC* 59), helping us to understand how language is founded on the structural exclusion of the language of the dead: writing of “the complex emotion experienced during a dream of the dead,” she explores the split consciousness in which “even as we believe that we are miraculously in the presence of the resurrected – of continued singing – we always know that he or she is dead still, that whatever the dead person is saying is being said by the dreamer, that a moment of dissolution will arrive.” Abbate thus contrasts the contentless truth of the Real promised by the son’s speech to the functions of a fetishized song. See Carolyn Abbate, *ISO* 3-5.

external stimuli he groups them under the purely aural rubric of “alarm-clock dreams.” What’s more, one such “alarm-clock dream” is the dream of a *composer* who dreams of a student enthusiastically replying “Oh, ja!” to his instructions; the student’s oneiric assent turns out to be a retransmission of the cries of – what else – “Feuerjo!” in the street.<sup>71</sup> Here, the composer – the father of song – comes face to face with a son speaking the truth of burning in words not entirely his own. It’s thus all the more surprising that in the “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” dream Freud entirely neglects all the sonic elements of the dream, when they are so self-consciously foregrounded in the dreams analyzed at the very beginning of *The Interpretation of Dreams* – almost as if his work, too, has the structure of circular awakening-into-fantasy analyzed by Lacan. More and more, it appears as if within psychoanalysis itself the realm of the gaze (the “specular image” that all too readily comes to define Lacan’s Imaginary) relies on a mistaking or overwriting, a missed encounter, with a sonic Real, with an acoustic realm defined as Real and also as electro-mechanical.

I linger on Lacan’s re-reading of Freud here because of the ultimate importance given to the structure, rediscovered by Lacan, of the dream of the burning child, and to the vital function, described by Lacan but as of yet not remarked on in any systematic fashion, that the voice plays in structuring that fantasy. Žižek extends Lacan’s dream-analysis to resolve the fundamental problem of ideology (Why would people step out of a reality into an ideological fantasy-world? Why do people continue to believe that their world is real, even after the work of critique has lain bare its fictitiousness? How, in a word, can false consciousness persist, when as such it implies the existence of its opposite – a consciousness of the “real world”?). Žižek tackles these problems by attacking their very foundation: namely, that there is a “real world” that could provide a standpoint from which to judge the truth or falsity of “false consciousness”: “The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself.”<sup>72</sup> That is, ideology is not in the image of the father’s dream, but in the image of his “strange reality,” the “reality” that is merely a simulacrum of his dream, which for its part includes the Real, as the unheard “noise” covered over by a simulated voice from the tomb – as that which we must wake up from.

Correspondingly, the subject can never choose to enter into the “strange reality” of false consciousness (or, more properly, consciousness within an ideological world); instead, the subject – upon awakening into what has become his or her world – has, through the very act of awakening, constituted him- or her-self as a consciousness within an ideological world. There is no consciousness for the subject except inasmuch as the subject, in one and the same movement, becomes subject in a “strange” or imaginary reality and becomes subject to the double fantasy of that reality: to a belief that the everyday world is real and the dream (which came closer to the Real by failing to encounter it) is not: the “‘ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness.’”<sup>73</sup> The fantasy of the contemporary world – the belief that the telephone, in waking us, calls us back to our lives and to the lovers who await us on the other side of the line, that the alarm clock wakes us from our “alarm-clock dreams” (perhaps returning us from the mechanics of the drives and their attendant principles into the free will of our waking lives, or at least into the counter-automatism of the superego) and re-inserts us into the media relays that coordinate us as subjects in the banality of our imaginary lives – is thus itself vehiculed by

<sup>71</sup> *ID* 4:23-30; 4:26.

<sup>72</sup> *SOI* 33.

<sup>73</sup> *SOI* 21. Italics in the original.

the medium of another fantasy, the fantasy that defines dreams as fantasy: viz., by the generalization of psychoanalytic theory.

Although Žižek goes far enough in generalizing Lacan's theory of the double structure of fantasy to recognize that the "everyday world" depends on an underlying fantasmatic medium for its consistency, that there is some "sublime object" in relation to which subjects become subjects of fantasy, he nevertheless does not follow through on a strong suggestion in Lacan's work that there is a name for this object that drives us into a belief in the coherence of our strange realities. Lacan locates this object precisely as that which Freud omits from his silent cinema of the Imaginary: the unheard voice of the son, for which the dream substitutes a mechanically-composed voice, a voice remastered by the equalizer of the unconscious.<sup>74</sup> Once you notice that Lacan carefully re-inserts the voice into the scene of entering once more into a new fantasy, falling in love all over again, you will see the concept echoing everywhere in Lacan's works, each time drawing a link between desire, the voice, and the affective links that keep us tied into the waking world. For instance, in *L'Envers de la psychanalyse* Lacan draws a picture of how astronauts might delude themselves into thinking they have escaped the gravitational pull of ideology by having blasted off perilously into outer space and seemingly beyond the grasp of technological modernity:

The alethosphere [Lacan's term for the ecological ambience of "meaningfulness" that keeps us tied into the Imaginary of our strange reality - SP] gets recorded. If you have a little microphone here, you are plugged into the alethosphere. What is really something is that if you are in a little vehicle that is transporting you toward Mars you can still plug into the alethosphere [...] These astronauts [...] who had some minor problems at the last minute,

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<sup>74</sup> Astonishingly, Žižek repeats Lacan's revisionary parapraxis, unfailingly obeying the dictates of his master's voice. In describing the "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" dream, Žižek lists the external stimuli that can crystallize dreams in a sleeper: "the ringing of an alarm clock, knocking on the door or, in this case, the smell of smoke." Žižek's series thus correctly identifies the auditory stimuli lurking in both Freud's (the alarm-clock) and Lacan's (the "knock") narratives of the dream, only to discard them for something entirely unheard-of: "the smell of smoke" (*SOI* 45). Just as Lacan's re-writing of Freud serves as a correction (inserting the Real, of which the young Freud has no idea as of yet, into the dream-theory), Žižek's re-writing of Lacan inserts a telling error: the Real, here associated with the olfactory, here reeks of what it will become in Žižek – purely fecal. I could critique Žižek's scatological concept of the Real (which gives it a protean nature in Žižek, for whom anything can be Real, and which allows him to tie Marx closely to Freud, since the feces is the first object inscribed in a real-world *sensu stricto* economic structure), for instance, by saying that the Real emerges at the entry into discourse, at which point the feces is not available as an object; at best, then, the feces can substitute for the Real as – why not? – one of its *Vorstellungsrepräsentanzen*. Instead, it's interesting to notice how far-ranging the consequences of this strange substitution are in Žižek's work. One telling example comes in his work on *The Matrix*, in which he corrects the film for presenting the entry-point into the real as a telephone: "Perhaps, an even better solution would have been the toilet: is not the domain where excrements vanish after we flush the toilet effectively one of the metaphors for the horrifyingly-sublime Beyond of the primordial, pre-ontological Chaos into which things disappear?" Again, Žižek substitutes the fecal Real precisely for the auditory-technological Real by claiming that the telephone at best serves as an allegory for the toilet. See Žižek, "The Matrix, or, The Two Sides of Perversion," <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-matrix.htm>.

would probably not have overcome them so well [...] if they had not been accompanied the entire time by this little *a* that is the human voice.<sup>75</sup>

Lacan's vision of the "aethosphere" is, today, more uncannily apt as ever: in our world, we are never free of the sonorous waves that bathe us constantly in eddies of the voice, never without our headphones, their wires running from our heads to our crotch pockets, never outside the reach of cellular radiation, never without that battery of talismanic objects which we weave in and out of our bodies, clothes, and accessories. Lacan highlights this link between the groin and the ear by discussing the voice's ability to "[grab] you by the perineum."<sup>76</sup>

Or look elsewhere in this seminar, in which Lacan most completely elaborates his theory of the four discourses: everywhere are "vibrations" and "waves" exiting Earth into space,<sup>77</sup> emanating from "the crystal of language"<sup>78</sup> at the heart of the ideological Master-discourse, which for its part refers to nothing except the crystal at the heart of the most simple radio receiver that needs no external energy source except for its own vibrations. Resonating with the image of the "crystal" is the remarkable doctrine of "crystallinguistics," of the omnipresence of the voice (the medium of the enunciation of discourse) as an omnipresent relay of electromagnetic discourse-currents, which Lacan describes in "Radiophonie" as the only medium through and in which the effects of language are produced.<sup>79</sup> Crystallinguistics is also Lacan's re-writing of Freud's tentative attempt to discuss "telepathy"; it explains the capacity of language to create spooky action at a distance, to crystallize simultaneous effects in more than one speaker – a capacity owing to language's odd embodiment as a disembodied, enveloping set of waves that run through and between all those poles in a discourse that we misidentify as "producers" when they are, at best, reproducers or lightning-rod relays in an electromagnetic stormcloud of language.

A further surprise awaits in Seminar XX, *Encore*, in which the language of the everyday and the everydayness of language are explicitly conjured up in the figure of – the broken record: "S'il n'y avait pas de discours analytique, vous continuez à parler comme des étourneaux, à chanter le *disque-ourcourant*, à faire tourner le disque, ce disque qui tourne parce qu'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel."<sup>80</sup> This astonishing formulation is introduced a few pages earlier: "Il n'y a aucune réalité pré-discursive. Chaque réalité se fonde et se définit d'un discours. [...] Écrivez-le *disque-ourcourant*, disque aussi hors-champ, hors jeu de tout discours, donc disque tout court – ça tourne, ça tourne, très exactement pour rien."<sup>81</sup> Thus Lacan locates the figure of "a record and nothing more," a purely automatized voice playing over and over for no particular reason – indeed, one of the most important synonyms of the titular *Encore* – as the absent heart of discourse. Here, the gramphonic voice becomes the "disque hors-courant" (the disk that's out of the running, outside of the playing field, that mustn't be listened to) that is nevertheless the "discours courant" (both the Rockapellan "word on the street," the words on everyone's lips, those words we never cease to say, and

<sup>75</sup> OSP 161.

<sup>76</sup> OSP 162.

<sup>77</sup> OSP 159.

<sup>78</sup> OSP 152.

<sup>79</sup> Lacan, "Radiophonie," in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001): 403-447. Hereafter cited as "R." For an extended discussion of this point, see below.

<sup>80</sup> Lacan, *La séminaire, livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975) 47. Hereafter cited as *E*.

<sup>81</sup> *E* 43-4.



the discourse of the electric current, a discourse about the electric current but also one relayed by the galvanizing force of electromagnetism). This *disque-ourcourant* is epitomized in the incessant plaint of the burning child, whose electrifying and shocking force repels us back into a world where it is even more successfully stilled, and in the performance of “every song from 1993,” the sum total of what, at a certain cultural moment, is stuck in everyone’s heads.

But what is it that everyone is talking about, in a manner that weds intensely felt, galvanizing affect with a pure, broken-record automatism? It is love: “L’amour, le signe de ce qu’on change de discours.”<sup>82</sup> To “change discourses,” in Lacan’s terms, is to take up a different position in the game of musical chairs that structures all discourse – not to escape discourse, but to turn it round, to keep its turntable spinning, and to turn it round on your world, to enter into a “new” relationship towards it all over again. In this way, “love” is the affective sign that one has rotated from fantasy into “reality”; thus, ideology is not a matter of entering once and for all into a “false consciousness,” but instead a process of falling in love, over and over again, with the social world. Hence the realization, upon waking, that “it *was* perfect” in “The Dream of Evan and Chan,” the delayed action of the affective power of the song; hence the father waking up to realize that his love for his son is lost. In fact, this is why the song has an affective power, and why it can get stuck in your head or left on replay: because it is not monolithic, because it includes a change of discourse, because it forces you through a change in discourse as you listen to it.

Look more closely at the title – “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan.” The parentheses (often used in song titles to represent words that are sung in the song but do not constitute part of the song’s title) suggest a dual reading: without the words in the parentheses, the title names a song about a dream; with the words in the parentheses, the title names a song that is a dream. The title, then, simultaneously names the dream and its exterior, the dream-work and its various narrations, forcing the listener to take both positions, or moving the listener from one position to another, or rendering the listener’s final position towards the text undecidable. This undecidability, of course, can only be resolved by another trip through the song – and so on. This is because, in this situation – in the model of our relationship to our world and the media that constitute it – we quickly see that we cannot distill one precise temporality out of its movement, we must not seek to “[l]’interpréter en termes de stades, de fantasmes ou de symboles,” as Octave Mannoni observes about the complex structure of such fantasies. These fantasies simultaneously include their plain face and its obverse, the fantastic seduction and the disenchanting glimpse into the machinery that manufactures it – a moment of total surrender propped up by the all-too-obvious awareness of its factitiousness. Indeed, as Mannoni continues, “L’intérêt est ailleurs”<sup>83</sup>; not only is it that the song’s critical interest lies in its collapsing of stages of desire that ought to have been kept distinct through its focalization on a turning-between, but that “intérêt,” in the sense of fascination or captivation, constantly moves from here to elsewhere, between two scenes, from one scene to another, drawing on its split structure to generate its mesmerizing force – the force that keeps us alternating between the palpable knowledge that technological objects construct and constrain the form of our everyday reality, that the contemporary media constellation has its historical particularity, and that our comfortable insertion into this mediatized world depends on the sustained effort of the

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<sup>82</sup> E 25.

<sup>83</sup> Octave Mannoni, “Je sais bien, mais quand même...” in *Clefs pour l’imaginaire, ou, l’autre scène* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 9-33: 15. Hereafter cited as “JSB.”

technological totems that have become “extensions” or “prostheses” of our biological bodies (a knowledge that is felt all too bodily when, for instance, you experience the sickening realization that your cell phone battery is going to die earlier than you would like); and the simultaneous sensation that, “all the same,” our world is normal, apparent, and filled with a natural human meaningfulness.

This constant process of falling in love (again) with a simulacral reality is beautifully encapsulated by Jean Baudrillard, when he discusses his seduction by America as an entry into “the same everyday romance: cars, telephones, psychology, make-up.”<sup>84</sup> This list is organized around the media that bind us to our world and make that world transparent or seemingly “immediate,” unmarked by distance (telephones, cars), and the media that construct narratives of our own and other’s subjectivities that we soon naturalize as “the real thing,” “the real you” (psychology, make-up). Baudrillard groups all of these little, banal media under the beautiful rubric of “the same everyday romance,” perhaps reminding us that the “romance” as a musical form was originally identified with the evocation of vocal music by purely instrumental means, thus recalling a history of technological simulation of the human voice (thus tying it to the voices evoked but unheard in the dreams we are now analyzing, and even more tightly to the telephone). We should also think of “romance” as not just the strange allure of these items, the attraction they possess for us (think of the pull of a beautiful car, or the way in which a red telephone lies at the heart of all the various cathexes, loving and hateful, in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*), but also as the process of “a romance”: the movement from attraction to seduction, from amorous possession to disenchantment – precisely the affective course plotted by “The Dream of Evan and Chan,” and the one that can be repeated *ad libitum* by hitting replay. In Baudrillard’s world, these objects are literally the vehicles of this amorous trajectory, one which is played out “everyday” and is somehow always “the same,” as if it is repeated so as to keep it from getting anywhere.

And if these objects seem to be something more than the sparkly “lathouses” that, according to Lacan, all capitalist objects (or objects of capital) are, it is for a good reason: the objects enumerated by Baudrillard all seem to offer something more than surplus value alone.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, they all seem to fit into Žižek’s titular category of “sublime objects,” objects which appear to be the bearers of an almost-tangible something else: speed, the voice, the self, the look, all of which promise to exceed and survive the objects which mediate their material instantiation.<sup>86</sup> When buying a new phone, we of course fall into the same everyday captation by the capitalist machine, but isn’t there something else, something even more seductive, that leads us to purchase all these little boxes that contain and emit voices, something more behind the purchase such objects have upon our imaginations? This surplus enjoyment provided by the sublimity of voice-bearing objects can have astonishing, and tangible, effects: for instance, just look how the iPod became the vehicle of its manufacturer’s, Apple’s, rise to cultural ubiquity, something which none of its other products were able to do. The only thing the iPod added to Apple’s already well-established formula of cool, desirable physical forms – each one a Platonic lathouse – was the sublime immateriality of the voice as object *a*. That one addition was enough.

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<sup>84</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1988) 101.

<sup>85</sup> For Lacan’s discussion of “lathouses,” which are basically partial objects, very low-grade objects (with a smaller *a* than the lowercase *a* of “other”), see *OSP* 162-3.

<sup>86</sup> *SOI* 18.

So, Baudrillard reminds us, it is not any mere object that can serve as the motor and vehicle for our “everyday romance” with the reality of our technologically and ideologically constructed world. It must be a special kind of object, an object that possesses something more than the kind of seductiveness shared by all consumer goods, to capture our fantasy and to set it spinning in such a forceful way. In the theory of psychoanalysis, there is in fact a name for such an object – an object unlike other objects of desire, an object which itself is the cause of the whirling dance of all other objects: the fetish object. Freud defines the first important aspect of the fetish object, which is also the reason for which Freud has been unable to study it scientifically until such a late date in his career, as its happiness, even its loveableness: fetishists, unlike other perverts, are almost never unsatisfied. Their sexual particularity does not lead them to the kind of frustration that finally ends them up on the analyst’s couch; neither the reality principle nor the pressure of *Realitätsprüfung* causes them any trouble. The brilliance of the fetishist is that he crafts a perfect solution to the traumas and privations of reality, one in which he need never go unsatisfied – because the fetish is always there, and tangibly so, to provide him with whatever satisfactions he could desire.

Now, fundamentally speaking, the fetish is established for the purposes of solving what may seem like a historically unsolvable problem. The fetish is established so as to prevent the fracture of masculine identity (based on the absolute identification of the ego and its object, the penis) that is already a *fait accompli* once the young boy has been confronted with the fact of the mother’s castration. But this moment of identity-fracturing also introduces the prosthetic into relationship with the body: in the logic of fetishism, the woman is endowed with a technological penis-substitute, yes, but also, in the same logic of the castration anxiety, the man is fitted (provisionally and uncomfortably) with a phallus, an imaginary technology or a technology of fantasy that from that point forward structures his desires and thus the entire field of what he can perform with his body. Fetishism operates so as to salvage the integrity of the body defined as the body’s stable and originary difference from the machine. And in contrast to McLuhan, we might say not that technology is inherently fetishistic, but that fetishism is inherently technological, in that fetishism inaugurates the difference between body and prosthetic in which technology will later appear as prosthetic, extension, fetish, penis-substitute, overcompensation, etc.

This returns us to the amazing twist at the end (that is, at the beginning) of “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan.” Once you play the song back, you may be able to notice – but only if you’re really paying attention – the notes around or between which its inaugurating static coalesces. You would only recognize those notes after having heard the song, but the B flat-A flat planing is exactly the same thematic material that is later developed into the “ringing ringing ringing” motif. In other words, the sound that diegetically appears to interrupt the fantasy of the song is itself the architectural foundation on which the song’s fantasy is constructed. For that very reason, the song structures itself so as to loop around in your head; the catchiness of its concluding hook – the mechanically-restricted alternation of two notes in imitation of the buzz of an alarm clock – leads you back, inexorably, to its middle, where the more recognizably “lyrical” passages express the dialogue of the lovers. But that dialogue too is nothing but fragments of electronic music, the “singing” that is evocative only as the “broken speech” of too many pop songs. And when the speaker wakes up, his world will be exactly the same as the world of his dream: a world in which people speak in borrowed fragments of trite lyrics, in which all sound is just the accumulation and recirculation of the top hits of yesterday and today, not to mention the constant interruption of other machine sounds such as alarm clock buzzes and telephone ringtones.

The dream of Evan and Chan would not be a dream, however, if it did not show the Real of what cannot be seen in reality. In the dream, we don't exactly find the son's reproach to the father, although there is in the dream the eclipse of the other's subjectivity – her fluttering eyelashes which signify the inaccessibility of her consciousness, her syncope into the world of “the person who is still asleep and whose dream we will not know,” whom “the person who has dreamt merely in order not to wake up” will forever fail to encounter.<sup>87</sup> In other words, the dreamer wakes up in order to spoil the “perfectness” of his love; the potential meaninglessness, since completely formalized and undifferentiated, amorous exchange in the dream threatens the stability of his self in his relation to the object. Later Lacan explains that the principles operate in order to place definite limits upon drive energy, so as to contain the flows of drive energy so that they do not overflow or drain the current canalizing structures of signifiers.<sup>88</sup> Here we see something like that: the radical, indiscriminate consumption of the dream-music-machine presents a traumatic possibility to the dreamer inasmuch as it models a kind of consumption beyond preference, taste, individuality – beyond all the traits that make a consuming ego recognizably human. In other words, there's nothing to “understand” in the broken speech of the other, nothing that returns or overwrites the act of speaking with an immediate and comprehensible meaning meant for you.

In the dream, technology, and bodies indeed all plug into each other in fundamentally unsettling ways. We've seen how the concluding sound of the telephone ringing produces the “lyrical” interest of the rest of the song. The entire atmosphere of the song is technological; there is no “breathing” possible here, no animate respiration, as instead mouths just inhale and exhale technological artifacts – fragments of song, alcohol, even the cigarette smoke that so today insistently symbolizes the mortal danger of plugging the biological into the technological. Without breath, without *anima*, there is no soul. Instead, there are bodies-become-animatronics: witness the music-box singer with his exhaustive repertoire, so exhaustive that it exhausts his own mastery. His assimilation of the radio dial marks him as feminized – he “curtsies bashfully” instead of bowing in the manner of a maestro. The very excess of his performance of mastery, the relation of control and domination of the object that defines the masculine subject of desire, demonstrates his eccentricity to a masculine subject-position. Paradoxically, ironically, he is feminized not by failing at masculinity, but by performing its fetishistic game too well. In the dream, the speaker's voice – itself, quite literally, built of fragments of pop singing – similarly intersects with the voice of the beloved, just as their bodies constantly threaten to merge.

But it is in the circulation of the inanimate or overly animated acoustic-technological object that their bodies truly reveal themselves as connected beyond any limitation. As the sound transmits and propagates itself from phone to radio to microphone to speech to song to song to applause to phone, and so on, the various lovers (and the performer, and the audience, and the telephone on the bedside table) reveal themselves as one distributed network of sound reproduction – not a unified field, but instead a field of different intensities and resistances receiving and recirculating various streams of information, with nary a nod towards its meaning.

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<sup>87</sup> *FFC* 59.

<sup>88</sup> See, for instance, *OSP* 18 et passim. Lacan also discusses this operation in “Kant with Sade” and “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious.”

What, then, are the stakes of waking up? Awake, the sound comes from the telephone; it interrupts and brings an end to my dream. Awake, the person with whom I share a bed with is the object of my desire, not another node precipitated out of a stream of intensive energy that flows through us both. Awake, I am the master of my own consumption, regulating it, acting against what I have already taken in so as to prevent it from overburdening and unsettling my subjectivity. Awake, songs are something on the radio or on my speakerphone that I can control, that I can turn on and off at will, even as they keep me plugged in to the world of meaning on which I depend to perform this constant act of falling in love with the waking world, over and over. In other words, the act of waking allows me to preserve the fantasy that the dream did not just present the Real of my desire. And the act of waking performed when the telephone or alarm clock rings is but the first of the acts of waking I will need to perform throughout my day, or that constitute the sum total of my activity during the day. Now we see how important it is that we have smartphones with us at every moment, radio waves and electronic music available on demand. We need to have these objects with us at all times so that we can perform the tiny differential act of waking up from them, of constituting our human subjectivity against and out of the fleeting or inaccessible moment of intersubjectivity with our machines, when our media are not extensions of ourselves but instead where we and our media are both extensions of some other flow.

If media theory tends to tell us, over and over, that we have finally woken up in the future, it is only because the future is the Real from which we are constantly waking up in the present. Our goal is to keep the effects of the future trauma promised by media theory – the cataclysm of electronic communication – in the future, by replaying that trauma as continually in the past. Fantasy here is not futurist or transformative but instead inherently, even desperately, conservative. And falling in love with pop music appears as one of the most terrifyingly solipsistic modes of desire imaginable. Certain readers may recognize this thesis as Theodor Adorno's basic charge against pop music; however, Adorno's reading of the cultural-industrial role of pop music, or so we hear, neglects the psychoanalytic dimension of desire that so obsesses Lacan and Freud. To test whether this is true or not, we will have to turn to someone else, someone who made falling in love with pop music into a form of life, into various forms of life (ethical, masochistic, pedagogical...). To begin with, then, let's watch Serge Gainsbourg as he begins to fall in love.

## La Baise Hyper-technique: Serge Gainsbourg and Theodor Adorno's Ballads of the Fetish

La colonne corinthienne, ionique ou dorique, qu'est-ce qu'on a fait de plus beau ? [...] Bref, c'est phallique. Et c'est sublime. Rien de plus rigoureux, et dans la rigueur ça implique le calme absolu, le calme de l'âme, ce qui est très rare. Va donc comprendre ça. Le calme absolu, le no man's land de toute passion : je suis en paix avec moi-même quand je vois un phallus.

- Serge Gainsbourg (quoted in *Gainsbourg mort ou vives*)

J'écris des chansons faciles, on dit que je sacrifie au commercial... On ne me fiche pas la paix quoi... On me cherche des noises.

- Gainsbourg (quoted in *Serge Gainsbourg: Pensées, provocos, et autres volutes*)

## Sea, Sex, and Sun

The work of falling in love with the world of pop music – a world of voices, crackling with electricity and static, radiating through networks of wires, gramophones, radios, telephones, bodies, and other resonant media – begins at the edge of the sea. Or at least it does in the version of the primal scene of pop given by Serge Gainsbourg to his biographer Gilles Verlant:

Quand j'avais dix ans [as the singer narrates into the interviewer's microphone - SP] mon chanteur préféré était Charles Trenet. J'en étais amoureux, je faisais une fixation sur lui... Je me souviens de vacances, d'une plage. J'étais épris d'une petite fille de mon âge. A l'époque on diffusait par haut-parleurs les chansons de la TSF [*transmission sans fil* or *télégraphie sans fil*, an outmoded technology of radio transmission pioneered by Guglielmo Marconi and originally used for naval communications - SP] et je suis tombé amoureux d'elle sur 'J'ai ta main dans ma main' de Trenet. Ça m'a marqué, c'est pour ça que je crois très fort à la collure de l'image et du son dans les souvenirs... Amour fulgurant et d'une pureté absolue. Elle était mignonne : j'avais déjà un penchant pour l'esthétisme.<sup>89</sup>

A legend coalesces here, between image and sound, land and sea, as the TSF systems end their maritime divagations and alight on solid ground, bringing Trenet's song (with its characteristically wild shifts in tonality and tempo) to resonate with the girls on the beach and the ocean just beyond. (Importantly, Trenet's song is also a fantasy about contact and envelopment: j'ai ta main dans ma main...) Serge Gainsbourg accomplishes his own *Bildung*, his creating his self by navigating a top-40 family romance: the new "Serge Gainsbourg" crystallizes out of this sticky encounter between classical, yet extreme, popular music and the new world of modern love. Still further, the legend of Serge Gainsbourg *as* a legend of pop, elaborated by and beyond him by his dedicated fans – the legend, that is, of what a legend means, of the people for whom it constitutes a legend – begins here as well, with the scene also preparing the ways in which Gainsbourg's aesthetic career can be read and re-read.

To watch this legend of a legend emerge, observe how Sylvie Simmons, another biographer of Gainsbourg, translates this anecdote across the Atlantic, remixes it for her American readership:

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<sup>89</sup> Gilles Verlant, *Gainsbourg* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2000) 30-1. Hereafter cited as *G*.

Musical, artistic, intelligent – the one missing element separating Lucien Ginsburg [Serge’s birthname - SP] and Serge Gainsbourg [the name he would take upon destroying the paintings produced during his first period of artistic ambition and embarking on a career in music - SP] was *girls* [...] It was the summer of 1936 and the family were on a seaside holiday. Lucien was eight years old. Playing in the sand, humming along to the music playing over the tannoy – which he recognized as Charles Trenet [...] – he looked up and saw a pretty girl walking across the beach. The combination of the girl’s beauty, the warmth of the sun shot through with the breeze off the sea, and the musical accompaniment fused in him like a nuclear reaction. At that very moment, he would later claim, he acquired a taste for female beauty that would remain tattooed inside him, inextricably linked with sensuality, visual image, and the sound of music.<sup>90</sup>

Simmons, in re-staging this primal scene, grafts onto Gainsbourg’s own lexicon additional resonances of oceanic exoticism (the myth of the tattoo), extends the lightning-crackle of “fulgurant” into an atomic-age “nuclear reaction,” and actualizes the sync-sound metaphor that precipitates sound, image, and affect into an indivisible whole. The encounter between two necessary supplements – girls and pop – becomes rhetorically exploded and expanded, but this hyperbolic representation is already prepared by the way in which Gainsbourg’s own account frames the encounter between the two supplemental phenomena, converging on the shores of the sea, as an all-consuming explosion of desire.

Simmon seems to get the date wrong, shifting the young Gainsbourg across the already unstable boundaries between puberty and pre-pubescence: Trenet didn’t release “J’ai ta main dans ma main” until January of 1938.<sup>91</sup> But Gainsbourg’s own account already played with narrative telescoping to collate the discovery of Gainsbourg’s desire for the littoral universe of pop music – which later becomes the titular hendiatis of his 1978 single “Sea Sex And Sun” – with an earlier infatuation with pop music, the “fixation” on Trenet. Gainsbourg’s namesake, the Wolfman Sergei Pankajeff, awoke from a dream “in a state of anxiety,”<sup>92</sup> beset by the difficult demands of a newly-encountered reality, just as Serge would emerge from the beach with a new name and a new “belief” in a psychological reality made by gluing sound to sight. In Freud’s analysis of the Wolfman, Freud observes a fantasy that appears to inaugurate a new period of psychological life may in fact merely activate processes that until then remained latent – or, instead, that the entry into a new fantasy may bring with it the retroactive construction of a whole series of structurally-necessary underlying fantasies: the two narrative justifications are mutually coherent inverses.<sup>93</sup> This fantasy may be the product of underlying forces just as easily as it may be a reaction against such forces –the

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<sup>90</sup> Sylvie Simmons, *Serge Gainsbourg: A Fistful of Gitanes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2002) 17. Hereafter cited as *SGFG*.

<sup>91</sup> *G* 31.

<sup>92</sup> Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17: 1-122, 28. Hereafter cited as *HIN*. For the most interesting and subtle examinations of the mechanics of fantasy-construction in the case of the Wolfman, see Peter Brooks, “Fictions of the Wolf-Man,” in *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Knopf, 1984); Jonathan Culler, “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981); and Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham, *Le Verbier de l’Homme aux Loups* (Paris: Flammarion-Champs, 1999) (hereafter cited as *VH*).

<sup>93</sup> *HIN* 48-57.

audio-visual affective universe of girls on the shore into which the fantasy initiates us could very well be not just a screen-memory but a screen.

Although the beautiful image of the Venus of Nice reveals to us truths about the world of Gainsbourg's pop aesthetic – and glimpses of the conflicted relationship to his pop patrimony implied in the troubled “fixation” on the figure of Trenet as musical forefather – it simultaneously obscures our view of the *mer* lurking beyond the shore (and the homonymous mother's body implied in its name), from which the order of TSF first emerged. Were “*girls*” the missing element in Lucien's erotico-musical imagination, or do they crystallize Serge's aestheticism precisely in their absence, in their presence as “missing girls” hidden by the definition of female beauty now tattooed permanently into his audio-erotics, bodies which his music will constantly and carefully aim to miss? As the media historian Jeffrey Sconce has shown, wireless transmission in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was strongly linked to relics of its naval past, haunted by “the structuring metaphor of the ‘etheric ocean’”<sup>94</sup> in which death and life, presence and absence, past and future, and male and female crossed across their mutual boundaries in ways much more fluid than the fixed orders of latter-day radiophonics.<sup>95</sup>

Gainsbourg's filmic fantasy both recapitulates and apparently moves beyond what all of his biographers have seized upon as the determining trauma in his family romance: the flight of his parents from the Russian Revolution and the eruption of anti-Semitic violence in their native Russia.<sup>96</sup> But the Ginsburgs' Mediterranean perigrinations – from Odessa, to Constantinople, to Marseille – themselves reiterate in reverse one of the traditional motions of Western lyricism. Pop-rock begins with the troubadours, whose strategies of courtly love often depended on the Mediterranean as a fatal impediment to the reconciliation of two lovers. Jaufré Rudel's famous love affair (his “*amour de loin*”) with an unseen and unmet countess of Tripoli ended when he died in her arms after Crusading to meet and woo her. But is Rudel's love, and the lyrical sound stylings that follow on from it, a love of the far-away woman (apostrophe is, after all, the necessary trope of lyric poetry and of pop music), or a love founded on the woman *as* so far away as to be unobtainable?

Lacan's famous epithet for the practice of courtly love in which lyric and music played such a major role – “*la seule façon de se tirer avec élégance de l'absence du rapport sexuel*”<sup>97</sup> – reminds us of the necessity for something like the ocean, something that stands between the man and the woman, preventing the successful resolution of their relationship *as if* neither one of them could do anything about it, so that the male troubadour can engage in all of the pains and pleasures of a love that would be true without ever having to encounter the impossibility of any perfect reconciliation (any addition in which the couple

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<sup>94</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “The Voice from the Void: Wireless, Modernity, and the Distant Dead,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 1.2 (August 1998): 211-232, 214. Hereafter cited as “VV.” See also the expanded version of Sconce's article that appears as the second chapter of his *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>95</sup> “VV,” 214 and *passim*.

<sup>96</sup> Biographers traditionally mark their definition of Olia Besman and Joseph Ginsburg's flight from Russia as the deciding moment in the history of Serge Gainsbourg by giving it pride of place at the very beginning of their works. See *G*, 11-15, *SGFG*, 15, and Michel David, *Serge Gainsbourg: La scène du fantasme* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999) 27-46 (hereafter cited as *SGSF*).

<sup>97</sup> *E* 89.



would add up to one whole) across the wider gulf of sexual difference. This scheme allows for an object of desire to be simultaneously present in fantasy and conveniently unavailable, absent in any conceivable practice. The Mediterranean vision of Serge Gainsbourg, then, allows the figure of myth to engage in a conveniently unrealizable reconciliation with his Jewish past and his motherland – a history that enables the complex anti-Semitism and masochistic identification with the figure of the Nazi in Gainsbourg’s post-1970 works, such as the hallucinatory concept album *Rock Around The Bunker*.<sup>98</sup> Simultaneously, the sea, seen here as the medium of a fantasy of connection that enables the preservation of a structure of disconnection, echoes the words of Trenet: doesn’t the experience of listening to “J’ai ta main dans ma main” and lip-synching along with the father’s words (having them “in your mouth”), the audio-visual fantasy, replace the encounter with the girl on the beach? Dying of pleasure, fed to him by the meandering Mediterranean waves of the TSF, Lucien is re-born, oceans away from the bodies of girls and seas, that now appear only in an audiovisual image.

Interestingly, Theodor Adorno resonates with Gainsbourg’s voice by reflecting on his own youth and staging his own primal scene in a short, mysterious essay entitled “The Curves of the Needle,” whose title already hints at the detours taken by desire and theory once the gramophonic object has sent them spinning. Adorno situates not only the gramophonic object, but his encounter with its song as well, across several borders: “the gramophone’s social position is that of a border marker between two periods of musical practice.” In the essay’s central scene, Adorno stands “Both types of bourgeois music lovers,” the expert capable of judging the value of the musical objects on sale and the consumer who buys the first thing he finds, before the gramophone.<sup>99</sup> After locating the gramophone on a historical border between before and after, between classical and popular (or dialectical and non-dialectical) music, Adorno then uses it as a backdrop for this encounter between two allegorical figures who epitomize not two distinct historical periods, but two moments in the shared “after” of pop music, two strategies of making demands on

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<sup>98</sup> See Serge Gainsbourg, *Rock Around The Bunker* (Polygram International, 1975). Biographies of Gainsbourg are often compelled to attempt to complete the impossible reconciliation of Gainsbourg with a mythological Jewishness. Most importantly, they recount his pride in wearing the yellow star during the German occupation of France: *Rock Around The Bunker* includes a ditty which goes “J’ai gagné la *Yellow Star* / Et sur cette *Yellow Star* / Inscrit sur fond jaune vif / Y’a un curieux hiéroglyphe.” The illegibility of the Jewish “inscription” is what enables the pleasure of the song, its enjoyment of the “jaune vif” of the star and its simultaneous disavowal of the sound “juif” hidden within the hieroglyphic description “jaune vif.” Similarly, Gainsbourg would commission the jeweler Cartier to fashion a platinum yellow star to wear, memorializing his split relation to the Holocaust in the form of an attractive-repulsive, petrified fetish-object (*G* 67). This fetishism of Jewishness, relaying the absolute distance of Russia and the mother’s body and the absolute proximity of the Nazi mirror, deserves more close investigation than I can give it here. For discussions of Gainsbourg’s traumatic Jewish childhood, see *G*, 33-67 and *SGFG*, 18-20; for an attempted psychoanalysis of the Jewish character of the Gainsbourgian fantasy, see *SGSF*, 47-64 and 175-198.

<sup>99</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 271-276: 273. Hereafter cited as “CN.”

pop – although “the sound that responds to both may well be the same.”<sup>100</sup> Does the gramophone mark a temporal border, or does it draw a line in the sand between two ways of performing alienation (uncritically for the consumer *ohne Geschmackskriterium*, and self-deceptively with the “canny” consumer)? Two modes of consumption meet in front of the record player as if to sign a truce, dividing their empire equally into two peacefully-cohabitating realms – while consigning the gramophone’s voice to the background, upstaging its drama with their mirrored antagonism. We may well suspect, and particularly in light of Adorno’s later work on the “fetish character” in music in the stereophonic age, that the answer will be – both.

Adorno turns to the social context Nice and overlays this ambiguous allegory with further borders. Nice stands for leisure, the “time off” from work that traditionally has provided the site for playing music.<sup>101</sup> But if Nice remains a symbol of vacation, or of the vacation industry, Adorno argues that the new conditions of industrial modernity have fundamentally altered its function as a site of heterosexual fantasizing and romancing. Rousseau imagined the watering-hole and the festival as utopias for straight cruising in his *Discours sur l’origine des langues* and *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les Spectacles*. Adorno encounters same elements of those earlier fantasy-spaces in Nice: a conflation of public and private (adolescents are let out of the family and into a semi-public zone); an intermingling of visual and aural media (the gramophones are kept in a series of “sealed glass cases” that permit visual promiscuity while restricting the elements of the soundtrack, establishing the primacy of sight over hearing with a visual master-writing that commands the image phonetically: “text and music hang on the wall above”<sup>102</sup>); and finally the institution of a social imaginary through a language of desire – “a screeching record by Mistinguett and the lewd *chansons* of a baritone who rhymes the impotent Siméon with his large pantaloons.”<sup>103</sup>

But one thing is missing. In this double tableau, with the lines of the score above and a line of underage bachelorettes below, “The girls wait for someone to approach them.”<sup>104</sup> The utopia inverts: where there ought to have been a world of playful promiscuity, only chastity reigns – there is no attempt to make contact, to close the distance between one’s body and the object of one’s gaze. In this purely imaginary world, the objects of the gaze are already in the kind of proximity to which they are suited – at eye’s length. Adorno recalls not Rousseau’s festival dance, but a universal nightmare recollection of middle-school dances.

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<sup>100</sup> “CN” 273.

<sup>101</sup> Adorno will further explore the transformation of leisure into a continuation of (rather than an escape from) work, although the germ of this critique begins here, with the association of practices of music-consumption with the division between work and leisure. Consequentially, many of Adorno’s works on contemporary “leisure” return to its imbrication with kinds of music-production (as in the essay “Music in the Background,” which specifically takes up the issue of how “leisure time” is scored) and music-consumption (as in the essay “Free Time,” in which Adorno explicitly contrasts his own dedication to music as an old-fashioned activity that still requires a kind of total yet different attention than work to the activities of the vinyl nut or concertgoer who consumes music as part of a “hobby”). See Adorno, “Free Time,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2004) 187-198: 189. *The Culture Industry* will hereafter be cited as *CI*.

<sup>102</sup> “CN” 273-4.

<sup>103</sup> “CN” 274.

<sup>104</sup> “CN” 274.

The entire race of females (and not just the young attendants who work the shop) become Vestal all-too-Virgins, with the petrifying icon of “text and music” taking the place of the statue of their goddess, hanging above the columns provided by the listening-booths.

What’s gone wrong? Adorno attempts to answer to this question by introducing what he calls “the mirror function of the gramophone,”<sup>105</sup> an imaginary, dreamt-of functionality finally provided by the gramophone’s felicitous technology. Reading the famous emblem of Nipper attending to *his master’s voice*, Adorno interprets the voice of the Master as the voice of the obedient dog’s ideal ego, finally reified into an object with its integrity intact and available for possession – that is, narcissistic self-possession. This wish – to be available to oneself as an intact, definite object – satisfies the needs of “the primordial affect which the gramophone stimulated and which perhaps even gave rise to the gramophone in the first place,”<sup>106</sup> thus the young male’s wish to deny the possibility of castration and take refuge in a belief in the unbreachability of his own body. Adorno further genders the gramophone’s function with one final observation – that “Male voices can be reproduced [gramophonically] better than female voices.”<sup>107</sup> This can’t be due to a difference in timbre, however, since records can capture the sound of the flute “adequately”; instead a different difference is in question here, the difference of gender itself:

in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it. But it is just this body that the gramophone eliminates, thereby giving every female voice a sound that is needy and incomplete. [...] Only there where the body itself resonates, where the self to which the gramophone refers is identical with its sound, only there does the gramophone have its legitimate realm of validity: thus Caruso’s uncontested dominance. Wherever sound is separated from the body – as with instruments – or wherever it requires the body as a complement – as is the case with the female voice – gramophonic reproduction becomes problematic.<sup>108</sup>

The female case is different because the female body is different, is different from its productions and emissions (the diva is quite literally “out of control” because nothing in her controls the emission of the beautiful but foreign body that is her voice). The reader may well pause in astonishment: Hadn’t Adorno just denounced the fantasy of primordial self-sameness as a fantasy, before then describing Caruso as some sort of completely auto-identical worm with no dialectical relation to himself (if you cut his voice from his body, they’ll both still move around)? And what just happened to his critique of the “baritone” from Nice whose body was so definitively not self-same, since it was both impotent and too small for its britches, thus implying that the difference between male and female cannot be distilled through a clear binary division between self-same and self-different? Has Adorno momentarily fallen into the same reveries that he is attempting to critique?

At the precise moment when “the physical appearance” of the body of the female voice was about to come into view, suddenly the paradigm of the body that had been in place since the beginning of the article disappears, replaced with a new body – a body in the image of the gramophone and the record. The record becomes a mirror that can reflect only male bodies, since only male bodies have the privilege of being equal to themselves, the

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<sup>105</sup> “CN” 274.

<sup>106</sup> “CN” 274.

<sup>107</sup> “CN” 274.

<sup>108</sup> “CN” 274.

privilege which properly belongs to the record and has only now been metonymically shifted on to the owner of a male body who is gazing adoringly at the record and – now – seeing only himself, in the mirror of his master’s voice, since he is his own master. Indeed, Gainsbourg confirms this finding of Adorno’s when, at the moment that a range of female bodies emerges into view, he instead takes refuge in identification with the wholeness of the Father-singer-TSF’s body as the young girl becomes a mere extension of his aesthetic systems and the tidal flow of the *mer* recedes entirely from the scene.

Adorno’s text suddenly passes over into the kind of boundary-making that the gramophone stands for – while it first sketched historical theses on the concurrent developments of technological media and consuming fantasy, it ends in an atemporal realm in which its fantasy is dehistoricized and the line in the sand of sexual difference is drawn. The critical theorist who opposed himself so vigorously to the edifice of pop and the impresario who perhaps is the most entirely, body and soul, identified with that edifice (even in his resistance thereto) thus “encounter each other in front of the gramophone.” And we can define their meeting-place as the site of fetishism.

This chapter will pursue the mutually productive encounter between Adorno and Gainsbourg to develop a critique of the fetishistic economy of song in the age of the gramophone. Compared to the famous critique of pop music elaborated by Adorno in “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” none of Adorno’s scattered essays on popular music have attained the canonical status of the fetish-character essay nor his many writings on that good, properly disciplinary theoretical object that is “classical” music. They instead demand the “indiscipline” of a mix-tape or the “indiscrimination” of a vinyl fetishist – the kind of attention that a Gainsbourg can inspire. The unanswered questions left in Adorno’s work are notably those that pertain to the practices of desire and pleasure he calls “fetishistic,” “narcissistic,” “regressive,” and, later, “somasochistic,” that is, those elements of the contemporary soundscape that are analyzed by Adorno simultaneously in Marxian and Freudian terms – a theoretical conflation announced and legislated by the opening appeal to the “fetish.” Gainsbourg’s explorations of precisely these perverse or psychopathological desires, which mobilize the entire edifice of pop music to produce songs that are simultaneously objects of desire and scenes of fantasy, provide us with an opportunity to re-open the psychoanalytical side of Adorno’s critique, while remaining true to its spirit of attention to the material media of mass culture.

In this chapter, I will begin by re-opening the case of the “fetish-character” through a reading of a handful of Gainsbourg’s most famous and spectacular songs from the late 1960’s, a period in which, I will argue, his musical practice was entirely motivated by a fetishistic economy and which represents perhaps the greatest corpus of musical fetish-objects in the history of popular music. In so doing, I will have to return to psychoanalysis, alongside Adorno’s Marxisms and media theories, to figure out how a purely sonorous object can be properly said to exhibit fetishistic properties, since the fetish is, apparently, defined in visual terms alone. In the second part of this chapter, I will turn to some of the vicissitudes of fetishistic dreaming by examining Gainsbourg’s work as a songwriter and producer, and particularly his relationship with the *yé-yé* singer France Gall who was the medium of his first major triumph and then the object of his sadistic derision. In Gainsbourg’s work for female singers, the other side of the narcissistic mirror becomes visible, and with it the figure of the female body and feminine identity that provides the necessary support for the technologies of enjoyment that capture Gainsbourg’s and Adorno’s imaginations. In the violent – and “regressive” rather than “infantilizing” – game of playing with dolls perfected by Gainsbourg, we will find the crystallization of the

masculine fantasy of record-gazing, paradoxically at the point where the woman-singer-puppet looks, with her own voice but to a tune that is not her own, into the mirror of the gramophone record.

### **SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ!**

Most readers of Adorno's critiques of popular music end up at sea in a fractious field of contestation and rebuttal – and the fault for this fractiousness is often placed on the work itself and its author. Before embarking on my development of these odd, disjointed texts, I would like to consider the three main critiques leveled against them. First, many objections to Adorno's criticisms of popular music appeal to empirical examples that "disprove" the validity of his conclusions; without considering why or how Adorno may have (unconsciously or consciously) gotten his facts wrong. Second, many readers sidestep these texts in themselves by framing them as offshoots or test-cases of Adorno's real work, the unified and legibly Marxian *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*. Finally, a (latent or explicit) psychoanalysis of the author argues that Adorno was unable to encounter the object of his critique in any meaningful manner, since his own defense-mechanisms – in particular, his excessively-refined *taste* – were working overdrive to obscure it from him. Hence Ronald Weitzman, in "An Introduction to Adorno's Music and Social Criticism" ostensibly intended to render Adorno's writings available for use by scholars of music: "It is necessary to be able to separate with uncondescending tact and sensitivity rare insights from the unavoidable practice of confused projection of highly passionate prejudices – which, in Adorno's case, act as the sharpest of double-edged swords."<sup>109</sup>

In my survey of critical writings on Adorno's pop theory, one word kept coming up, over and over: mandarin. Qualifying Adorno's taste as "mandarin," diagnosing an inherent snobbism either authentic to him or fraught with historically bourgeois distinctions, becomes a means of discounting his conclusions on popular music: they cannot be well-thought-out or based in empirical truth, because Adorno's reflexive taste-preferences made any authentic critical encounter between him and the pop object impossible. But beyond the strange, inverted Orientalism of the term, "mandarin" metonymically links Adorno to that notable synecdoche of all that can go wrong with writing, the Chinese character that stands for all hieroglyphic writings. But to use "mandarin" to dismiss Adorno's writing would then be to borrow an operation of critical dismissiveness central to Adorno's own project, which, as Miriam Hansen argues, revolves around a searing critique of something called a "hieroglyph." Adorno denigrates "hieroglyphs" as a means of questioning "the scriptural character of the technological media,"<sup>110</sup> the way the various *writings* of media link and define image, voice, and text. Adorno argues that hieroglyphic media, such as television, seem to tie meaning and image together without any distance between signifier and signified, but we mustn't be duped by this illusion of immediacy. Instead, if these media present themselves as returns to a pre-symbolic link between thing and sign, it is only because they are in the business of constituting a regressive (either infantilizing, returning us to a fantasized pre-conscious stage of development, or anthropologically degenerate, returning us to a tribal

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<sup>109</sup> Ronald Weitzman, "An Introduction to Adorno's Music and Social Criticism," in *Music & Letters*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (July 1971) 287-298: 288.

<sup>110</sup> Miriam Hansen, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," *New German Critique*, 56 (Spring-Summer 1992) 43-73: 46. Hereafter cited as "MCHW."

scheme of magical thinking) and fictitious “illusion of a common discourse,” as Hansen puts it,<sup>111</sup> that works to produce an uncritical adhesion to a social mass.

Adorno discounts popular music precisely by means of the hieroglyph when he defines the relationship between words and music in the pop song as commensurate to the relationship between picture and copy in advertising: “The picture provides the sensual stimulus, the words add slogans or jokes that tend to fix the commodity in the minds of the public and to ‘subsume’ it under definite, settled categories.”<sup>112</sup> Adorno fixes on the *fixation* of signification, and the simultaneous evacuation of the possible re-motivation or dissemination of the signifier: a hieroglyph distills the halting force of ideology. Perhaps Adorno, anticipating Lacan, must attempt to make his writing as illegible as possible to stave off the reader’s desire for a “natural” or “immediate” naïve voice. A movement arrested, a desire suspended; a timeless, totemic, non-signifying signifier, a signifier in its most concrete and material form; a sublime object capable of shifting its value instantaneously from object of fear and loathing to means of aspirational critique – we are, of course, dealing with a *fetishistic* logic when confronting the theory or practice of the hieroglyph in Western culture and its associated critical method.

Before turning to the important question of how a sonic artifact can become a hieroglyph, I would like to place Adorno’s fetishistic logic in dialogue with some of his more classical critics. For Axel Honneth, Adorno historicizes object-relations into an excessively simplified story: the fall of the nuclear family (which made the Father available as an object of incorporation in the foundation of the super-ego) leads to a mass of psychologically-castrated egos lacking the means of regulating their drive-energies. Honneth argues that Adorno defines the mass of mass culture only by its failure to experience any significant confrontation between the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle. Consequently they must never have inherited the super-ego of privation that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois family erected into an institution: “The mass media can develop as an effective means for controlling instincts, of course, only if individuals themselves have lost the capacity for autonomous regulation of their drives.”<sup>113</sup> Only if individuals have no sense of reality can they fit easily into – or be easily assimilated by – the mass-media techno-realities of the gramophone, the radio, and popular music.

Similarly, Jürgen Habermas attacks Adorno’s “performative contradiction” – the way Adorno seems to use the elements of critique without taking into account the way his use of those elements ought to have been accompanied by a belief in something worth doing criticism for. Unlike Nietzsche, who at least believed in a standard of “taste” behind which “there could still be a rational structure,”<sup>114</sup> Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer:

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<sup>111</sup> “MCHW” 48.

<sup>112</sup> Adorno, “On Popular Music,” in *Essays on Music*, 437-469: 454. Hereafter cited as “OPM.” Adorno presents the converse of this argument a few pages later, in discussing how listeners to popular music cannot or do not “understand music as a language in itself” due to its “largely undifferentiated material”; again, what is missing is difference, the gap between signifier and signified that differentiates the Symbolic from the Imaginary (“OPM” 460).

<sup>113</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) 92.

<sup>114</sup> Jürgen Habermas, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique*, No. 26 (Spring-Summer 1982), p. 13-30: 26. Henceforth cited as “EME.” This paper, originally given as a lecture at Boston

took not only a different but an opposite route: no longer desiring to overcome the performative contradiction of a totalizing critique of ideology, they intensified the contradiction instead and left it unresolved. At the level of reflexion achieved by Horkheimer and Adorno, every attempt to set up a theory was bound to lead into an abyss: as a result, they abandoned any theoretical approach and practiced *ad hoc* determinate negation, thereby opposing that fusion of reason and power which fills in all the cracks.<sup>115</sup>

We might well agree with Habermas that “doing critique” must imply “doing it *for some theory*,” in the same way that once you lie down on the couch and begin free-associating you’ll find that a transference *from* something onto your analyst has already begun to install itself. For Habermas, the refusal to pursue this teleological ideal, produced through criticism, as a defining goal demonstrates Adorno and Horkheimer’s fixated, infantile sadism – placing them in the position Honneth identified as that of the “masses,” a purposeless and directionless adolescent revolt. But perhaps, for Adorno, the ultimate goal of critique, like psychoanalysis, isn’t to elope with your analyst or commit to an ideal, but to turn the tools of analysis onto their production of those affectively-charged ideals that keep us bound to the world even as we acknowledge its fictionality, its technologically-produced nature.

In short, we can resolve these arguments by taking Adorno at his word, that is, by reading him as a theorist of fetishism. Tackling these arguments in reverse, we see that, first, the critique of fetishist belief shows not only how analytic practice creates conviction, but also how the analyst, as the engine of imaginary captation, must hold firm to the negativity of her position in order to instruct the analysand in the arbitrariness of the symbolic and the non-ethical (since ideal-less) ethics of desire. Secondly, the theory of fetishism, as re-envisioned by Lacan in his essay “Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real,” gives us a precise answer to Honneth’s dilemma. Reconsidering fetishism from the standpoint not of the encounter with the “missing” maternal penis, but with the trans-sexual fact of castration *per se*, Lacan demonstrates that the fetishist can refuse to enter into the symbolic order (founded, as it is, on the “bar” between signifier and signified and thus the pure meaninglessness of language) and instead create a stopgap simulacrum of the Symbolic out of purely Imaginary resources – hence a purely dyadic concept of relationality, without room for the intercession of a third (the missing “super-ego”), and no structure of castration, lack, or frustration upon which the reality-principle could constitute itself.<sup>116</sup> The fetishist may be “in no state to symbolize” (and “language is symbolic behavior *par excellence*”)<sup>117</sup>, but he certainly does not lack for expressive resources; the young boy analyzed by Lacan in the throes of entering a fetishist relation draws *more and bigger* imaginary penises,<sup>118</sup> but these icons – as “symbols,” not signifiers<sup>119</sup> – only bear witness to the

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University on March 25, 1982, can also be found in Habermas’ *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*.

<sup>115</sup> “EME” 29.

<sup>116</sup> Lacan and Wladimir Granoff, “Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real,” in *Perversions: Psychodynamics and Therapy*, ed. Sandor Lorand (New York: Random House, 1956) 265-276: 272-275 (see, for instance, “it is here, historically, that fetishism is born – on the line of demarcation between anxiety and guilt, between the two-sided relation and the three-sided one,” 272). Hereafter cited as “FSIR.”

<sup>117</sup> “FSIR” 272.

<sup>118</sup> “FSIR” 274.

increasing strength of his captation by a pure, dyadic Imaginary. And in the end, “behavior can be called imaginary when its direction to an image, and its own value as an image for another person, renders it displaceable out of the cycle within which a natural need is satisfied”<sup>120</sup>; it is the reflexivity of the fetishist’s mirror-language that takes him out of the “natural” realm of the drive, allowing for the replacement of “instinct” with mass-media imperatives. Finally, the difference between the fetishistic “Imaginary symbolic” and an authentic language that includes an empty space for the symbolization of alterity outside of the dual object of aggression and affection of the imaginary relation explains the importance Adorno grants to the hieroglyph, which, as in *Nice*, brings the activity of heterosexuality to a halt and installs an oddly artificial series of inseminations in its place. All this is much more understandable in, for instance, Adorno’s writings on television or film, since the fetish is more easily comprehensible from the standpoint of a specular “imaginary.” But what happens when the fetish, as Adorno insists in the title of his essay “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” is in music – hence auditory?

Freud’s elaboration of fetishism, and Lacan’s exploration thereof, seem to insist on the necessarily Imaginary, visual character of the fetish. But before the notorious – and notoriously *visual* – scene of the young boy gazing slowly up towards the place where he will discover the mother’s self-evident lack of a penis, Freud presents a case of a different character. This fetishist – his name, by the way, is Sergei; he’s the Wolfman whose name Gainsbourg will adopt, along with others such as “Mr. Hyde” and “Clyde Barrow” – takes an object that appears to conform to the visual paradigm: the “young man had exalted a certain sort of ‘shine on the nose’ into a fetishistic precondition.”<sup>121</sup> However, over the course of analysis an interesting sonic dimension of the object comes to light: “The patient had been brought up in an English nursery but had later come to Germany, where he forgot his mother-tongue almost completely. The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The ‘shine on the nose’ [*Glanz auf der Nase*] – was in reality a ‘glance at the nose.’”<sup>122</sup> On first glance, Freud’s reading of this scene seems entirely apt: why shouldn’t the nose be as good a last-ditch fetish-substitute for the missing maternal penis as any other? The nose even has the added meaning of symbolizing the fetishist’s self-reproach for having looked too far, for having stuck his nose where it didn’t belong; he should’ve stopped short of following the seductive glimmer of the forbidden all the way to the point where he would have to confess to himself that he “knows” the truth of castration.<sup>123</sup>

Lacan and Granoff, however, observe that all of this on-the-noseness of the nose-fetish proves that what is at stake is not the search for “vague analogies in the visual field,” but instead “the search for meaning in language”<sup>124</sup> – and a language that is not only spoken, heard aurally and indeed even marked by the accent of the speaking body (for how else could “glance” and “Glanz” become homonyms?), but also tied to a maternal speaking body – a “mother-tongue.” The theoretical pleasure felt at the meaning that accrues around the nose arrests us, keeps us from letting our gaze wander a bit further down, to the mouth: here, the fetishistic drama plays itself out again, but in another place on the body. The

<sup>119</sup> “FSIR” 269.

<sup>120</sup> “FSIR” 272.

<sup>121</sup> “F” 152.

<sup>122</sup> “F” 152.

<sup>123</sup> *VH* 240.

<sup>124</sup> “FSIR” 267.



mother-tongue emanates from a truly terrifying place, the mouth, since, as Mladen Dolar demonstrates, the mouth is unique in that it fails to provide any visual evidence of how the voice is produced by the body, as the voice only holds the (imaginary) body together with the (symbolic) body of language inasmuch as it glues them to each other with a gap.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Dolar argues, the drama of vocal fetishism more convincingly conforms to Freud's staging of fetishism than the forms of fetishism Freud analyzes:

The ultimate stage is finally reached when one actually sees the orifice, the bodily aperture, from which the voice is coming, the mouth. That is: when one sees the gap, the crack, the hole, the cavity, the very absence of phallus... [The fetishism of the voice] fixes the object at the penultimate stage, just before confronting the impossible fissure from which it is supposed to emanate, the slit from which it allegedly originates, before being engulfed by it.<sup>126</sup>

Similarly, the entire game of erecting “the gaze at the nose” and projecting it, homonymically and specularly, onto the body of the object of desire can only be played through the medium of a “mother-tongue” – defined as a babbling continuum of sounds that overlap and resonate with each other. Dolar's account makes vocal fetishism into a prototype for specular fetishism, and demonstrates that the entire apparatus of specular fetishism screens the more terrifying lack of the mouth by waving the all-too-visible phallus in its place; just as Lacan's account insists on the primacy of a drama in maternal language without which the specular drama would have no backing, no consistency. Sergei's glancing-game, in which words become aural and not visual “analogies,” dislocatable parts of a mysterious ocean of sound, works to conceal not just the “truth of the Mother's castration,” but the voice itself, under a technology of fetishism based on strange sounds, phonemes, that chase themselves across speakers and languages.

Dolar observes how song emphasizes the sounds of language – the recognizable, imaginary forms by which we encounter the vocal flow without listening to it: “Singing, by focusing on the voice, actually runs the risk of losing the very thing it tries to worship and revere: it turns it into a fetish object – we could say the highest rampart, the most formidable wall against the voice.”<sup>127</sup> Here sounds (either tonalities or phonemes), the by-products of the voice, are collected, reassembled according to a fetishistic/imaginary logic, and turned against the experience of the voice. Dolar's argument about song explains Sergei's fetish, which employs the analogy of phonemes to standardize the vocal flow into a vocabulary or hieroglyphic dictionary of sounds. It also feels oddly appropriate to the case of the young proto-Serge on the beach: the TSF, operating as the technologized, hieroglyphic replacement/displacement for the oceanic body of the *mer*, becomes the object of reverence and worship – electronic sound – when added to the body of the “petite fille de mon âge.” The fetishistic tableau is complete; now all we have to do is listen to its song.

In one famous version, the Gainsbourgian aesthetics of the fetishized sound escapes song explicitly (note the double entendre). The moment defines the music of 1969, which Gainsbourg would christen “69, année érotique,”<sup>128</sup> although the project was recorded in

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<sup>125</sup> VNM 59-60.

<sup>126</sup> VNM 69.

<sup>127</sup> VNM 30.

<sup>128</sup> Gainsbourg (with Jane Birkin), *Jane Birkin/Serge Gainsbourg* (Fontana Records, 1969). Hereafter cited as *JBSG*.

another charged year, 1968.<sup>129</sup> At the climax of the song “Je t’aime... moi non plus,” the breathy, half-whispered vocals of Gainsbourg’s duet partner Jane Birkin conclude their passage from speak-singing – although even when she does sing, her notes are set so high that her falsetto constantly threatens to, and sometimes does,<sup>130</sup> dissolve back into sighs – to a representation of what lies beyond song: a protracted simulation of orgasm, with gasps of breath, moans, and everything else a man who has every wondered what feminine enjoyment might look like could desire. A previous incarnation of the song recorded by Gainsbourg’s last love Brigitte Bardot, passed as a live recording of a female orgasm<sup>131</sup>; but the brilliance of the Birkin version lies entirely in its non-spontaneity, the way in which the sounds that ought to be generated by the body’s arbitrary pleasure alone fit perfectly in with the pop-liturgical organ descant.

Birkin emphasizes the complete control Gainsbourg exercised over her instrument to produce the mechanically perfect sounds of pleasure that form the song’s obligato: in the studio, she said, “Il dirigea avec des gestes de chef d’orchestre mes soupirs amoureux.”<sup>132</sup> Gainsbourg himself would confirm that the goal of the song was not release but instead “hyper-technicality”: “Brigitte et moi, c’était trop... chaud ; et Jane et moi, hyper-technique. Eh bien, c’est comme la baise : quand on baise à chaud, on baise mal, et quand on baise technique, on baise mieux.”<sup>133</sup> The aesthetics of the song sublimates the experience of desiring passion to an evaluable, conductable virtuosity. But the subordination of affect to its technological reproducibility is not only the theme of the song, but its very structure. The song first defines women as pure bodily interiority, naming them in terms of innards alone, as an *entre-des-reins*: “Je vais et je viens / Entre tes reins.” Yet the song simultaneously replaces any interior or inaccessible form of feminine pleasure with a, if not specular, then at least spectacularly audible simulacrum thereof; this simulacrum follows the technically-reproducible graphics of masculine sexuality, from incipient arousal to erection all the way to an unmistakable sonic “ejaculation.” The female voice-body even gets to have a refractory period, if you put the song on repeat.

In this way, “Je t’aime... moi non plus” entirely anticipates the masculine erotic myth of *Deep Throat*’s laryngeal clitoris – if the woman’s seat of desire proves to be inaccessible to the epistemological impulse of the male gaze, at least we can use science to rebuild her “real small penis” in a place where – even if it remains invisible – it will at least produce a fetishized oral object that can be registered, recorded, and replayed in the appropriate field of sexual pleasure, here defined only in terms of the dialectics of the phallus. And indeed, as Linda Williams has argued, what is at stake here is precisely the construction of a technological/biological practice of female enjoyment that is legible from within a field of sexual pleasure and knowledge linked closely to the male body (and thus on the constant possibility of denying any actual truth to the concept of sexual difference), even if, as we see

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<sup>129</sup> See *G* 358-386 for a full exploration of this period.

<sup>130</sup> The most notable breakdown of her vocals occurs at the end of the second verse, when she can no longer sustain the high note at the end of the line “Tu vas et tu viens / Entre mes reins / Et je te rejoins.”

<sup>131</sup> *G* 354-5.

<sup>132</sup> *G* 384.

<sup>133</sup> Bayon, *Serge Gainsbourg Mort ou vices* (Paris: Grasset, 1992) 108. Hereafter cited as *MV*.

here, this practice is not necessarily a wholly visual one.<sup>134</sup> To paraphrase Octave Mannoni's definition of the rhetoric of fetishism, the song's litany works to allow the listener the pleasure of saying, along with the impresario who worked so hard to "conduct" Birkin's performance, "Of course she hasn't got a penis, everybody can see that, but you can see that she responds exactly as if she had one, all the same."

The song's implications, however, go far beyond the immediate context of masculine strategies of (not) knowing feminine enjoyment. Indeed, one of the most seductive elements of the song is the way it seems to speak an immediate, pre-linguistic code in which affect, embodied response, and oral signs all match each other perfectly: the art of faking an orgasm, of course, is really the art of duping your audience into believing that an orgasm cannot but betray itself – that an orgasm, then, does not express itself in signs, is unrepresented and unrepresentable – that is, that an orgasm cannot, by definition, be faked. We all desperately want to believe in this myth, obviously. The sonic display of orgasm – itself a fantasmatic technology, as Gainsbourg demonstrates even as he capitalizes thereupon – is the palpable cry, the all-too-buyable evidence, that allows us all to believe in such a critical fantasy. But what is this a fantasy of? Clearly, it is a fantasy of a language with no arbitrariness, with no room for deception, with no space between signifier and signified: of a symbolic order without barredness, of heterosexuality without alterity. Simply put, it is the fantasy of the denial of castration in language – the apogee of fetishism, a generalized evacuation of all castration, all difference. Gainsbourg would claim a "très morale" value to this lesson: "Parce que l'amour physique ne suffisant point aux passions, il faut s'en référer à d'autres arguments."<sup>135</sup> Indeed. Without the phallic sign of ejaculation – and without a concept of passion that includes difference and doubt – the woman had better scream ("Eh, évidemment, une gonzesse, si ça prend son pied, ça hurle hein"<sup>136</sup>) or, perhaps more politely, someone ought to tell Gainsbourg about Masters and Johnson's (1966) research into the "omnipresence" of the clitoral orgasm.

Birkin's acrobatic respiration, arguably the most pyrotechnic example of the fetish-voice in Gainsbourg's production, is certainly not the first. Perhaps it is the crowning achievement of the series; Gainsbourg's compilers place "Je t'aime... moi non plus" as the final track on his best-selling, posthumously-released compilation album *Comic Strip*, displacing chronological order to obey the logic of its procession of fetish-objects.<sup>137</sup> Birkin's breathy triumph of 1969 completes Gainsbourg's work of the last four years, dating to his achievement of artistic independence by writing the Eurovision-winning "Poupée de cire, poupée de son" as a solo for *yéyé* singer France Gall in 1965. Those four years between 1965 and 1969 allowed Gainsbourg to make all the musical fantasies he had cultivated in his early career into realities, with the financial resources to produce exactly the sounds he had dreamt of. Indeed, no recording technology, no instrument – not even the bodies and throats of the

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<sup>134</sup> See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1989) 35-6. See also her discussion of *Deep Throat* in chapter 4 of that work, "Fetishism and Hard Core: Marx, Freud, and the 'Money Shot'" (93-119).

<sup>135</sup> Gainsbourg, *Serge Gainsbourg: Pensées, provocos et autres volutes* (Paris: Le cherche midi, 2006) 156. Hereafter cited as *PPAV*.

<sup>136</sup> *MV* 69.

<sup>137</sup> Gainsbourg, *Comic Strip* (Island/Mercury, 1997).

most beautiful women of the 1960's – were outside of his reach. Everything became available for him to explore and create the soundscape of his desire.<sup>138</sup>

In a song quite closely related to “Je t’aime... moi non plus,” the bompalompalomp nonsense-syllables of doo-wop suddenly resurface in a surprising context. The song is 1966’s ridiculously catchy “SHU BA DU BA LOO BA”:

J’ai acheté pour Anna  
 Un gadget fantastique  
 Un animal en peluche  
 Qui lui fait les yeux doux  
 Quand elle tire  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 La ficelle  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 Il lui répond  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 Ça me rend fou

Maintenant avec Anna  
 Nous n’somm’s plus jamais seuls  
 Il est là sur l’oreiller  
 Qui lui fait les yeux doux  
 [Chorus]

Peut-être qu’un jour Anna  
 En aura marre de lui  
 Alors je serai le seul  
 A lui faire les yeux doux  
 Comment lui dire  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 Que je l’aime  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 Lorsque j’entends :  
 SHU BA DU BA LOO BA  
 Ça me rend fou<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> After 1969, and after *Jane Birkin / Serge Gainsbourg*, with its most perfect crystallization of his fantasy, his ambitions shifted; although his later records raise tantalizing questions about the relationship between dream and reality (*L’Histoire de Melody Nelson*), about how it feels to occupy the place of Jewishness in the European imaginary (*Rock Around the Bunker*), about masculine identity and allegories of the male body (*L’Homme à la tête de chou*), about the fraught relationship between black music and the pop marketplace (*Aux armes et caetera*), and, finally, about the perverse ethics involved in taking on the role of a culture’s beloved but reviled obscene body of enjoyment (as embodied in Gainsbourg’s late-career shift into the public persona of the scatological guru “Gainsbarre”)

<sup>139</sup> “SHU BA DU BA LOO BA,” from Gainsbourg, *Qui est in qui est out / Marilu* (France: Phillips, 1966). Hereafter cited as *QI*.

It is, at first, a disarmingly naïve song: just Gainsbourg singing, interrupted occasionally by an amalgam of female voices who sing-whisper the doo-wop notes of the chorus and shu-ba-du-ba their way along in the instrumental break, along to a jangly, almost self-consciously derivative background. The first notes of the song, however, an aggressive 1-2-3-4-5 crash of percussion and bass, do testify to the implicit violence of this piece. But what, the song forces us to ask, does “shu ba du ba loo ba” mean, exactly? It appears to be the sound produced by the toy given by the speaker to his “Anna,” the “réponse” to her tugging that demonstrates that Anna has already entered into an aural dialogue with this object. As such, the song insists that nonsense syllables – which ought to be, by definition, nonsense – are themselves laden with meaning, if we can learn to decode them.

Indeed, the particular syllables in question represent the sounds of an amorous dialogue between the woman and her toy (presented by the boyfriend presumably as a means of distributing and thus reducing his own responsibility for keeping her satisfied), in which “shu ba du ba loo ba” stands in for the same sounds that Birkin exhaled earlier. The drama is of providing a woman with a phallus, thus fulfilling the man’s fantasies (and the man’s fantasies of the woman’s fantasies), but there is a surprising result: the “hyper-technique” object, the mechanical fetish, produces pleasures greater – or at least more convenient – than those of the “love” it was supposed to simulate. The vibrator, it turns out, isn’t a shoddy replacement for a penis; it can be an object of greater desire than the “natural” organ that ought to have been coming between the couple. Indeed, to emphasize this point, Gainsbourg has the speaker’s attempt at formulating what the song ought to have been about (“Comment lui dire que je l’aime?”) be interrupted, violently, by the gleeful shu-ba’s, as they insert themselves by force into the texture of the chorus.<sup>140</sup> It’s enough to drive you mad.

By translating the practice of doo-wop into a new context, the song reveals the function that doo-wop, scatting, etc. had always performed in pop music. In this way, it returns us to Adorno, who, when faced with popular music, consistently critiques the “madness” experienced by its employers, by the ones pulling the strings of their gramophones and radios to produce their beloved, tarantella-inducing sounds. Adorno’s essays return obsessively to the fervor of listeners – an allegorical echo of the madness of the Maenads. Adorno shows how in the musical system of the 20<sup>th</sup> century consumers replace their attention to the experience of a performance with the intoxication of purchasing and possessing all the bric-à-brac that surrounds musical performance: records, band posters, and ticket stubs.<sup>141</sup> When Adorno describes the phenomenon of jitterbugging (basically his catch-all term for showy, self-conscious dancing that seeks virtuosically to demonstrate the dancer’s knowledge of the music and mastery over the movements of the dancing body) as a St Vitus’ dance or a savage drum circle, he also likens it, quite technically, to “the reflexes of mutilated animals,”<sup>142</sup> short-circuiting biology with mechanicity.

In a 1941 sociological essay “On Popular Music,” Adorno proposes a fascinating experiment to determine the boundaries of what he calls “jitterbug fanaticism,”<sup>143</sup> the

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<sup>140</sup> In Gainsbourg’s authorized compendium of his song lyrics, the shu-ba’s are printed in all-caps (I follow this convention here), all the more insistently emphasizing their brutality. See Gainsbourg, *Dernières nouvelles des étoiles* (Paris: Plon, 1994) 124-5 (hereafter cited as *DNE*).

<sup>141</sup> Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *CI*, 29-60: 38. Hereafter cited as “OFC.”

<sup>142</sup> “OFC” 53.

<sup>143</sup> “OPM” 466.

enthusiastic and athletic display of what Adorno describes as the “fictitiousness in all enthusiasm about popular music.”<sup>144</sup> Adorno seeks to prove beyond a doubt that the happy jitterbugs, who assume that they are crafting their own response to the music – responding to it dialectically, that is, by producing their own individual kinetic version of the piece to resonate with and chafe against the mass-produced beat of the song – are in fact mere puppets, with the music pulling all the strings. Adorno suggests that, if one were to film the jitterbugs’ dance in sync-sound, “one could find out, i.e., how far the jitterbugs react gesturally to the syncopations they pretend to be crazy about and how far they respond simply to the ground beats.”<sup>145</sup> The syncopations – the mass-produced symbols of extravagance and particularity – merely simulate individuality and difference. But Adorno doesn’t stop at a disinterested consumption: “Dance and music copy stages of sexual excitement only to make fun of them.”<sup>146</sup> The travesty of dance and music pretends to represent sexuality in the sense of the irregularity of arousal, the improvisations of desire, the dialectic of amorous exchange that can only take place between two poles that are allowed to be different – sexuality in the sense of alterity, of relating to and with otherness – while it instead only uses the alibi of its mimetic capacity to redefine sexuality as nothing more than indifference and the repetitive beat of the same, over and over.

Adorno describes an imaginary scene, filled with imitation and aggressive rivalry between specular doubles, that repeats itself insistently so as to fend off the symbolic space of difference, absence, and the possibility for an ethics of desire based on an openness to the other’s otherness. Instead, there is a mad – and maddening – stomping of the feet on the ground beats, another form of the willed identification of the self with the perfectly reproductive spirals of the phonograph record, precisely the split-consciousness of the fetishist who prefers to remain in the imaginary hall of mirrors while constructing a hieroglyphic parody of the symbolic. In this way, we can fully understand the weight of Adorno’s aphorism that “the entertainment, the pleasure, the enjoyment [music] promises, is given only to be simultaneously denied”<sup>147</sup>: what is at stake is not necessarily the evacuation of difference defined as the opposition between female lack and male possession of the phallus but the entire enterprise of pleasure and desire as a discourse founded on alterity. If the courtly songs of the troubadours solve this problem by willingly basing their poetics in an enacted failure, the fetishist pop song tends towards an opposite, yet similar, solution – in an environment of overabundant success, the constant enactment of simulated success works to deny the fact of failure. Too much simulated success – remember Freud’s fetishists, who are overjoyed that their perversion grants them permanent access to pleasure, a way around the constraint of the reality-principle – is not only a replacement for the difficulty of love’s structural link to failure, but a ward against it, a way of demonstrating to oneself, through one’s own embodied practice of enjoyment, that such failure does not exist.

So if we contrast Lacan’s “only elegant solution” to the rather messier, if highly effective, solution of Adorno’s vision of the world of mass electronic media, we discover how precisely Adorno demonstrates that the fetishized – and thus technologized – voice plays the role of the tether, keeping us permanently plugged into the pleasure-relays of a distributed field of generalized and equivalent eroticism. Adorno gives technology a starring role in this field in his critique of the “barbarism of perfection.” The “barbarism” of

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<sup>144</sup> “OPM” 467.

<sup>145</sup> “OPM” 467.

<sup>146</sup> “OFC” 53.

<sup>147</sup> “OFC” 30.

barbarism is itself a form of doo-wop: the Greco-Roman “barbar” refers to the stammering of those who could not speak the true language of the civilized, to the way their voices had not yet entered into symbolic language and remained producing nonsense syllables. Adorno’s epithet paradoxically describes the elocution of non-elocution, the cultivation of an inauthentic culture of language, as his reference to the refusal of the “hole” where a dialectical resolution between others could occur demonstrates: “The new fetish is the flawlessly functioning, metallicly brilliant apparatus as such, in which all the cogwheels mesh so perfectly that not the slightest hole remains open for the meaning of the whole. Perfect, immaculate performance [...] presents [the work] as already complete from the first note. The performance sounds like its own phonograph record.”<sup>148</sup> This statement carefully describes the sound of technology to register the actual changes that have been made to the human body. Here, the toothed gears completely fill the space of difference with their all-too-present protuberances. But this spectacle of intermeshing is only an orgiastic cover for the deeper, and equally evident, truth: these bodies that fit so well together only do so because they were perfectly engineered for this purpose, in short, these bodies have been replaced by bionic duplicates. They have become robotized, entirely technologized; the same logic that allows them to have so many phalluses is based on the fact that they have no bodies of their own at all, or at least none that are defined in terms of their difference from the phallic standard.

Returning to “The Curves of the Needle,” the key difference between bodies that Adorno there renders as the truth of sexual difference is, of course, precisely this capacity for disjunction with the technological, fetishistic, and thus imaginary body of the medium. The “body that the gramophone eliminates” is nothing but the body in which voice and embodiment “resonate” without serving as “complements” to each other.<sup>149</sup> Adorno’s concept of “complementarity” describes the abolition of interplay and difference that causes the seen body (the imagined body) and the produced voice (the fetishized voice) to overlap entirely. For Adorno, the feminine body may be nothing more than the body in a position of difference to itself – the body that is not entirely, not wholly itself. Femininity need not be associated with any literal or epistemologically producible “hole,” but instead with a refusal of imaginary wholeness in bodies of any gender.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> “OFC” 44.

<sup>149</sup> “CN” 274.

<sup>150</sup> This radicalization of Adorno becomes all the more convincing when we supplement it with the ramifications of an argument Adorno makes elsewhere on the way in which popular music, by systematizing a musical language in which songs are “either” major or minor, establishes an all-or-nothing analytical paradigm that fixates criticism at the stage of being capable of identifying only a “happy” or a “sad” song. Adorno, then, argues that a more comprehensive approach to our engagement with music would do away with the false binary between major and minor as a purely digital distinction, and understand the possible oscillations inside both tonalities. Thus we could not understand major keys as stable and minor keys as motive and more inherently predisposed to modulation; we could not make a binary distinction between similarity and difference. If we plug this insight back into Adorno’s initial sketches of sexual difference, we would have to conclude that any identification of maleness with firmness of and femaleness with instability of identity is itself fetishized and fixating – we would have to open up a space within Adorno’s writings for a concept of sexuality as non-self-sameness. See “OPN,” 444.

This fetishistic link that equates two technologically-produced images of the same body, thus tautologically defining it as self-similar, relies on the logic of hieroglyphics, on the self-evident identity of signifier and signified. Adorno calls this gramophonic hieroglyphics “The Form of the Phonograph Record.”<sup>151</sup> In “On the Fetish-Character in Music,” Adorno comments on the odd new symbolic language that arises in the margins of gramophony, the “strange diagrams” that are “intended for players who cannot read the notes” and that “depict graphically the fingering for the chords of the plucking instruments. The rationally comprehensible notes are replaced by visual directives, to some extent by musical traffic signals.”<sup>152</sup> These signs turn out to be based on another important technological medium of massification, the photograph, in that they capture in one still image an event that before was defined in terms of relation across time and space. (Every advanced musician is aware of the fact that to read music is in some sense incompatible with an attempt to replicate the notes on the page in the manner of a beginning student placing her fingers on the keys one-by-one; instead, the musically-literate read *between* the notes, judging their distance from each other and keeping the hands in constant motion across the keyboard.) This gesture is what vanishes in the gramophone’s regime of “acoustic photographs”<sup>153</sup> – a term justified by the linguistic use that links the “platters” of the record-player to the “plates” of the camera. Indeed, the gramophone record’s form ends up mirroring the forms of the other recording and replay technologies that accompany it by becoming “two-dimensional model[s] of a reality that can be multiplied without limit, displaced both spatially and temporally, and traded on the open market. This, at the price of sacrificing its third dimension: its height and its abyss.”<sup>154</sup> Both erection and invagination – height and abyss – are equally foreclosed in this aural-specular regime.

Gainsbourg explores this double foreclosure in the ecstatic “Comic Strip,” a duet with Bardot that splits its vocal parts even more violently than “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba”:

Viens petite fille dans mon comic strip  
 Viens faire des bulles, viens faire des WIP!  
 Des CLIP! CRAP! des BANG! des VLOP! et des ZIP!  
 SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ!

J’distribue les swings et les uppercuts  
 Ça fait VLAM! ça fait SPLATCH! et ça fait CHTUCK!  
 Ou bien BOMP! ou HUMPF! parfois même PFFF!  
 SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ! [...]

N’aie pas peur bébé agrippe-toi CHRACK!  
 Je suis là CRASH! pour te protéger TCHLACK!  
 Ferme les yeux CRACK! embrasse-moi SMACK!  
 SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ!  
 SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZ!

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<sup>151</sup> Adorno, “The Form of the Phonograph Record,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, in *Essays on Music*, 277-282. Hereafter cited as “FPR.”

<sup>152</sup> “OFC” 51.

<sup>153</sup> “FPR” 278.

<sup>154</sup> “FPR” 278.



SHEBAM! POW! BLOP! WIZZZZZ!<sup>155</sup>

Again, Gainsbourg sings only the non-uppercase lyrics; those signs are produced by the mouth, throat, and lungs of one Brigitte Bardot, who employs her entire vocal apparatus in the production of an astonishing array of onomatopoeia. These signs fulfill the same role as the doo-wop syllables of “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba” and the sighs and moans of “Je t’aime... moi non plus,” providing on-demand externalizations of “phallic” pleasure in the female vocal register, notably in the concluding pair of “WIZZZZZ!”es that so explicitly mimic the final stages of penile climax, ejaculation and the subsequent loss of tumescence. Again, as in “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba,” the male voice’s commentary on the erotic scene is interrupted by the all-too-audible sounds of a present, enjoying female body (“Ferme les yeux CRACK! embrasse-moi”).

“Comic Strip” is a complex pantomime, in which it is almost impossible to say exactly which of its elements – a scene of highly grown-up seduction and role-play, a pop song as synecdoche for the medium of music *tout court*, and a mass medium defined entirely by its peddling of pre-pubescent thrills to male readers who are assumed never to interact with real female bodies – imitates or recapitulates which other part. Bardot, with breathtaking virtuosity, pulls off the difficult game of reading stereotypical comic strip representations of non-verbal noises (explosions, fisticuffs, car crashes, and the like) so that they simultaneously sound comically over-the-top and surprisingly representational, particularly in the metallic whistle of the “WIZZ!” In a sonic short-circuit, sounds that began as non-vocal bodily noises pass through the hieroglyphic midpoint of the comic strip’s uppercase letters surrounded by jagged zigzags (the purely visual-symbolic representation of a violent and violently non-visual content) to return, in the voice, as non-vocal, two-dimensional cries. The mouth’s words no longer symbolize a bodily content with which they would be in tension; instead, the mouth becomes a pure body doing an end-run around symbolic signification so as to appear to represent itself with no delay, no detour. “Comic Strip” provides its listeners (and its producer) with the communicability of a spectacularly imaginary body, a duet for ego-ideal and ideal-ego which fluctuates nonchalantly between fusional desire and a shattering aggressivity.

The final “WIZZZZZ!” not only represents a comic-strip word-bubble but also prefigures the sound of the needle turning scratchily in the record groove after the end of the track. This unwritten but anticipated machine noise is a structurally necessary part of the song as well; Bardot’s musical muteness prepares the listener to listen correctly to the oncoming solo of the gramophone. The song’s spiraling circuit returns the listener not just to the winding-down of a fetishistically-transplanted female phallus, but to the winding-down of the gramophone itself, casting that sound as an equivalent specimen of machinic jouissance. This terminal equivalence now brings three bodies into a relation of doubleness with each other, through the supplemental addition of the machine-body: the female endowed with a fetish-voice, the record player in its refractory period as it recovers from its session of self-love with its record, and the male manipulator of these two technologies who now steps forward to flip to the B-side. Gainsbourg’s music teaches the listener to hear the record itself in what Adorno calls “the contours of its thingness,”<sup>156</sup> an evocative name for

<sup>155</sup> Gainsbourg and Brigitte Bardot, “Comic Strip” from Gainsbourg, *Bonnie And Clyde* (Fontana, 1967). Hereafter cited as *BAC*. The lyrics as transcribed here follow *DNE*, 148, although I have restored one line that is notably absent from that transcription.

<sup>156</sup> “FPR” 278.

the “WZZZZZ!” of the post-coital spinning of the needle. The erotic pedagogy of Gainsbourg’s music doubles as a socio-economic initiation, as Adorno demonstrates when he feels compelled to turn to the very *form* of the phonograph record to explain its dominance as an economic object.

This particular form somehow goes one step beyond that of the “commodity-form”; here, we can no longer stand amazed, as Marx did, at how the ventriloquized turning-table somehow appears to glow with a self-evident value, since the turntable indeed explicitly demonstrates its value in every specific aspect of its form. If this “form of the phonograph record” is entirely negative – as the “delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing” of its curves, or as the missing reflection of a consequently absent object, since “Nowhere does there arise anything that resembles a form specific to the phonograph record”<sup>157</sup> – this does not stop it from proliferating, from continuing to inscribe itself circuitously on everything it touches. The phonograph’s non-form form, a borrowing without content, a re-writing of meaningless and equivalent nonsense, precisely reveals the form of the fetishized commodity that Marx thought it was in every commodity’s best interest to conceal. Adorno moves commodity fetishism beyond its Marxian horizon into a generalized hyper-fetishism, in which all the players in the fantasy reflect each other both in the form of their technological phallicization and in their total lack of any specific formal differences.

One of the most low-tech methods, and one of Gainsbourg’s favorites, to elicit the fetish-voice is, quite simply, to research and cultivate the foreign accent. In Gainsbourg’s music, this cultivation is wonderfully flexible and reversible: you can either have American or British words pronounced with a French accent (as in his duet with Bardot “Bonnie And Clyde”<sup>158</sup>, his solos for Bardot “Everybody Loves My Baby” and “Bubble Gum,”<sup>159</sup> and his own stunning “Hold Up”<sup>160</sup>), or French words pronounced with an American or British accent (every duet with Jane Birkin, for example, but also “Torrey Canyon”<sup>161</sup> and “Bloody Jack”<sup>162</sup>), or a combination of both – a jumble of languages, all mismatched with their speakers (as in the exuberantly brutal “Qui est ‘in’ qui est ‘out’”<sup>163</sup>). In a pinch, any pronounced accent will do, whether it’s the exaggerated American accents of the backup singers in “Docteur Jekyll And Monsieur Hyde”<sup>164</sup> or the over-the-top, unlocatable (Andalusian? who knows?) accent given to the word “Almeria” in “Initials B.B.”<sup>165</sup> Even the phoneme (as in “Barbarella garde tes bottIN’s”<sup>166</sup>) isn’t safe: it too can be fractured by the constant skipping from one language to another, unmoored from all “natural” languages, neither French nor English.

The fetishistic logic of these songs presents the technically-mastered performance of a failure to master language, whether generated consciously by the performer (as on

<sup>157</sup> “FPR” 277.

<sup>158</sup> “Bonnie And Clyde,” *BAC*.

<sup>159</sup> “Everybody Loves My Baby” and “Bubble Gum,” *BAC*.

<sup>160</sup> Gainsbourg, “Hold Up,” from *Comic Strip / Torrey Canyon* (France: Philips, 1967). Hereafter cited as *CS*.

<sup>161</sup> Gainsbourg, “Torrey Canyon,” *CS*.

<sup>162</sup> Gainsbourg, “Bloody Jack,” *Initials B.B. / Bloody Jack* (France: Philips, 1968). Hereafter cited as *IBB*.

<sup>163</sup> Gainsbourg, “Qui est ‘in’ qui est ‘out,’” *QI*.

<sup>164</sup> “Docteur Jekyll And Monsieur Hyde,” *BAC*.

<sup>165</sup> Gainsbourg, “Initials B.B.,” *IBB*.

<sup>166</sup> Gainsbourg, “Qui est ‘in’ qui est ‘out,’” *QI*.

Gainsbourg's "Almeria") or produced by other means, such as scouting singers not fluent in a language to sing in that language. As such, the accent draws the listener's attention away from the words and back to their enunciation, to a particular sound of non-meaning produced by the interference between two symbolic systems. These techniques of mastery forestall and foreclose symbolic mastery, to fixate mastery on the side of the imaginary voice, the voice as residues of interference, in phonemes that are literally displaced. What is heard is not the voice, nor the signifier in its meaninglessness, but instead the gendered meanings of loss of mastery played out in a fully imaginary context: one speaker, often feminine or feminized, fails to properly pronounce a phoneme, marks it with an accent, while another conductor or arranger places it in a precisely-calibrated musical and linguistic frame. If in the accent, the female voice seems to lose control, we need merely to think of the schoolgirl giggles that overplay "Pauvre Lola" for the other face of the same myth.<sup>167</sup>

Biographically speaking, the accent was one of the objects of Gainsbourg's own fascination, an element that he sought out and cultivated in his collaborators and amorous partners alike (often conveniently incarnating the two in the same body). Birkin describes her first encounter with Gainsbourg precisely in terms of a play of accents that seeds meaninglessness within language:

"La première fois que nous avons été présentés, Serge et moi, j'avais mal compris son nom, je croyais qu'il s'appelait Serge Bourguignon. Je ne connaissais que trois mots de français parmi lesquels bœuf bourguignon, d'où ma confusion, je suppose. Avant de tourner un bout d'essai avec lui à Paris, j'avais appris quelques bouts de dialogues mais c'était un effort désespéré : la langue me semblait aussi étrange que le chinois."<sup>168</sup>

Jane frames her narrative of her seduction of Serge around the association of their courtship with a lack of linguistic mastery (which is as foreign as Mandarin Chinese). Her particular lack of mastery is produced by the apparatus of film production that has sent her to France to star in film written a language she does not speak – clearly the potential success of her performance barely factored into the casting decision – and then again by Gainsbourg's specific strategies of collaborating with her – the lyrics to "Je t'aime... moi non plus" are filled with nasal vowels and r-sounds, the chief vocal challenges of French diction for the English native speaker, that the vocalist cannot avoid, due to their placement on stressed moments in the song.

At least Jane does seem to command restaurant French; she knows the names of the dishes most featured on French-restaurant menus. Amusingly, the confusion of accents leads her to name Gainsbourg both as a food to be consumed (bœuf bourguignon) and, if we imagine her own accent as it must have played out in this scene, as an imperative to vomit ("Surge, bourguignon!"). Here internalized as Jane's command to herself, the image of vomiting, of throwing half-digested objects out of the mouth, figures Gainsbourg's invention of Jane's British accent – the key object of her songs, the fetish-voice that captivated and even sated Serge. After 1969, the "année érotique," comes 1970, the year in which Gainsbourg produced nothing and which brought the fetishistic project of 1965-9 to an end. It is as if she has given the correct name to Gainsbourg: isn't his interest precisely to circumvent the symbolizing capacity of the mouth by filling it instead with a cycle of ingesting and disgorging?

<sup>167</sup> "Pauvre Lola," *BAC*.

<sup>168</sup> *G* 372-3.

Discussing the strange contradiction between food and “proper orality,” Lacan observes that “As far as the oral drive is concerned [...] it is obvious that it is not a question of food.”<sup>169</sup> The couple food/song serves to short-circuit any possible work of digestion or symbolic incorporation, thus explaining the imaginary, introjective foundation of the collaboration between Birkin and Gainsbourg. In his essay “Music in the Background,” Adorno notes how the form of background music and the form of objects for oral consumption always seem to be paired: music “costs the listener nothing; it is included in the price of the coffee, the hot chocolate, the vermouth; he barely notices it.”<sup>170</sup> These orally-consumable objects are of no nutritional value whatsoever, which is as absent as “exiled Music herself.”<sup>171</sup> Adorno’s essay names a pair of exiles: first, Music, defined as the dialectical discourse between opposites; and digestion, the authenticity of consumption, the work of swallowing the non-predigested. But the two come together almost immediately, since background music is defined by the same injunction against digestion as hot chocolate and vermouth: “you don’t have to listen to it.”<sup>172</sup> And although the flirting couples in Adorno’s essay seem, as in *Nice*, to lack any language to speak to each other of their different desires, no desire for difference, they are nevertheless in for an astonishing metamorphosis befitting the essay’s mythological tone:

Nowhere has music become so wholly appearance as in the café. But in appearance it is preserved. It must, or so it seems, be thus emancipated from all human seriousness and all genuineness of artistic form if it is still to be tolerated by human beings amidst their daily affairs without frightening them. But it is its appearance that lights up for them. No – that lights them up. They do not change in it, but their image changes. It is brighter, sharper, more clearly defined. When café music falls silent, it sounds as if a miserly waiter is turning off a couple of electric bulbs. Background music is an acoustic light source.<sup>173</sup>

The fear of an encounter with difference fetishistically propels an entry into a world of appearances, in which sound becomes the vehicle of the imaginary.

Music here appears precisely as the strut of the imaginary order, the fetish-object that gives consistency to the entire enterprise of unreal consumption. Non-musical music is the silver backing to the glass of “reality’s” electrically-flooded transparency (even its electromagnetic, “real-time” telepresence to itself) that enables the hall of mirrors to project its endless series of doubles. Adorno ties this anti-digestive consumption of the boulevard commodity to the commodity’s imbrication with powerful psychosexual and technological forces that allow for the flattening of eating and talking into an exchange of two-dimensional “images.” Now the other can only be experienced as surface; any attempt to divine the other’s interiority, say, in a kiss, can only come in the form of a structurally impotent incising, biting, or singeing – as in the chorus of Gainsbourg’s “Hold Up”: “Je suis venu pour te voler / Cent millions de baisers / Cent millions de baisers / En petit’s brûlures / En petit’s morsures / En petit’s coupures.”<sup>174</sup> The mouth-work of amorous exchange, in its

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<sup>169</sup> *FFC* 168.

<sup>170</sup> Adorno, “Music in the Background,” trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, 506-9: 507. Hereafter cited as “MB.”

<sup>171</sup> “MB” 506.

<sup>172</sup> “MB” 507.

<sup>173</sup> “MB” 508.

<sup>174</sup> “Hold-Up,” *CS*.

model, here is literally “held up,” becoming both the fetishized accents of the chorus-girls who intone “C’est un hold-up!” as well as the nips, cigarette burns, and scratches that are the lover’s only recourse once the beloved’s body becomes as flat as the “small bills” that the bandit seeks to steal.

Gainsbourg’s obsession with the morcelated body is not the effect of a primal sadism, but the product of the sole remaining amorous strategy in the fetishist’s bag of tricks. (Recall Testud’s evocation of the “image” “tattooed inside” Gainsbourg: only once the body becomes entirely flat can its surface appear as its interior and can we speak of a tattoo as being on the inside. The only way to penetrate the mirror is to break it in pieces, even though, as Gainsbourg’s bravura “Ford Mustang” demonstrates, such violence can no longer give access to the depth of the other and will instead only lead to the further proliferation of fetishes:

On s’fait des *langues*  
 En *Ford Mustang*  
 Et *bang!*  
 On embrasse  
 Les platanes  
 « *Mus* » à gauche  
 « *Tang* » à droite  
 Et à gauche, à droite

Un essuie-glace  
 Un paquet d’*Kool*  
 Un *badge*  
 Avec inscrit d’ssus  
*Keep Cool*  
 Une barre de  
 Chocolat  
 Un *Coca-Cola*  
 [Chorus]

Une bouteille  
 De *fluide Make-up*  
 Un *flash*  
 Un *Browning*  
 Et un *pick-up*  
 Un recueil  
 D’*Edgar Poe*  
 Un briquet *Zippo*  
 [chorus]

Un numéro  
 De *Superman*  
 Un écrou de chez  
*Paco*  
*Rabanne*  
 Une photo

*D'Marilyn*  
 Un tube *d'aspirine*  
 [chorus]<sup>175</sup>

“Ford Mustang” is – although, in a strange elision, no typographical remark to this effect remains in Gainsbourg’s written version of the lyrics – also a duet; I have italicized the lyrics sung by the female vocalist who, of course, negotiates both English and French with an overly-exaggerated accent, seeming equally ill-at-ease in both languages (the American and French brand names Coca-Cola and Paco Rabanne, for instance, seem to be equally foreign to her). The song begins with a long sustained high note on the violin with barely any vibrato, inverting the framing format of “Comic Strip” – here, the song does not introduce the machine-sound of the gramophone needle’s silent scratching, but it presumes the listener has already heard that sound and re-writes it retroactively. The violins, which stand in for the voice of technology in this canon for three mechanized singers, return to weave in and out of the melody with further drawn-out cries, until they take over fully in the song’s coda, replacing the unsung “Et à gauche, à droite” with a descending, arpeggiated a# m7 chord and then ironically landing in a dry G Major. The machine’s part in this *canon a tre* builds slowly from a neutral buzzing to a representation of the act of “winding down,” recalling the slapstick image of the one hubcap still in motion after the car crash that wobbles, wobbles, and finally falls.

Meanwhile, Gainsbourg places the two ostensibly human vocalists in closer proximity to each other than he does elsewhere; although they take pains not to overlap or oversing each other, they are forced to bite off the ends of their syllables as they slice one phoneme into two almost-overlapping parts (as on “un paquet d’*Kool*”). Similarly, no one pattern of vocal distribution orders the overall partition of lyrics between the male and female voices; she doesn’t merely sing the English words (again, “*Paco Rabanne*”), and as the song goes on she takes over the enunciation of the *de*’s that was in the first verse purely the male voice’s business, even as the male voice has already stolen “chocolat” – which comes at what is elsewhere the female line in the verse’s overall pattern – from her. “Ford Mustang,” literally illustrates of the act of *se faire de langues* – three different tongues struggle against each other, weaving in and out of close contact without ever touching, in a battle for three players, a game of pop-vocal chicken. Just look at the wonderful transposition of the mouthwork of the tongue-kissing to the “embrasse” of the car and the obstacle it hits: all of these objects have mouths violently engaged in attempting to establish dominance over each other.

The wonderful conceit of the song, which replays the moment of a kiss-induced fatal car crash as a series of static “flashes” on the objects left behind after the collision of Mustang and tree, restages the battle of the tongues as a confrontation between bodies human and machine. But as in the contemporary works of J. G. Ballard, a major part of the unsettling effect of “Ford Mustang” lies in how, on closer inspection, the human and machine worlds have already collided. The objects strewn by the crash all testify to a collusion between the human body and its mass-market technological prostheses: make-up, Coca-Cola, aspirin, the Browning that hints at the penetration of human bodies by ballistic technologies and rhymes with the flashbulbs as two halves of Marey’s famous

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<sup>175</sup> Gainsbourg, “Ford Mustang,” *IBB*. Lyrics in *DNE*, 169-170; I here modify the lyrics so that the female vocals appear italicized.

chronophotographic gun, the Zippo lighter perfectly engineered to fit in the hand,<sup>176</sup> the photographic reproduction of Marilyn's face that redefines her body as a screen-image, the similarly flattened and two-dimensionally steroidal body of Superman, the menthol cigarettes that were advertised in the 1960's for to their capacity to desensitize the human throat and allow for more industrial-rate inhaling, and the "écrou de chez Paco Rabanne" – the designer known for his science-fiction gowns that clothed women in metal fragments and assorted hardware to merge the shape of the female form with a exploded image of the machine, creating a simultaneously dystopian/utopian, biological/technological surface to overlay the female form.<sup>177</sup> In a dark irony, the woman's body, already armored in its haute-couture plate mail, becomes eternally encased in the sheet metal of the car, while only the fragments of her dress escape, as if they have been homeopathically inoculated against the collision that they already figured through their difficult wearability. The splayed cabin of the car even includes a "pick-up," a portable record player, extending the song's hall of mirrors to encompass the listener, who must subsequently imagine the scene inside the car before the accident as a merger of music, technology, and sexuality, and thus as a transposition of the listener's own engagement or confrontation with the gramophone technology she or he is using to replay the song. Similarly, the flash gun itself gives the secret of what the song is hoping to imitate: the flash's stroboscopic effect halts all movement into pure, timeless, static images – the very character of the array of objects edited together the song. Echoing Adorno's discussion of café music, this song flashes on the lights in order to create a hyper-visualized, hyper-fetishized, and hyper-technical spectrum of inert acoustic afterimages.

These objects all come from a world of mass consumerism and advertising, referenced by the parade of brand names that all come spilling, motionlessly in the lyrical lens's light, out of the chassis of the Mustang. The chorus, substituting "embrasser" for the more common "se payer un platane," implies that here consumption – both economic and amorous – will pass through the biting, tearing, and morcelating mouth. These terms return us to the terrain of Baudrillard and Lacan: in the capitalist system, they function as signifiers of pure emptiness, names without content and thus the sites of an unbounded capacity for the hyperreal production and projection of meanings and desires outside the imperatives of any Real drive. By wrenching these signifiers out of what ought to have been their context and placing them in the disordered catalogue of his song, Gainsbourg performatively demonstrates – by proving just how meaninglessly meaningful these non-signifying words can be, by showing how their interest or pleasure has no inherent relation to the products they pretend to incarnate totemically – the absolute equivalence or contentlessness that structures their success in the advertising system. Gainsbourg began working on the song by going through the advertising and sales materials for the 1968 Ford Mustang, using his pen to fracture the regular columns of copy, circling and underlying terms such as "Stereo-Sonic Tape System," "Tachometer," "SelectAire Conditioner,"<sup>178</sup> "Fingertip Speed Control,"

<sup>176</sup> Perfectly contemporary with "Ford Mustang," in fact, is Baudrillard's long critique of the design of hand-held lighters in *The System of Objects*.

<sup>177</sup> Rabanne, importantly, created the costumes for Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*, including the famous chain-mail breastpiece and the series of plate-mail inspired leotards she wears throughout that film's simultaneously science-fiction and sadomasochistic tableaux, explicit inspirations for Gainsbourg.

<sup>178</sup> The SelectAire Conditioner appears in the song as the "badge avec inscrit d'ssus *Keep Cool*"; again, we see how closely Gainsbourg stuck to the Mustang catalogue even as he discarded the song's overt reliance on its lexicon.

“Positive Door Lock Buttons,” “Outside Rearview Mirror,” “Deluxe Seat Belts,” and “SelectShift Cruise-O-Matic Drive.”<sup>179</sup> Gainsbourg’s work on the Mustang catalogue thus exactly replicates the fracturing performed by the “kiss” of the plane tree, by fracturing the smoothness of the lexicon offered by the Ford Corporation into its component parts.

These component parts are themselves composed in turn of a similar collage-work that cuts words into fragments and reassembles them, Frankenstein-like, into strange technolinguistic bodies: the name of the proprietary “SelectAire Conditioner” not only transforms its component parts but cannibalizes the integrity of the very object it seeks to represent, the “air conditioner,” by replacing “air” with the remixed “SelectAire.” Dashes flourish as the model for evacuated spaces, looking just like the hieroglyphic signs of the stitches that string the phonemes together. Simultaneously, all the parts begin to resemble each other, as only superficially different results of the same rhetorical operation upon language (just as “SelectAire” and “SelectShift” exhibit exactly the same structuring logic). Gainsbourg’s sketches for the song merely recapitulate this logic of fracture and suture. In his initial notes he breaks the advertising jargon into parts that would fit into the song’s meter:

un capsul de  
coca-cola  
 un se-  
lectshift cruise-  
o-matic drive

un ste-  
reo-so-  
nic tape system  
 un ciga-  
rett’ lighter  
 un speedometer<sup>180</sup>

Perhaps “Ford Mustang” begins with this realization that “coca-cola” already exemplified all the games of fracturing and reconstructing that Gainsbourg sought to perform on “ste- / reo-so- / nic tape system.”<sup>181</sup> Gainsbourg rediscovers doo-wop in the lexicon of his everyday

<sup>179</sup> Gainsbourg, *Les Manuscrits de Serge Gainsbourg: 1950-1968: Être ou ne pas naître, question/réponse*, ed. Laurent Balandras (Paris: Textuel, 2006) 124-125. Hereafter cited as *EPN*.

<sup>180</sup> *EPN* 126.

<sup>181</sup> The same work of dissolution and suture is performed on political signifiers in Gainsbourg’s “Johnsyne et Kossigone,” written for Dominique Walter: “Johnsyne et Kossigone / Sont deux petites mignonnes / Mais non, rien à faire ! / Je resterai célibataire [...] Kossigone / J’m’en tamponne / Et Johnsyne / Me bassine / Qu’elles pleurnichent / Je m’en fiche / Leurs bisous / Je m’en fous” (See Dominique Walter, *Johnsyne et Kossigone* (EP Disc’AZ, 1967) and *DNE* 159). Instead of the fracture of “Mus/Tang”, here we have a delicate surgical operation being performed on “Johnson” and “Kossyguine” (Kosygin), names for two competing brands of world-history. The consumer’s studied rejection of the politico-amorous advances of both premiers precisely mirrors the cool rejection of name-brands in “Ford Mustang.”



reality: “Keep Cool” / “Kool” / “Coca-Cola”; “Edgar Poe” / “Zippo.” In English, we consider “cool/Kool” and “Poe/Zippo” to be failed rhymes; in French they are *rimes riches*; in this translinguistic world they are both worthless and priceless. Thus no sublimation, whether in creative construction or violent morcelation, is possible, since the only objects available for such an attempted detour of desire into some other, metamorphosed form are, to their very core, indifferent. Even the woman, the putative object of the desire for amorous conjunction, is a modular series of screws and joints, an IKEA automaton, a façade that’s self-similar at every level. Rage against the system of signifiers is itself the productive heart of that system and its consumption; rage is what the system needs to produce, so as to reproduce itself. But then we must ask a different question: How does the system of technofetishism teach us to rage against it, so that this revolutionarily adolescent iconoclasm will sustain the system’s own generalization?

### Poupée de son

If this happens to be the truth of the techno-fetishist system, its beauty can be quite seductive, as it is in Gainsbourg’s lilting “La Javanaise,” which rapturously cedes to the pleasures of fetishistic babble. Originally written in 1963 for Juliette Greco and covered by Gainsbourg himself on the dance album *Bonnie And Clyde*, “La Javanaise” at first seems to claim to be – what else? – a “javanaise” (“Ne vous déplaît / En dansant la Javanaise”<sup>182</sup>) even though there is no such dance and the music is clearly a waltz. Instead, the dance twirls its figures at the level of the syllable: “J’avoue j’en ai bavé pas vous / Mon amour / Avant d’avoir eu vent de vous / Mon amour [...] La vie ne vaut d’être vécue / Sans amour / Mais c’est vous qui l’avez voulu / Mon amour.” The language of a love song is interrupted, over and over, by the alliterative va-et-vient of “va” et “ve.” In his notebooks, Gainsbourg copied out a dictionary definition highlighting the paradoxical exoticism of the sound of “v”: “Javanais qui appartient à l’île de Java. Javanais langue qui est parlée dans cette île et appartient au groupe malais. Sorte d’argot où l’on introduit va après chaque syllabe d’un mot [sic].”<sup>183</sup> So the dance of the “Javanaise” in fact plays out at the level of its language, its steps alternating seductive advances (its tone of amorous invitation) and an injunction against love, almost a direct attack on the partner in the dance (“Va!”). The V’s double function – connecting the two sides of its fold across the structure of their separation – has here been arrested and put to work against the amorous content of the song. But this operation of folding is impossible on a two-dimensional plane, and all that remains is to throw oneself whole-heartedly into the displaced and reiterated, but not sublimated, erotic violence of spacing. The V loses one of its wings, and becomes the hieroglyphic slash that cuts between the lovers in a phrase such as *Jane Birkin / Serge Gainsbourg*.

The song that immediately follows “Je t’aime... moi non plus” on the album *Jane Birkin / Serge Gainsbourg* attempts another response to the seductive call of technofetishism, suggesting a strategy of erotic suicide that would hem to the structure of technofetishist desire without forcing the lover into a quasi-sadistic position towards his object, a strategy called, quite simply, “L’anamour.” The song begins in a static suspension of the technological media of contemporaneity: “Aucun Boeing sur mon transit / Aucun bateau sur mon transat / Je cherche en vain la porte exacte / Je cherche en vain le mot exit.”<sup>184</sup> The

<sup>182</sup> “La Javanaise,” *BAC*.

<sup>183</sup> *ENPM*, 45.

<sup>184</sup> “L’anamour,” *JBSG*.

ballad works overtime to keep everything from moving, to still the constant turnover of what Heidegger described as the state of modern technology's "standing-in-reserve," by freezing the frame of its vision "à deux cents Asa [sic]," in the flash of a standardized shutter speed. But by stilling the techno-capitalist world's incessant round, no transit – no transatlantic commerce ("transat") – is possible; the arc of the song's journey remains abortive, with no exit or terminus imaginable. We might be able to halt the transatlantic peregrinations of the TSF waves, but they are still the only possible subjects of our address: "Je chante pour les transistors," Gainsbourg's voice confirms.

As a synthesized organ begins to play to reinforce his description of the scene even further, Gainsbourg mourns that "J'ai cru entendre les hélices / D'un quadrimoteur mais hélas / C'est un ventilateur qui passe." No engine exists (the engine's propeller – its "hélice" – resembles the form of the biological material that ought to be exchanged according to the mechanics of human reproduction) to propel us out of this willed doldrums, only the atmospheric technology of our song (literalized as a "ventilateur," a respiring-machine) that will waft like a lullaby and leave the "Belle au Bois Dormant qui dort" untouched in her slumber. Untouched, but unviolated; in its conclusion, the song merely spirals over and over itself, intoning its final chorus with no modulation, no progress towards a climax: "Je t'aime et je crains / De m'égarer / Et je sème des grains / De pavot sur les pavés / De l'anamour." Gainsbourg attempts an Atlantic translation of the troubadour's voluntary Mediterranean self-exile – "errance" becoming "s'égarance" – in a last-ditch attempt to make fetishist desire ethical, to turn its solipsism against itself eternally and as such avoid the violent crash against its object that would be its terminus.

In "L'Anamour," productivity is stasis, its seduction an endless work of keeping us into on the dance floor or at home moving the needle back to the beginning of the track, attempting to halt the violent, parcelating *passage à l'acte* of our desires, the desires that it simultaneously provokes. This strategy of exhaustion, of remaining in fantasy so as not to destroy fantasy, appears here as the only ethical (let alone "elegant") way of holding to the fetishist practice of popular music. Could Adorno have imagined the willed character of the listener's self "automatization," his effort "to become transformed into an insect,"<sup>185</sup> to become structurally identified with the repetitive character of a song that forecloses modulation and development and thus assures that "nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced,"<sup>186</sup> to be in fact a desperate and hopeless attempt at conducting his desire ethically, hopeless because it can in no way unsettle the violently reductive structure of that endlessly mirroring, imaginary desire?

In a world of an endlessly-circulating series of fetishistic objects (not partial objects, because they present themselves as totalities thanks to their fragmentarily meaningless, fill-in-the-blank structure), there is no way to turn a frustrated desire into a revolutionary impulse, to sublimate a desire that is not only too easily satisfied to be satisfying but that is also incapable of any encounter with the other as such into a creative force. This is due to the absolute evacuation of the possibility of a dialectic impulse: since the objects of the world are already predicated on fragmentation, they cannot be transformed by an encounter with a rupturing desire. If "Ford Mustang" performed this lesson and "La Javanaise" examined its ramifications at every level of the language of desire, "L'anamour" offers Gainsbourg one chimerical way to sidestep the violent conclusion of his imaginary drama

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<sup>185</sup> "OPM" 468.

<sup>186</sup> "OPM" 438.

(the same route of the endless detour perfected by Adorno's radio hams).<sup>187</sup> But to witness the full force of the violent workings of the fetishistic machine of pop-musical production, we must turn to a darker corner of Gainsbourg's career, and with it to the darker passages in Adorno's critiques of mass culture: namely, Gainsbourg's sadomasochistic relationship to the singer France Gall, whose rendition of his song "Poupée de cire, poupée de son" at the 1965 Eurovision Music Contest afforded Gainsbourg his entry into popular stardom, and the rage that is the productive core of their relationship, the rage "[into which] regressive listening is always ready to degenerate."<sup>188</sup>

Gainsbourg's songs for Gall all play on the psychoanalytic diagnosis of "regression," the retreat into infancy when confronted with the perils of what ought to be an "adult" sexuality. Gall's entire career is based on a hyperbolic infantilization of the already-infantile yé-yé aesthetic; one of her best songs, "Polichinelle," written by Pierre Saka, is a translation of the dynamics of "Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba" into a context that plays on the edge of female adolescence and dramatizes the Freudian setting of the female refusal to grow up. In the song, Gall's female speaker describes her "joli polichinelle" who one day, when she's alone in her bedroom, transforms into "un grand garçon," "le prince charmant / Dont je rêvais quand j'étais enfant."<sup>189</sup> The doll – now transformed into the masturbatory "gadget fantastique" of her childhood fantasies, or perhaps the "real little penis" of her infantile self-explorations – promises to take her away, but then the fantasy is interrupted: "Soudain j'ai entendu des pas / C'était ma mère qui arrivait / Et dans ma chambre, elle est entrée." The specificity of the scene is important: the fantasy of the young girl (read: the fantasy of having a penis of one's own, the fantasy that the young girl wrongly assumes not to be a fantasy at all) is dissolved by the apparition of the mother, who forces her way into the girl's *Mädchenzimmer*, teaching her that her body is meant to be penetrated and as such cannot support any sort of phallic self-sufficiency, and as such the material for the girl's pleasure

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<sup>187</sup> See "OFC" 53-5. The radio ham, who "has no luck with girls" ("OFC" 53) – whether this failure with the opposite sex is the predicating trauma or the all-too-logical result of his hobby Adorno never makes clear – identifies himself totally with the radio-machine, transforming his private haven into a circus of publicly-circulating industrial objects. He replaces the possibility of a dangerous relation with the "opposite" sex, or with the dialectic nature of sex as such, with the pleasures of endless but unfulfilling contact with "other" radio hams, who are at this point as entirely automatized as he is. Adorno's critique of the social situation of the radio ham proleptically recalls, in a very unsettling fashion, the arguments currently being made in favor of computer-generated and internet-disseminated pornography as means for the prophylactic self-treatment of those whose sexualities are deviant to the point of cultural unacceptability (pedophiles or necrophiliacs, for instance); the internet becomes the medium of an imbrication between human and machine sexuality that allows us to remove those whose desires make us uncomfortable (not only pedophiles, but also unattractive males, the obese, and the elderly) from social circulation. "They will satisfy themselves in the privacy of their own homes, and thus free us from the threat of their desire," we argue; we no longer have to think about the disturbing otherness of "their" desires, and we tacitly agree not to acknowledge that the "privacy" of their own homes has become a social institution ensuring the voluntary institutionalization of non-normative sexualities.

<sup>188</sup> "OFC" 56.

<sup>189</sup> France Gall, "Polichinelle," *La petite* (Philips, 1967).

cannot come from any resources provided for her either by biology or her childhood up to this point.

In a late paper on female sexuality, Freud posits that the girl only comes to the “positive” paternal Oedipal triangle after negotiating a fraught “negative” Oedipal triangle in which the mother is the object of identification and attachment; thus it is the mother who forces the girl to abandon a virtual “masculine” sexuality of the clitoris, effectively castrating the daughter by training her in the ways of penis envy. The chief monument to this traumatic wound inflicted by mothers on their daughters is “the surprising, yet regular, fear of being killed (? devoured) by the mother”<sup>190</sup> – both a female version of the shell-shock survivor’s dreams that replay the moment of traumatic injury to the bodily-ego, and a testament to the daughter’s need to be properly castrated before the science of psychoanalysis can come into play. The song’s sad, repeated closing monody of “[Le polichinelle,] Il est toute ma vie” echoes the speaker’s earlier claim that “Je ne sais pas si j’ai rêvé / Ou bien si c’est la réalité / Mais moi j’ai depuis ce jour / Rencontré l’amour”: if adult love is to come, it will simultaneously be different from this dream of childhood (a difference marked by the “mais” that distinguishes adult sexuality from the (reconstructed?) fantasy of infantile sexuality: “this experience is unclassifiable, but it prepared me to recognize ‘real’ love”) and identical to it (“il est toute ma vie”). The reason for this bizarre temporality is clear: once the girl has been properly trained in her castration, her infantile sexuality can only be defined as a hallucinatory dream, a mistaken fantasy that she once properly possessed a “real little penis” when in fact the only phallus available to her for her enjoyment is that provided her by the technology of fetishism and its “gadgets fantastiques.” Adult sexuality, as fetishistic enjoyment, is thus simultaneously a step beyond adolescence and an imitation of what, after the proper course of a fetishistic education, is defined as pre-adolescent naïve sexuality. That is, in the fetishized world, adolescence, as a training-ground for maturity, takes on the role of defining both “post-adolescent” and pre-adolescent sexualities as simulacra of each other, of ensuring that the dream of trans-gendered pleasure – the capacity to be both in a masculine and feminine position with regards to genital pleasure without this duality contradicting itself – appears as only a dream, unless it is actualized through the mediation of technological fetish-objects, such as the record-player, the lipstick, or the menthol cigarette. If “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba” looks an awful lot like an adult parody of the primal scene described in “Polichinelle,” it could be argued equally as convincingly that in fact the primal scene of “Polichinelle” is only the ex-post-facto reconstruction, à la the Wolfman’s primal scene, of what needed to have happened for the adult games with toys of “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba” to work out: that a world free of castration and its threat has to have appeared as only a fantasy.

Clearly, the reasons that this operation upon childhood must play out in the feminine register are related to what Freud calls “Consequences of the Anatomical Distinctions Between the Sexes”: for the boy, the penis is already and self-evidently at stake; with the girl, however, some education is necessary to make her conform to a standard by which she would simultaneously think (wrongly and in fantasy) that she would have a penis and know (correctly and in reality) that she has not got one. Hence the entire enterprise of music for

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<sup>190</sup> Freud, “Feminine Sexuality,” in *Standard Edition*, vol. 21: 225-243, 227. For a more nuanced treatment of the intergenerational dynamics of feminine castration and the repetitive insistence of the post-traumatic “penis-envy” see Torok, “The Meaning of ‘Penis Envy’ in Women,” in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 41-73.

girls, from yé-yé to Taylor Swift, that is based on a pedagogy of an originary lack and a subsequent “empowerment” (“J’ai depuis ce jour rencontré l’amour”). The structure of such feminine-discipline songs is based on an alternation between the two poles of pop music – kiss-off and new love – that defines the old love as a silly, infantile fantasy and the new replacement love as mature and real.<sup>191</sup> But in so doing, these songs instruct us in a practice of “adult” love that, by definition, insists on our belief in a girlish dream about first love that can never have been, trapping us in a hall of mirrors in which we unwittingly play out the fetishistic drama of belief within our own split consciousnesses à la that true follower of pop music, Ally McBeal (we know that love is a childish dream, one produced by our endless quest to find the one and reinforced by media of love such as personals ads and blind dates, but nevertheless we keep on dreaming, supplementing our encounters by playing them out within pop-musical environments).

Gainsbourg’s music for Gall plays mostly on this problematic position of the female within the scheme of fetishistic desire as trapped in an eternal adolescence due to the structural overlapping of maturity and infancy. In “Laisse tomber les filles,” for instance, she implores her lover to give up on the permanent exchange of partners facilitated by the fetishistic equivalence between bodies:

On ne joue pas impunément  
Avec un cœur innocent [...]  
Tu verras ce que je ressens  
Avant qu’il ne soit longtemps [...]

La chance abandonne  
Celui qui ne sait  
Que laisser les cœurs blessés  
Tu n’auras personne  
Pour te consoler  
Tu ne l’auras pas volé<sup>192</sup>

Along with its reminder that the practice of fetishist desire will always result in the circulation of the “wound” among hearts – and that in the broken-record-like spiral of modern love all hearts, male and female, are equally exchangeable and vulnerable to the same affects (Lacan’s “discours courant” of the sexual relation) – the song blames the fetishist for continuing to spin along on the merry-go-round of his fantasies. Perhaps he should have

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<sup>191</sup> That is, songs that discipline females in their castration begin with a first lesson that Debbie Harry summarizes as “Once I had a love and it was a gas / Soon turned out I had a heart of glass.” But the genius of Blondie’s subversive “Heart of Glass” is that it fails to provide the second half of the lesson, leaving the singer – and the listener – in the paradoxical position of maintaining the falsity of the “adorable illusion” of love while prolonging its duration. The solution to a “realistic” attitude towards modern love turns out to be the creation of a folie à deux, the escape down two post-Euclidean “parallel lines” of fugal fantasy that nevertheless appear to converge at the horizon, drawing the other in instead of leaving Sleeping Beauty asleep in the manner of “L’anamour.” See Blondie, “Heart of Glass,” *Parallel Lines* (Chrysalis, 1978).

<sup>192</sup> Gall, “Laisse tomber les filles,” *Laisse tomber les filles* (Philips, 1964).

practiced “L’anamour,” but this solution seems impossible in light of the previous song Gainsbourg had written for Gall, “N’écoute pas les idoles”:

De toute les chansons celles  
 Que tu retiens  
 Ne sont rien qu’amours cruelles  
 Sans lendemain  
 C’est la raison pour laquelle  
 Je n’aime rien  
 Rien de ce qui me rapelle  
 Tous ces refrains

N’écoute pas les idoles  
 Écoute-moi  
 Car moi seule je suis folle  
 Folle de toi [...]

J’ai peur et je te résiste  
 Tu sais pourquoi  
 Je sais bien ce que je risque  
 Seule avec toi  
 Pourtant j’irai chez toi puisque  
 C’est comme ça  
 Rien que pour casser tes disques  
 Tu ne pourras

Plus écouter les idoles  
 Ça t’apprendra  
 Que moi seule je suis folle  
 Folle de toi<sup>193</sup>

Although the drama of “N’écoute pas les idoles” and that of “Laisse tomber les filles” share an astonishingly equivalent acoustic background, its warning seems much more complicated. The speaker makes the same ethical appeal to her lover – give up the fetishistic practice of desire that your record-playing habits support and sustain – but simultaneously falls into complicity with the refrains she claims to love nothing about. In a case of ladies protesting too much, “N’écoute pas les idoles” was a star-making song for Gall, who subsequently becomes one of its “idoles.” Even though she “resists” and “fears” the fantasies behind the music – fantasies of the end of love – she simultaneously goes along with their structure, to the point of “casser tes disques,” erupting in the fetishistic rage to smash the mirror that “Ford Mustang” would later explore, so as to replace their voice with hers, as she sings, over and over, “folle de toi” as the record winds down toward its B-side. Entreating her lover to “grow up,” she adopts the position of maturity as well as the regressive solipsism she warns him against. Instead of bringing the infinite series of girls to a close, she takes advantage of its violent structure to insert herself into its chain. Indeed, in next year’s “Poupée de cire,

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<sup>193</sup> Gall, “N’écoute pas les idoles,” *N’écoute pas les idoles* (Philips, 1964).

poupée de son,” Gall will recognize her own body as structurally identical to the shards of vinyl she produces in “N’écoute pas les idoles.”

In the split communities and psyches of Mannoni’s Katchina-worshippers or Lacan’s story of Santa Claus, the adults, who believe “for the children” and as such believe in the naïveté of the children’s belief, both idealize such naïve belief and resent the children for (presumably) getting to enjoy the pleasure of knowing immediately, without doubt, that magic is real – the same magic produced by the mediating social machine into which the adults have transformed themselves. The adults’ rage is more naïve than any belief, since it is the only belief that deludes itself into an assumption of certainty. Similarly, Adorno’s theses on “regression” define listening not as “regressive” inasmuch as it returns the listener to a childhood state that he has already experienced, but “regressive” inasmuch as it creates a new, simulacral infancy into which he can escape: a position of infancy that can be repeated through the new practices of “maturity.” Thus the “regressive” pedagogy of pop music not only avoids a potential future, but inscribes a new present alongside the new past that would have to have happened for that present to exist as such.

In a disturbing metaphor (disturbing because it accurately and precisely anticipates the way in which popular music has recently been mobilized as an instrument of torture), Adorno compares the omnipresence of a hit song with the experience of a “strong-willed political prisoner” who “may resist all sorts of pressure until methods such as not allowing him to sleep for several weeks are introduced.”<sup>194</sup> This is a pedagogy of erosion by ubiquity. The Russian critic Nikonov one day woke up to find that Wagner’s endless melodies now gave him seizures; contemporary research on the phenomenon of “earworms” demonstrates that musical stimuli can literally re-write the path of electromagnetic flows in the brain.<sup>195</sup> So when Adorno aphorizes that “The composition hears for the listener”<sup>196</sup> he precisely observes how the programming of the composition, its computational structure, replaces the human judgment of the listener, perhaps on the level of implanting its mechanisms into the folds of the human brain, but certainly by building an electronic double of the listener to hear for him. Music – particularly in its new guise as popular music, which is programmed around the cyclical and thus anti-differentiating return to the same material at the beginning and end of each of its sections<sup>197</sup> – is itself a model computer that replaces and overwrites the position of its operator, just as John Searle’s “Chinese Room” experiment substitutes for Alan Turing’s language-program a human operator pre-loaded with a computational technology. In this world, meaningless but seemingly meaningful hieroglyphics are exchanged without any room for meaning, defined as the difficult negotiation between humans and their language, to intervene.

In an environment saturated with the buzz of musical machinery, the listener-cum-torture-victim must attempt to resist with the only tool at his or her disposal: hence the paradox of the “beat.” For Adorno, the “beat” is the main mechanism of standardization employed by popular music, which in all of its variations is left intact (or indeed, popular music demonstrates the superiority of the beat by allowing all rhythmical alterations to fail to escape the primacy of the underlying meter).<sup>198</sup> At the same time, the “beat” becomes the name for the listener’s only means of attempting to re-assert dominance over the rhythmical

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<sup>194</sup> “OPM” 464.

<sup>195</sup> For a helpful summary of this research, see *M* 24-27 and 44-53.

<sup>196</sup> “OPM” 442.

<sup>197</sup> “OPM” 438.

<sup>198</sup> “OPM” 460-1.

repetitions that have been “plugged” into his consciousness or neural structure thanks to their insistent character; the way to pretend to dominate a melody, to make it “your own,” is to “add tiny up-beat notes” that sound as if you are “[whipping] or [teasing] the melody.”<sup>199</sup> That is, in the game of mastery and servitude played with the song as a medium of repetition, repetitions which are literally beaten into the heads of their listeners, the listener reacts by “beating” (whipping, “making the melody wince or moan”<sup>200</sup>) the song itself on the “up-beat,” attempting to forestall the song’s immanent beating by inserting a beating of his or her own, before the song can beat the listener. This results in a temporal foregrounding of identification, an identification that is the last resort of the listener’s elicited rage, explaining the “affinity of [musical] enthusiasm to fury”<sup>201</sup> and, more subtly, the reason why “The adaptation to machine music necessarily implies a renunciation of one’s own human feelings and at the same time a fetishism of the machine such that its instrumental character becomes obscured thereby.”<sup>202</sup> This “fetishism of the machine,” a surprising term for Adorno since it implies that he has imagined a grander role the machine could potentially play in mass or other culture, should be read as the reduction of the machine’s possibility to speak for itself, a transformation of what used to be the space or spacing that mediated the negotiation of dialogue – the steady “beat” of time that flows throughout musical composition and allows for the specificity of its individual parts within the continuity of the whole – into an end in itself, an endlessly circulating “beating,” which should be heard in the full resonance of its primally violent character, that replaces and forestalls any dialectic of man and machine (or of man and man, or of machine and machine). Music becomes “robotic,” and the state of war – as in *RUR* – becomes generalized as the only possible field of quasi-dialogue.

In Adorno’s word-play on the echoes of “beating” (he wrote “On Popular Music” in English) something of the Freudian concept of the “beating-fantasy” begins to emerge. For Freud, the masochistic phase of the beating-fantasy, with its precise identifications of the persons involved (“I am being beaten by my father”) remains a pure construction of psychoanalysis (and of the analysis of female patients in particular) – as did that strange primal scene of the Wolfman – just as the fetishistic-masochistic scene of listening to “hit” music is an adult reconstruction, the mark of a successful puberty, that nevertheless masquerades as an infantile position. (We know that, for Adorno, the adult submission to the pattern of being-beaten and continuing-to-circulate-beating is a learned position, because he writes, again surprisingly, of the many other meanings popular music can have for... adolescents: “youngsters who invest popular music with their own feelings are not yet completely blunted to all its effects.”<sup>203</sup> Might the choice to feel music’s pains by identifying with them personally, and transferentially, before the institution of the barrier between human and machine, become a means of halting the cycle of popular music, or of opening up spaces for different bodily-affective relations within that cycle?<sup>204</sup>) But in the meantime,

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<sup>199</sup> “OPM” 456.

<sup>200</sup> “OPM” 456.

<sup>201</sup> “OPM” 465.

<sup>202</sup> “OPM” 461.

<sup>203</sup> “OPM” 459.

<sup>204</sup> Here Adorno seems to locate the structure beyond or behind his critique in the bodies of the “youngsters,” in a move that strongly resists reduction either to Habermas’ claim that no “positive” element exists to motivate Adorno’s critique or the archaic, bourgeois concepts of masculinity and femininity that reappear in the closing chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Similarly, Adorno’s faith in the “youth” of the “youngsters” echoes his comment in



the only function of Gall's yé-yé is to drive its young listeners to the breaking point, at which the record shatters and Gall, the listener, and the idol pass into the magic mirror of an immediate doubling. And here we see why falling in love with pop music can be called "a process of masochistic adjustment to authoritarian collectivism"<sup>205</sup>: if the fantasy, once (re?)constructed in its masochistic guise, can nevertheless take any player as its beaten object (man, woman, or even the song itself), its primal structure and its transitivity is based on the identity of all these players as objects of the punitive-disciplinary beating by the father that teaches the fundamental lesson of the system: everyone is equal to the next-in-line for a beating, in that they are castrated, and this lack is easily covered up by the proliferation of fetish-objects that allows them to enjoy, just like the father, the release of phallic pleasure.

Driving the violence of this masochistic logic to its breaking point, Gainsbourg, as a means of venting his rage at having to take a submissive position towards her, produced for Gall the scandal of a legendarily career-destroying song, "Les sucettes." Gainsbourg observes that Gall played a necessary role in mediating his rise to fame: "Avant *Poupée de cire, poupée de son*, je ne rencontrais que des sourires sceptiques, étant donné que j'étais un chanteur dit intellectuel, je dirais pseudo-intellectuel. On disait que j'étais apprécié d'une certaine élite, il n'est pas dangereux, pour nous. À partir de là, la petite France Gall m'a aide à ouvrir certaines portes."<sup>206</sup> Although a momentary scorn can be felt in Gainsbourg's emphatic description of Gall as "la petite," this still sounds like a glowing compliment next to his later descriptions of her, such as this one from a 1980's edition of *Les Inrockuptibles*: "France était trop bête pour être un Lolita. Une Lolita ça doit quand même savoir allumer. Elle ne m'allumait pas du tout... Hé hé hé... J'avais l'essence mais elle n'avait pas le briquet."<sup>207</sup> Here "bêteté" is defined as an improper fetishization, a not-yet-phallicization: Gall doesn't have the Zippo needed to light up her partner's desire, even if she has the voice and the look to command an army of teenage followers.

In Gainsbourg's retelling of his "collaboration" with Gall, he constantly attempts to teach her of her own fragmentary nature, the a priori definition of her body as lacking. His lyrics for "Baby Pop" direct Gall to sing "Chante danse Baby Pop / Comme si demain Baby Pop / Au petit matin Baby Pop / Tu devais mourir." Perversely, however, Gall would say

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*Composing for the Films* that "ordinary listening, as compared to seeing, is archaic" inasmuch as hearing has not "adapted itself to the bourgeois rational and, ultimately, highly industrial order"<sup>204</sup>— listening preserves a space of *archaïcness* that is not the regressivity of bourgeois industrial mass culture, a youth before infantilization, a trans-temporal pre- or extra-adolescence. Perhaps something of this ahistorical youth of listening is reflected in the listening of the youth. Furthermore, if the "youngsters" are the space of a subversive subjectivity worth fighting for, they remain outside the scope of the "positive"; indeed, they are seen here as the inverted reflection of the kind of transference — the passage of egoic and affective material between the subject and the music-system — that vehicules mass-media simulacral subjectivity, as a form of transference that in its tight grip on the embodied self's protean changeability resists reduction to a single meaning and as such opens up multiplicity and difference within the musical mirror itself. If these youngsters embody a positive ideal, they nevertheless do so without foreclosing on negativity and difference within the same. See Adorno and Hans Eisinger, *Composing for the Films* (London: Athlone Press, 1994) 20.

<sup>205</sup> "OPM" 460.

<sup>206</sup> *PPAV*, 139.

<sup>207</sup> *G* 277.

that precisely this lyric “me plaisait beaucoup.”<sup>208</sup> The struggle between Gall and Gainsbourg, then, appears to be that Gall isn’t taking enjoyment in the right place, that her truly adolescent – hence improperly infantilized – character seems, like Adorno’s youths, to be able to attach personal meaning to lyrics that ought to be impersonal lessons in the equivalence theory of techno-fetishism. The arms race between them, in their battle of the genders (regression to the phallic mean vs. the mobility of adolescent genitalization), escalated until the 1966 release of “Les sucettes,” and beyond it, since Gainsbourg and Gall would struggle to define what “Les sucettes” meant to the present day.

First, the “original”: over a lush, faux-Classical backdrop – string orchestra, tambourines, organ – the juvenile voice of Gall smoothly intones the lyrics. Later, when Gainsbourg “covers” the song on *Jane Birkin / Serge Gainsbourg*, the backing is transformed into an astonishingly louche ambience of jazz-fusion, based on the replacement of the strings with a sleazily-jamming electric guitar, and there is no way not to read the song’s lyrics as a dirty joke. But the lyrics, and the overall pattern of the song, remain the same:

Annie aime les sucettes  
 Les sucettes à l’anis  
 Les sucettes à l’anis  
 D’Annie  
 Donnent à ses baisers  
 Un goût ani-  
 Sé lorsque le sucré d’orge  
 Parfumé à l’anis  
 Coule dans la gorge  
 D’Annie  
 Elle est au paradis  
 Pour quelques pennies  
 Annie  
 A ses sucettes à l’anis  
 Elles ont la couleur de ses grands yeux  
 La couleur des jours heureux [...]  
 Lorsqu’elle n’a sur sa langue  
 Que le petit bâton,  
 Elle prend ses jambes à son corps  
 Et retourne au drugstore<sup>209</sup>

Controversy followed immediately, but not naturally: Gainsbourg had to work to frame this hit as a scandal (there was, after all, no censorship attempt made on the song, and, to the contrary, several television performances were organized with giant dancing lollipops and lots of shots of young ladies with suckers).<sup>210</sup> Gainsbourg attempts to take the game of playing with Gall’s public image one step too far, to break the doll who had before then given him so much pleasure and success – or at least, to create the legend by which he would have destroyed her, publically or privately, by tricking her into singing a yé-yé song that is in fact a more overt rendition of “Shu Ba Du Ba Loo Ba.” The legend that the shock of having

<sup>208</sup> G 291.

<sup>209</sup> Gall, “Les sucettes,” *Les sucettes* (Philips, 1966). See also *JBSG* and *DNE* 128.

<sup>210</sup> G 300.

performed a song about oral sex drove a shamed Gall to not leave her house for weeks still grows, cited as a legend by Verlan but presented as truth by Testud.<sup>211</sup>

The first important formal element of the song is the absolute homophony between Annie's name and the characteristic of her desire, "l'anis" (later, Birkin will pronounce "année" is exactly as Gall pronounces "Annie" and "anis" in "Soixante-neuf, année érotique"). This homophony suggests that the one who truly has Annie/anis stuck in her throat, whether on the way up or down, is Gall herself; Gall must already be enjoying the pleasures of fellatio, whether she knows it or not. In the next mirroring, what Annie exchanges for the phallic substitutes or phallic covers, the "sucettes à l'anis" she buys at the drugstore (thus making the lollipops into a bizarre prophylaxis for prophylactics) are "quelque pennies," obviously a code-word for "penis." Penises become supplemental substitutes for themselves. In the song's final ironic turn, Annie discovers, after some sucking, that the lollipops that stood in for penises (or the penises that stood in for lollipops) are in fact "des petits bâtons" – real(ly) little penises. Penises themselves can only temporarily, as the song takes for granted, stand up to the phallic standard from which they derive their value (and it's not a high value, either, merely a few cents' worth).

Everything circulates through the song and its reception – lollipops, pennies, penises, and Annie (and the sound "Annie") – taking on "un goût anisé," an "Annied" flavor; but for whom is this flavor, if not the next person to taste Annie's lips? Is the listener supposed to infer a young companion for Annie, or instead to think about the auto-erotic pleasure Annie can gain by licking her own lips, by saying her name, by vibrating the different names for her body against themselves? The object of the song's desire is clearly not penises, nor semen, the proper object of the oral fetishist. Flowing down Annie's throat is not the seminal flow but the crystallized, condensed lump of barley sugar, and penises themselves turn out to be merely the support of the real fantasy, the little sticks beneath the fantasy's thicker covering. The true fetish here is erection or surplus-value itself, which, although everything seems always up for grabs in the space of the drugstore, is also inserted into patterns of ebbing and flowing, between "sucettes" and "bâtons," just as bodies can constantly alter their relationships to themselves, as suggested by the metaphoric "prendre ses jambes à son corps." Does the song, then, support the techno-fetishist operation by which anyone, when armored with the proper exchange-object, can be erected into the complete, prosthetically-enhanced figure of desire – an operation that in turn is erected on the fundamental axiom that the phallus is something that is lacking, that is sublimely or paradisiacally absent from the constant circle of exchanges? Or, in what would be a surprising inversion, does the song instead suggest, if only fleetingly, that erection can (a)rise (and fall, and rise again) exactly where it only ought to have been grafted, in the play of Annie's lips against themselves, in the resonances between *Annie* and *anis*, between herself as "proper" name or mere excremental object, as – finally – both, or undecidably, self-similar and self-different?

In other words, why does Gainsbourg need to fear Gall so much? His Gallophobia drives him to struggle for 25 years to define the song's meaning as purely abject and abjecting, both by fostering the narrative of scandal surrounding "Les sucettes" in which he must have tricked Gall into singing a demeaning song and also by covering "Les sucettes" so as to definitively fix its meaning as phallically-oriented. The actual violence of the song has less to do with Gainsbourg giving it to Gall to perform, than with his subsequent framing of the song as an act of violence. In 1966, he gave Gall a spectacular Hermès bracelet as a gift on the occasion of the song's release and scandal – seemingly miles away from the

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<sup>211</sup> Cf. *G* 299 and *SGFG* 44.

hyperbolic cruelty he manifests towards her later.<sup>212</sup> But perhaps the gift and the cruelty are coterminous: if Gall can be put in her proper place as a mechanized body, a techno-fetishistic doll, then she can also be shown how to enjoy the proper ornaments for that body, the “écrous” of jewelry that can finally be functionally placed upon her form. Gainsbourg’s amorous pedagogy commands Gall to abject herself, learn to embrace her incompleteness, and promises she will develop the capacity to enjoy that abjection.

But this lesson does not seem to take so naturally with Gall, the doll that refuses to be played with in the proper way. What if Gall is correct when she claims that “Avec ‘Les sucettes’, Serge s’est trompé, la chanson n’était pas à l’image de mon caractère”<sup>213</sup>? What if “Les sucettes” fails to be a perfect mirror for Gall, just as a gap manages to remain between the proper cyclical functioning of its fetishist economy and the tension between its mirrored parts? What if, suddenly, at the climax of what should have been the most dramatic object-lesson in sexual indifference and masochistic pleasure, difference will have emerged at the heart of sameness? Even as a body is mechanized to the furthest extent, reduced to the automatic pains and pleasures of a doll, this doll, uncannily, may begin to take on a life of its own. A doubtful life, perhaps an animation or a re-animation, one that only begins to emerge when you aren’t looking at it straight-on, but a life that could unsettle the very foundations of the mediatized empire of desire that seeks to evacuate anything other than its mechanical sameness. To follow this strange, twilight life of the doll, we will have to hear from within Gall’s voice the echoes of all the dolls who have sung before her, and within those the uncertain, dubious other lives within those songs. In short, we will have to go back to a beginning, a moment at which the doll first starts to sing – to sing, and not merely to speak or to make music – and a beginning that is certainly not *the* beginning.

The year is 1965. Gall has just won the Eurovision song contest as the representative from Luxembourg with Gainsbourg’s “Poupée de cire, poupée de son.” Unlike “Les sucettes,” Gall considered to this song be an accurate mirror of herself at the time: “Serge écrivait des chansons qui correspondaient à la manière don’t il me voyait. J’étais quelqu’un de très triste, très solitaire. Je déteste parler de ces années-là. J’ai enregistré mon premier disque à quinze ans et demi. À vingt ans j’étais encore tout à fait bébé. [...] À l’époque de ‘Poupée de cire’, j’avais très peur des garçons et cette chanson me ressemblait très fort”.<sup>214</sup> But performing the song was technically difficult: Gainsbourg’s composition forces Gall to exhibit herself on the edge of failure, with one sustained note halfway through the chorus (on “voir”) falling on a low F that is obviously one step below the boundary of Gall’s range. As such, the very song Gall praises for showing her as she really is simultaneously forces her to run a very specific danger, the danger of having her voice break, and consequently failing to support the image of doll-like perfection the song projects upon her. The conclusion of the line “Mes disques sont un miroir / Dans lequel chacun peut me voir” indeed renders her perilously visible, as the medium of a tenuous support of the listener’s fantasy; in many live performances of the song, Gall chose instead to sing the note an octave higher, to forestall this danger. When Gall’s body fails to sustain the song’s fantasy, the results are explosive: after performing in the Eurovision, Gall’s fiancé Claude François either refused to take her television calls or yelled through the line “Tu as chanté faux, tu étais nulle !” so loudly it could be heard through the telephone cabinet.<sup>215</sup>

<sup>212</sup> G 299.

<sup>213</sup> G 299.

<sup>214</sup> G 277.

<sup>215</sup> G 276.

Adorno's seaside gramophone-girls might have dreamed of writing this song for themselves:

Je suis une poupée de cire, une poupée de son  
 Mon cœur est gravé dans mes chansons  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son  
 Suis-je meilleure, suis-je pire qu'une poupée de salon?  
 Je vois la vie en rose bonbon  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son

Mes disques sont un miroir  
 Dans lequel chacun peut me voir  
 Je suis partout à la fois  
 Brisée en des éclats de voix

Autour de moi j'entends rire les poupées de chiffon  
 Celles qui dansent sur mes chansons  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son  
 Elles se laissent séduire pour un oui, pour un nom  
 L'amour n'est pas que dans les chansons  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son [...]

Seule, parfois je soupire  
 Je me dis: "À quoi bon?  
 "Chanter ainsi l'amour sans raison  
 "Sans rien connaître des garçons?"  
 Je n'suis qu'une poupée de cire, qu'une poupée de son  
 Sous le soleil de mes cheveux blonds  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son

Mais un jour je vivrai mes chansons  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son  
 Sans craindre le chaleur des garçons  
 Poupée de cire, poupée de son<sup>216</sup>

Even as the song looks forward, to the sunny imagery of *Jane Birkin / Serge Gainsbourg*, it simultaneously looks backward, to the scene on the beach where music kept the adolescent couple apart, endlessly looking at each other without allowing their visual exchange to transfer the "warmth" of bodies. Gall, as the "blond sun" that illuminates, in the manner of Adorno's background music, the bodies of all other dollified females, emits a cold light. In this mirror Gall sees herself exactly as "N'écoute pas les idoles" promised: in the lens of her records, everyone catches her reflection as broken "éclats de voix."

The song's structural center, the chorus that leads from the all-too-fragile (and self-evidently so) "voir" to the triumphant, octave-higher "voix" that is sung with absolute confidence, lying as it is near the radiant center of Gall's range, bases itself on the alternation

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<sup>216</sup> Gall, "Poupée de cire, poupée de son" on *Poupée de cire, poupée de son* (France: Philips, 1965).

between the fetish as a visually-perceptible poor fit, an obviously uncomfortable prosthesis, and the immediate replacement of this image of fragility and brokenness with the pure resonance of the fetish-*voix* that hides itself by naming itself explicitly. Other totemic words break off from the song: “l’amour n’est pas que dans les chansons,” Gall warns us as an example; but is she saying that *love* exists outside of the world of song (then, we might ask, what is the musical version of love?), or that the syntagm “amour,” one of the “noms” upon which dancing dolls will break into desire with no compelling reason (“pour un oui, pour un non”), is circulating in and outside of the limits of her records, throughout the streams of the mediatized universe? The solar dystopia of “Poupée de cire, poupée de son” is one in which everyone is automated, their strings pulled by the beats of the music that illusorily animates them, the musical waves that radiate from the body at the system’s center – the wax doll, the doll made of record shellac, or the “poupée de son,” the doll stuffed with sound, with sounds – the body of the techno-fetishistic medium itself, the body with which the singing woman must seem to converge. In a way, it is this body’s fragility – its wax or fetishistic (in)consistency – that renders it so vulnerable to the “ardency” of boys, of which it can know nothing, lest it melt or become fragmented once more.

Finally, the world of “Poupée de cire, poupée de son” is a world without girls. Everywhere Gall looks, she sees only dolls and boys. Weren’t girls the one thing missing from Lucien’s first attempts at fantasizing, the element that the TSF was supposed to have brought him? Therefore the explosion of Gainsbourg’s fantasy was not simply missing girls, but missing *missing* girls. Kittler turns to the “electronic ladyland” of pop music to suggest that the feminine body has now been defined as the constitutive lack, the lacuna of epistemological impotence, of the contemporary media constellation – its missing missing Real.<sup>217</sup> But this argument forgets that this song mirrored at least one young girl who found herself in it – and thus, found herself as fragmented in it. Gall emerged from her performance of the song as a pop idol, of the kind she struggled against in “N’écoute pas les idoles.” Yet she must also have emerged from it as an adolescent struggling to understand her difference from the boys who have created her in their image (the song’s epistemological impulse turns on the body of the “garçons”: “À quoi bon chanter l’amour sans connaître des garçons?”), and also as someone able, as Adorno wrote, to engrave her songs with her own character and her own heart.

Gall’s final promise – “Un jour je vivrai mes chansons sans craindre le chaleur des garçons” – may be read either as a resolution to discipline herself in fetishism, to enter into the economy of masochistic coldness, or to seek out a love, from within the language and world of her songs, that would bring forward the heat of the body that has ceased to emanate from a seashore scene now transformed into a tattoo or a longwave, low-energy radio frequency. To do so would be to bring the girl back out of the doll, to allow the heat of real bodies to melt the wax statue, to soften the phallic erection of desire, to embrace a displaced and paradoxical adolescence: to begin to love, not the stability and fixity of fetishism, but the uncertainty surrounding the possibility of the doll’s paradoxical and temporally-disjointed animations – or even to love the gramophone as something other than a means of reproduction, to love it as a difference engine. Perhaps it would be to think that there could be, in the mouth, something other than a phallus or a not-a-phallus. To allow Gall to live this odd dream-within-a-dream of “growing up” in a different way, as difference, would be to learn to love pop music differently as well.

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<sup>217</sup> *GFT* 111-114.

### Hoffmann, Fantasy: Olympia's Uncanny Song

Dès que paraît la poupée, le récit oblique et fuit.

- Cixous, *La fiction et ses fantômes*, 25-6

[Offenbach's music] held forth a vision of a time when man should no longer be in thrall to technical invention, but should freely use and play with it.

- Siegfried Kracauer, *Orpheus in Paris*, 336

### Vocal Breakdown, Technical Breakthrough

The song of the singing doll, Olympia, in Jacques Offenbach's opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1877-1881) eerily recapitulates "Poupée de cire, poupée de son," the emblem of Gall's Eurovision tele-triumph, her victory in the Olympic Games of pop music. Olympia's "Doll Song," engineered as a tinny, artificial satire of the defining tropes of the French operetta, has become an endlessly popular, endlessly reiterated concert aria:

Les-oi-seaux-dans-la-char-mille,  
 Dans-les-cieux-l'as-tre-du-jour,  
 Tout-par-le-à-la-jeu-ne-fille  
 Tout-par-le-à-la-jeu-ne-fille d'amour !  
 Ah ! Ah !  
 Tout-par-le-d'a-mour !  
 Ah !

*(Elle reste la bouche ouverte.)*

Voi-là.  
 La-chan-son-gen-tille !  
 La-chan-son-d'O-lym-pi-a,  
 d'O-lym-pi-a ! Ah !

*(Spalanzani effrayé passe derrière Olympia, on entend le bruit d'un ressort qu'on remonte.) [...]*

Tout-ce-qui-chante-et-ré-sonne.  
 Et-sou-pi-re-tour-à-tour.  
 É-meut-son-cœur-qui-fris-sonne.  
 É-meut-son-cœur-qui-fris-sonne d'amour !  
 Ah ! Ah !  
 Fris-sonne d'a-mour !  
 Ah !

*(même jeu)*<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Jacques Offenbach, *Les contes d'Hoffmann, opéra fantastique en 5 actes*, libretto by Jules Barbier, edited and restored by Michael Kaye. In this chapter I will rely on Kaye's version of the "finished" opera, as included in the accompanying materials to Jacques Offenbach, *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, Orchestre et chœur de l'Opéra national de Lyon conducted by Kent Nagano

The stage directions, however silently, determine the fundamental *performance problem* that every director of this opera must confront in staging the song's dialectic of mastery and breakdown. At this point in the opera, the poet Hoffmann, equipped with a pair of rose-colored glasses purchased from the technology-peddler Coppélius, has fallen in love with Olympia, the robot-adolescent that Doctor Spalanzani is exhibiting as his own daughter. In front of the poet, oblivious of her automaton heart or automaton lack thereof, Olympia exhibits her breathtaking musical control in a coloratura electrical storm of staccato arpeggios, mechanical-clock trills, and music-box roulades, only to break down dramatically mid-chorus. After her "father" rewinds her, the scene plays itself again. This repeat includes exactly the "même jeu," the same stage business, that before appeared as a gratuitous accident, one which ought not to be subject to mechanical repetition, demonstrating that vocal mastery, the breakdown of vocal mastery, and the mastery over that breakdown all constitute the song's fantasy and its pleasure.

In fact, several theorists of opera locate the crux or "navel" of the opera-spectator's fantasy in such a breakdown of vocal mastery. Before Poizat gives his seductive theory of the divine moment in opera where song breaks down into the "cry," he examines a kind of opera spectatorship in which breakdown is defined not as transcendent, but as purely technical – extradiscursive, that is, inasmuch as it is outside of meaning, but also abject, shoddy, and material. Poizat emphasizes the "overpowering anguish" that "those who love to record music" feel when "recording a live broadcast, the anguish of knowing that it will be impossible to recover the original moment if the recording goes awry, that a transmission problem or a defect in the recording material may squander the opportunity,"<sup>219</sup> an anxiety generated by the presence of a possible technical accident, the endless pressure of a machine that might break down. Following Baudrillard, Poizat inverts the scheme, fixing on the point of breakdown as a powerfully cathected moment. Similarly, the work of the anxiety-producing machine serves to set the stage for the point of its interruption: the work of an aria, for instance, leads to the cadenza or fermata in which all other musical business stops to listen to a voice that no longer carries any signifying information, whether lyrical or tonal.

Poizat's eponymous "angel's cry" explicitly names the moment in which the business of music stops, ceding ground to "an encounter with the Divine, in the place assigned to it by the 'divine' voice itself, that of the diva – particularly in her cry"<sup>220</sup>; the correctly-orchestrated cry, the cry that the diva pulls off, provides the listener with the pleasure of hearing the lyrical give way to the ineffable. Gary Tomlinson identifies this pattern as the "metaphysical" specificity of opera as a medium.<sup>221</sup> But Poizat shows that this "proper" interruption is haunted by another interruption, the accidental breakdown of the recording

(Erato Opera Collection, 1996). I make the choice to lean on this version of the score and libretto because Kaye's reconstruction of the opera is the most contemporary, the most encyclopedic, and, in many (paradoxical) ways, the most fractured and problematic. For a fuller discussion of the history of the Kaye revision of the opera and its reception, see Mary Dibbern, *The Tales of Hoffmann: A Performance Guide* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002) xxi-xxii; and Heather Hadlock, *Mad Loves: Women and Music in Offenbach's Les Contes D'Hoffmann* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 113-133 (hereafter cited as *ML*).

<sup>219</sup> *AC* 98.

<sup>220</sup> *AC* 112.

<sup>221</sup> See Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).



medium or in the voice – a flat note, an unsuccessful ornamentation. To phrase the question in Poizat’s Lacanian terms: out of the two breakdowns (the eruption of Cry into music, and music’s interruption by technical difficulties), which is the *tuché* and which the automaton? That is, which one contains some trace of the real, of the outside of the representational system that continues to write itself in silence?

Wayne Koestenbaum answers this question by observing that “Vocal crisis is a form of communication. It tells us that opera is an art of interruption, rupture, and bodily danger,” and “A broken voice has brought the self’s private woe, the body’s history and flaw, into the Olympian art of singing.”<sup>222</sup> By an odd coincidence, Olympia breaks into Koestenbaum’s text, metonymically designating an operatic art defined not by its successful, but by its interrupted performance. Certainly Koestenbaum does not desire the same kind of transcendent cry that, according to Poizat, opera holds up as the object for its well-disciplined listener. Instead, Koestenbaum identifies breakdown as the exposure of an abject interiority: Koestenbaum intimately ties “selfhood” to a “flawed” body, exploring not the music of a divine angel’s cry, but instead the sublimity of a broken, mortal note. For Koestenbaum, this breakdown allows us to glimpse a very human interiority, in contrast to the more radical mechanistic anxiety that of Poizat. Koestenbaum’s alternative to “the angel’s cry” reassures and over-elates the spectator, who can’t wait for the moment that the heroine’s voice cracks, which will become the climax of many a cocktail-party conversation. This spectator can finally affirm the specificity of his own body and its limits in the mirror of the fragmented diva. Poizat seizes upon a second, absolutely inhuman breakdown, a pure technological accident that produces more and more anxiety – even though, somehow, there can still be a group of opera fans namable as “those who love to record music.”

In a less psychoanalytic register, Friedrich Nietzsche famously critiques Richard Wagner’s operas as “the opera of redemption,” enjoining the reader to “beware of understanding [the profundity of redemption],”<sup>223</sup> condemning meaningfulness and ego-gratification in one gesture. In the moment of the angel’s cry, music redeems itself by being able, however partially and only through its own failure, to represent what lies outside its limits. But what is redeemed when voices crack, when tape recorders wind down, when Olympia spins out of control? The diva’s false note redeems her precisely as “the woman behind the diva”: fragile and vulnerable at last, the diva truly has a (human) heart, visible only when it’s broken. She can enter an afterlife, returning to domesticity by leaving the stage and shedding the character of the inhuman woman that she merely played in the game of opera. She’ll have time to atone, to recover her lost humanity. She’s just like us. This logic thus bars Olympia from ever participating in Koestenbaum’s “Olympian art of singing”; lacking a human body, she is not even permitted the nobility of defeat in a fair fight. Better just to break her into pieces, as the evil Coppélius does in revenge for Spalanzani’s defaulting on the loan of Olympia’s eyes; she was nothing but an impossible residue anyway, and you’d have to be hallucinating to hear anything human in her song (although the diva performing Olympia will now be allowed a whole range of human dignities).

Poizat’s strictly inhuman cassette-tape breakdown refuses to phrase the diva’s breakdown in terms of the *pathos* of the felt experience of bodily mortality; Carolyn Abbate’s *In Search of Opera* follows the ramifications of this gesture. She frames the history of opera as

<sup>222</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2010) 127. Hereafter cited as *QT*.

<sup>223</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967) 160.

a contestation between the animate and the mechanical, summed up pithily in her maxim “musical performance is uncanny.”<sup>224</sup> Abbate demonstrates that traditional Western musical performance, “in which someone plays (is played by) someone else’s work,” makes “the machinelike status of human beings more clear” than anywhere else.<sup>225</sup> Abbate describes opera as a Promethean bargain: Humans subordinate themselves to machines, by forcing their bodies to correspond to the patterns of musical instruments as well as the compositional whims of master-composers, and even in the extreme by submitting to the rigors of vocal training that explicitly define how the body must be run. But this technique promises to allow them to express their humanity all the more poignantly, by mastering the deeply touching music-box harmonies of Ravel’s *Tombeau de Couperin*, or the impossible, and impossibly impassioned, roulades of the Queen of the Night’s Act I aria. For Abbate, opera ends up on the side of the human, if only by showing that the machine has never been so inhuman after all: “A moment when something fails, which in performance exposes the machine in the human being, can conversely mark the humanity of the machine.”<sup>226</sup>

Abbate’s aesthetics defines the machine strictly as the machine going wrong, the machine in a moment of breakdown; thus the human operator’s presence, supplementing the machine’s constantly self-endangering performance, becomes all the more necessary. Abbate refurbishes the comforting moral of works such as *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*: a ventriloquized machine graciously confesses that it is insufficient to program and run itself without running into error, defining “accident” as no longer contingent but essential, and thus installs human presence as the sole guarantor of art. Abbate defines opera in performance as the only appropriate object for critical and spectatorial desire: “the first and enduring bases for a passion about opera are not operatic works in the abstract, as intentional objects, but operas and their singers in performances.”<sup>227</sup> Abbate’s aesthetics allow us to escape from the semantic tyranny of “the composer’s vision,” the authorial imprimatur, and also to insist on the sensual and temporal – auditory, vocal – aspects of music. Simultaneously, Abbate only animates the machine to reveal it as dead, lifeless, and broken, in constant need of a revitalizing charge of humanity, and thus deprives it of a life of its own. In this history, Olympia becomes an out-of-place, temporally-disjointed footnote, suspended in the wrong era: she ought to have belonged to the pre-1850 quest to engineer singing automata who themselves produced their voices, but instead she ends up as another kind of residue in an age that had already moved on to considering the machine as purely reiterative, borrowing its life and voice from a human source, as a wind-up gramophone, in other words.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *ISO* 9.

<sup>225</sup> *ISO* 195.

<sup>226</sup> *ISO* 199.

<sup>227</sup> *ISO* ix.

<sup>228</sup> *ISO* 201-2. See also *ISO* 202: “Experiments that led to the phonograph were one by-product of a quest to reproduce the human singing voice; the problem of ‘reproduction’ became the search for a ‘recording’ almost simultaneously with the realization that singing could never be generated by machine.” Quite literally, Olympia, as an out-of-date embodiment of the desire to give machines their own voices, is an industrial by-product, one that can’t even be redeemed as a gramophone, although she can substitute for one (indeed, the cranking sounds inserted into her aria are a form of fetish-sound enabling the spectator to equate the singing female robot with the gramophone).

In these renderings of opera, the fantasized and fictionally-animated figure of Olympia is silenced, like Kundry, for the redemption of a fatally flawed but fundamentally affective humanity (a queer kind of humanity, defined around a paraphiliac “love for recording”). Gainsbourg’s manipulations of Gall obeyed this same logic, particularly in the imbrication of “Poupée de cire, poupée de son” and the Eurovision Song Contest, which itself straddles the “human” (defined, in baldly 19<sup>th</sup> century terms, as a particularity belonging to a historical nation-state) and the “technological” (both the post-gramophonic art of popular music and the implosive, anxiety-producing power of television’s emergence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century). Furthermore, we rediscover in Olympia’s song the very themes and tropes of Gall’s: the sunlight, medium of love itself, that warms and threatens to melt through the lyrical line; the young woman’s solipsistic world in which everything speaks of the same love the young girl sings, her voice becoming indistinguishable from its echoes; and a fantasy of breakdown or breakthrough, when the doll ceases being the automatic, mechanically-reproductive conduit for the Father’s fantasy of an ideal music and instead participates, and articulates her own potential participation from her standpoint of absolute difference, in the world of love and resonance, song and electromagnetic waves, that she causes to vibrate. Even if Olympia, or Gall, is, technically speaking, a resonant, shivering box that produces a song, does she have a heart to emit? When Hoffmann’s glasses are broken, once he can no longer see her as an animate being, i.e. a creature endowed with breath and a soul, that heart is revealed to have been merely an optical illusion, the *trompe-l’œil* effect of depth projected fetishistically into or onto a flat surface. But if Gall and Olympia double each other, so do the pairs Gainsbourg/Gall and Spalanzani/Olympia: the machinery of overdetermination here include not only the puppet, but the puppeteers. Does Gall’s reiteration of Olympia’s doll-song prove that Gall is even more an automatic reproduction of the machine-sounds of the past? Or, instead, does the doll-song’s endless self-inscription reveal that this trope, this turn of a technological fantasy, has taken on an uncanny life of its own? Is the soul, the essence, of the automaton her soullessness, or do the rhetorical strings that animate her in order to express that soullessness enable her to take a few breaths of her own?

Like Hoffmann, to recover the different allure of Olympia, the way her song preserves without reducing the interplay between human and machine, we must put on the rose-colored glasses of fantasy, reading various reductive fantasies of Olympia’s song to explore what their construction *as* fantasy overwrites or renders inaudible. Bearing in mind Nietzsche’s injunction to beware of what we can easily “understand” in opera, I will first examine some of the opera’s surface-level complexities that are often reduced for aesthetic or “practical” reasons. To do so will involve taking the opera seriously, and thus taking the very “comic” of “comic operetta” seriously. I will then consider one of the more surprising traditions of “mechanizing” and reducing Olympia’s interest and autonomy: feminist opera criticism, which commonly does away with Olympia and the version of feminine music- and love-making that she represents. Oddly, it is precisely the person most in question in these feminist looks at Olympia – Sigmund Freud – who turns out to give one of the most surprisingly animated, lively portraits of what ought to be a dead doll. Freud’s multiple and inconsistent readings of Olympia suggest a more nuanced and polyvalent imagining of Olympia – and the practice of love and song that she epitomizes. Still today, as I will show in my concluding reading of a recent performance of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* at the Met, Olympia leads us to ask why we prefer the operations of fetishism to a theory of sustained breakdown between bodies and machines.

## Interlude

As it will be necessary to follow the traces of the encounter between poet and doll as they weave in and out of the entire text of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, I will now present a plot summary for those not yet initiated in the opera's charms, or for those who would like to see the form that such an initiation has taken in my case. This summary reflects several of the idiosyncrasies of an opera with multiple textual variants and multiple stagings; if, as Cixous suggests, "le récit oblique et fuit" at certain points, I will try to follow its multiple branchings and breachings.

*Prologue* The opera opens in Luther's tavern, next to an opera house where the diva "La Stella" is appearing in *Don Giovanni*. The spirits of wine and beer sing a chorus, after which the Muse appears from a wine-cask and disguises herself as Hoffmann's companion Nicklausse, planning to compete with La Stella for Hoffmann's heart ("Il faut, en cette heure fatale / Qu'il choisisse entre nos amours, / Qu'il appartienne à ma rivale, / Ou qu'il soit à moi pour toujours !"). Hoffmann arrives, and in no particular order: trades barbs with his arch-nemesis and rival for the affections of La Stella, the Councilor Lindorf; then sings the ballad of Kleinzach – which is interrupted by his rêverie, the "Vision," a memory of love that will not correspond to any of Hoffmann's lovers as presented in the opera; and then promises to regale the students with the story of his romantic misadventures if they stay with him through the opera and keep drinking ("Voulez-vous le récit de ces folles amours ?").

*Act I: Olympia* Hoffmann is now posing as a "puits de science" to get closer to his obsession, Olympia, the daughter of the scientist Spalanzani. Hoffmann meets the vendor Coppelius, who shows him his stock of "vrais yeux" ("beaux yeux, / Des yeux noirs, des yeux bleus !") and then sells him a pair of rose-colored glasses. A salon exhibition of Olympia commences; the guests arrive and she sings an enchanting song. Hoffmann steals a waltz with Olympia to become closer to her, but suddenly she begins to whirl wildly and smashes his spectacles before her father can rush in to take her to bed. However, Coppelius – who is furious that Spalanzani has not yet paid him back for the eyes he sold to be used in Olympia's construction – smashes Hoffmann's love, and the poet discovers, to general amusement, that she was and always had been a robot.

*Act II: Antonia* Hoffmann sneaks into Antonia's father's house. He has been forbidden from visiting her, but doesn't know why. In fact, her father Crespel knows that Antonia has inherited a fatal condition from her mother, a famous diva – if Antonia sings, she will die. To make matters worse, the mysterious Doctor Miracle lurks in every corner. Hoffmann arrives, sings an extended scene with his betrothed, then discovers the terrifying truth and forbids her from singing any more. But once he's gone, Doctor Miracle appears, and conjures the voice of Antonia's dead mother by playing his violin in front of the mother's portrait. Antonia sings herself to death, breathing her last in Hoffmann's arms.

*Act III: Giulietta* In this act, originally cut from the 1882 premiere of the opera, Hoffmann has sworn off love. But at a gambling-party in Venice, he is seduced by the courtesan Giulietta; she, meanwhile, is in thrall to the evil magician Dappertutto, who has used his magic gemstones to mesmerized her who wants her to use her magic mirror to steal Hoffmann's reflection (as she has previously stolen the shadow of Schlemil). Giulietta seduces Hoffmann, forces him to kill Schlemil in a duel to recover the key to her rooms, then begs Hoffmann to give her his shadow as a going-away present, since he's going to

have to run away to escape police attention. At this point things become a little obscure: either Giulietta drinks a cup of poison intended for Nicklausse, or Hoffmann gets his reflection back, or Hoffmann attempts to kill her and ends up stabbing her true love, the dandy Pitchinaccio, instead, since Dappertutto has clouded his vision with a magical fog.

*Epilogue* Hoffmann, drunk, finishes the ballad of Kleinzach. When Stella arrives, things don't go well, and the diva leaves with Lindorf (again, the reasons vary, as do the psychologies of Stella: sometimes she's a good-hearted person truly in love with Hoffmann who leaves with Lindorf only in desperation, while sometimes she's a scheming gold-digger who's all too eager to give up art for money). Hoffmann may or may not attempt suicide. Nicklausse reveals himself to be the Muse and claims Hoffmann as her own, but it's unclear whether his art will be a consolation or a hell: the final song includes the Muse and Stella singing competing couplets: "Loin de toi le passé ! Ton génie est à moi !" versus "Mais toujours le passé surgira devant toi !" *Fin*

### **Divas, Dancers, Dolls, Ducks: Figuring Automation in the *Contes***

The opera's staging of Olympia's song poses the question of her autonomy or automatism (and indeed, the question of autonomy or automatism *tout court*). The famous film of the opera, directed in lurid Technicolor by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, stages Olympia's song as a pure hallucination.<sup>229</sup> Powell and Pressburger translate the opera into film by doubling almost all of the characters: an operatic performance dubs a movement-theater piece performed by lip-synching ballet dancer, in what could be described as one of the first, and certainly one of the longest, pure music videos. In so doing, Powell and Pressburger replace one kind of automation by another: While the opera foregrounds the unsettling conjunction of technical mastery and emotional expression within the highly-disciplined yet highly-idiosyncratic operatic voice, their *The Tales of Hoffmann* resolves the dialectic of Covent Garden by first mechanizing voice and body separately, then suturing them together in a way that dramatically reduces their possibility for complexity.

Olympia, in the Powell and Pressburger film, is far too perfectly automated, and her song is no longer an example of Abbate's "performance": too little can go wrong, since the voice and the body have been delegated to animatronic specialists; thus Olympia is no longer the creation imagined by Offenbach's *Contes*, no longer a "fundamentally impossible" "fake or an obvious trick in the way that an android pianist was not, because a *singing* voice in fact could not be generated mechanically,"<sup>230</sup> a machine lacking its "fundamental" foundation of "impossibility" or of the necessary breakdown. If the Olympia of the *Contes* was a science fiction, the Olympia reconstituted by Powell and Pressburger, through the image of Moira Shearer's body and the sound of Dorothy Bond's voice, is too perfect a creation (a fiction, a made-up thing) of cinema science. In *The Tales of Hoffmann*, we can encounter a purely mechanical automaton, since both of its puppeteers have yielded up all traces of their humanity to each other. Here we lack the sound of the ballerina in her dance, the rustle of her skirts, the gasps in her breath, as well as the body of the singer in her song, the uncomfortably supplemental presence of her form in her performance.

The illusionistic image of Shearer fouetté-ing her way through the Doll Song epitomizes how little the film tries to hide its illusion-producing mechanisms. Although

<sup>229</sup> Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, dir., *The Tales of Hoffmann* (Janus Films, 1951).

<sup>230</sup> ISO 201.

Shearer begins the song lip-synching along to the words (and the lip-synch returns in a few inserted shots), she quickly abandons the lip-synch that ought to have been an absolute law – thus there is no perceivable ground for the spectator’s belief that the dancer in the image is producing the voice on the soundtrack.<sup>231</sup> By creating an Olympia that is literally unperformable by human actors the film also creates an Olympia that is literally unperceivable by human spectators: it’s impossible to appreciate Shearer’s and Bond’s gymnastics simultaneously, since out of the gaze and the voice one must always serve as the backing track to the other – a truth demonstrated vividly when the aria is interrupted by the foley sound of a mechanical click to accompany Shearer’s blinks. The film does not necessarily lose by this, however; instead, the impossible Olympia, parcelated into a perfect soundtrack and a perfect ballet, is the source of a purely technical spectatorial enjoyment. No longer do we find a breakdown between the body and voice, but instead a purely fetishistic solution to the fragmentation of the self. Kaja Silverman, in *The Acoustic Mirror*, demonstrates how this solution is proper to film – that is, the film adds a subtraction of bodily and vocal grains to the opera. She describes how the interaction between a (visibly edited) series of images and the (illusionistically-constructed through opposition to the images) flow of the soundtrack produces the “fetishistic value which a surprising number of film theoreticians have conferred upon the voice” and the resulting “fiction of the authenticity of cinematic sounds” that “promotes belief not only in presence but in self-presence” as defined as the identity of the voice to itself, outside of a structure of suturing.<sup>232</sup>

Indeed, the film’s staging of Olympia’s song clearly defines a stable aural track as lacking any capacity for deception by juxtaposing it with a self-evidently illusionistic series of images. Powell and Pressburger certainly unveil the fictiveness of the image through the baseline cinematic technique of montage, but they also imagine Spalanzani’s home as a (literal) marionette-theater. The supplementary characters, the chorus of interested citizens invited to view Spalanzani’s scientific breakthrough, all appear as baroquely-made-up humans in an expressionist take on Punch and Judy when Hoffmann’s glasses are on; as soon as the spectacles slip, however, the human lip-synchers are replaced by real-life puppets on a tiny dollhouse stage, a *mise-en-abyme* of the salon in general.<sup>233</sup> The film resolves a

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<sup>231</sup> This is the only scene in the film that drops synch-sound. Practical considerations are, of course, involved; Powell and Pressburger clearly intend the Doll Song ballet to match the virtuosity of the Doll Song itself, and Shearer’s variation requires sustained physical effort above and beyond which any further effort would be next-to-impossible (not to mention that ballet technique does not cover lip-synching, making such facial movements perhaps incompatible with the dance’s steps). Powell and Pressburger manage this difficulty in the rest of the film by eliminating ballet for the only two other truly virtuosic vocal roles, by having Hoffmann (Robert Rounseville) and Antonia (Ann Ayars) play both their images and their voices and thus foreclosing in advance any possible fancy footwork on their parts of which they would, perhaps thankfully, be incapable.

<sup>232</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 43. Hereafter cited as *AM*.

<sup>233</sup> The salon of Spalanzani in *The Tales of Hoffmann* recalls Abbate’s analysis of the paranoia felt by Jean Paul in his 1788 essay on Wolfgang von Kempelen’s efforts to create a speaking-machine. Jean Paul fears that the empty chatter of women in fashionable salons has already turned the fair sex into a race of automata: while Jean Paul fears that real women will all-too-easily be replaced by talking dolls, Spalanzani’s salon stages real dolls replaced by “real” women. Now the fantasist dreams of human bodies in a world of machines, when before the

question without even allowing the audience to formulate it: by showing clearly that only the spectacles of fantasy would allow you to be duped into thinking that an automaton was a person, it defines in advance assigning humanity to machines as the core of fantasy and delusion. If the film thus comments on its own machinery – saying, for instance, that only the magic lenses of the cinema allow us to believe in the impossible singing and dancing body of Shearer/Bond – it is only to emphasize and re-assert the difference between reality and fantasy, performing and performed, the world outside and inside the movie theater or opera house.

However, in the “ideal text” that is the score of the opera itself, no such decision can be reached as to the definitive place of fantasy. The opera structurally refuses to let us know, definitively, what its characters are thinking, and whether their thoughts are accurate representations of their diegetic world or instead figments of their own distorted view thereof. The opera imagines a world in which we cannot be sure first about who – Hoffmann, Nicklausse, the chorus – is fantasizing, and then about what the content and motivations of their fantasies may be. Yes, Hoffmann buys the glasses from Coppélius. But do the glasses show him what he wants to see, or does his desire use the glasses as an alibi to project in front of him what he has desired all along – the fantasy of the perfect voice in the perfect body, which Kittler describes as the fantasy of oral mediation central to the historical E. T. A. Hoffmann’s work?<sup>234</sup> Hoffmann has already been warned – by his sidekick Nicklausse, who in the prologue was replaced by the Muse, a divine woman who here gets to “play” the role of a man, making a male body into her puppet as she wanders through the stories of love narrated inside the frame of the opera – that Olympia is a figure of a particular kind of fantasy, the automaton-mania of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nicklausse’s song certainly suggests that s/he has seen the true nature of Olympia, since it presents love as an allegory of “Une poupée aux yeux d’émail [...] Au près d’un petit coq en cuivre” who “Par un rouage ingénieux [...] en roulant les yeux, / Soupirait et disait : Je t’aime !” Or does Nicklausse simply intend to warn Hoffmann about the naïvely generic or automatic character that all young lovers, believing themselves to be the first to ever love, inevitably take on? He may even be upbraiding Hoffmann for not seeing in Olympia anything besides that which his image of romantic adoration would allow him to see. Hoffmann may be

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satirist found himself in a nightmare of soulless dolls in a world of women. See Abbate’s discussion of this text in *ISO* 72.

<sup>234</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), particularly 25-123 and 124-144. Hereafter cited as *DN*. See, for instance, Kittler’s framing of the Mother’s voice as a sublime oral flow that says nothing but imposes the necessity that men speak, and enjoy their speaking of the voice’s mystery: “An accomplished Mother’s Mouth at the end of its self-education no longer works in an empirico-dialectical manner, but becomes the mouthpiece of an “original voice sound” that generates all others” (*DN* 35); in this way we can see the importance of Olympia: lacking the capacity to engage in dialogue, she performs the purely phatic function that gives consistency and meaning to her interlocutor’s words. Kittler argues precisely this in stating how Olympia is the necessary accessory to the Poet’s pursuits: “Only a beloved given totally to ‘oh’-saying can fulfill the wish that language (mathematically put) should have no greater power than the soul, that it should really and exclusively ‘portray man’s inner life.’ Olympia is the soul that, instead of speaking, makes her lover speak and speak exactly that inner life” (*DN* 42).

acting in thrall to his own unconscious fantasies, Nicklausse warns, and may even be said to be reducing Olympia to the mere instantiation of his fantasy in turn.<sup>235</sup>

Can we even trust Nicklausse's clear-sightedness? He gets one number per act, the first two seeming to confirm him as a clairvoyant truth-teller: the humorous, admonitory couplets, and the aria "Vois sous l'archet frémissant / Vibrer la boîte sonore" in which he prophecies the manner of Antonia's death by describing how a violin's "âme" can be hacked by an outside operator. However, Nicklausse's final song, the famous "Barcarolle" – "Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour / Souris à nos ivresses !" – damages his good reputation somewhat, being a duet with Giulietta, the most ethically-compromised character in the opera. Are his songs, then, meant to awaken Hoffmann from his affective automatism, or instead to set the right *tone* for his various romantic failures – comic, romantic, and modernist? Nicklausse might be less of an ally of free action and more of a stand-in for the poet as the puppet-master behind real-life scenes and effects.

Similarly, there is no telling, from the libretto and music alone, at what point (or if ever) the chorus of guests, a stand-in for the many-headed body of the audience, realizes that Olympia is a doll. Their music remains oddly static, from the moment of their first entrance when they refer (ironically?) to Olympia as the daughter of Spalanzani, through their introjections in the Doll Song, through the long waltz scene in which Olympia begins to go haywire, to the conclusion in which they sing, triumphantly, "Ah ! ah ! ah ! La bombe éclate ! Il aimait un automate !" No cue describes the exact moment at which they see through the illusion of Olympia's song.

Musicologist Heather Hadlock describes one of the most telling features of the *Contes*: "Whoever wants to perform it must resolve – at least for the duration of a performance – its inconsistencies and ambiguities."<sup>236</sup> Hadlock refers, first of all, to the problems of textual resolution attendant on any fragmentary and palimpsestic text: the *Contes* was left unfinished at the time of Offenbach's death (or is the opera too finished, with its many contradictory versions, plans, and performance decisions overlapping and interfering with each other?). But in the context of the Olympia act, her observation underlines the director's obligation to decide on the problems of psychology – understood as the degree to which the characters are conscious of themselves, their "motivations" – that the score and libretto leave so interestingly "unresolved." Is Hoffmann deluded by Coppélius, or is he deluding himself by means of Coppélius's conveniently-offered spectacles? Is Nicklausse telling Hoffmann that Olympia is literally a machine, or is he telling Hoffmann that Hoffmann is, metaphorically, robotically playing out the fantasies of young love? Does chorus's explosive jeering at Hoffmann signal that they've been in on a joke at his expense all along, or does the violence of their laughter echo the intensity of their effort to dupe themselves into thinking that they were never duped?

Beyond these considerations of consciousness and consistency lurk even more complicated detours and displacements of fantasy, suggesting that certain fantasies may not be "fantastic," derived from the imaginary of literature, alone, but instead folies à deux of literature and science. Nicklausse's couplets paint the picture of a doll declaring her love to a "coq en cuivre" who "Avec un air rébarbatif, / Tournait par trois fois sur lui-même" – bird

<sup>235</sup> This line of argument, we will see, is most famously summarized in Freud's triumphalist (and, in fact, itself potentially ironic) dictum that "The automatic doll can be nothing else than a materialization of Nathaniel's feminine attitude towards his father in his infancy." See Freud, "The Uncanny," in *Standard Edition*, vol. 17: 219-252, 232. Hereafter cited as "U."

<sup>236</sup> *ML* 15.



and lady, not an innocent pairing of automata. The spinning cock imitates another imitating engine, the famous defecating duck of Félix Vaucanson (1738), which was and still is often linked to a sonic automaton, either Vaucanson's mechanical flute player or the female harpsichordist crafted by Pierre Jacquet-Droz (1774), which, like Vaucanson's duck, mimetically echoed its model on both its surface and in its inner workings.<sup>237</sup> By choosing a particularly famous robot as his referent, Nicklausse doesn't merely tease Hoffmann for being robotic in his affections for Olympia, but adds another layer of irony: Hoffmann has not even chosen an original imitative machine to imitate; his imitation is unselfconsciously imitative.

If Nicklausse certainly cites the very iterability of the iteration-engine Hoffmann is diegetically reiterating, he also suggests a genealogy for the technological structure of this iteration. Vaucanson's flute-player imitated the playing of a flute by means of a quite sophisticated apparatus that blew air out its lips and manipulated the keys of the instrument, while Jacquet-Droz's harpsichordist imitated the gestural and affective codes associated not with playing an instrument, but with playing music. Her gaze played across the keyboard in time to her fingers, and her breast heaved and fell with the tones of her music, imitating not only embodied soulfulness but breathing as well, as if to insist on her *animation*. A contemporary could fault Vaucanson's flutist for failing to be "an artificial face that expresses the passions, for to express the passions of the soul, one must have a soul"; Jacquet-Droz's harpsichordist, on the other hand, "gave so titillating an impression of the bodily manifestation of powerful emotion that she seemed to confirm La Métrie's argument that the passions and the artistic creativity they fueled were, of all human attributes, the most mechanical."<sup>238</sup> Both the harpsichordist and Olympia are engineered so as to exceed an effort to imitate the technological performance of a musical composition by integrating the mimetic relationship between performer and spectator: the performer's affective supplementation of the music performed resonates with the spectator as a surplus-affect produced by witnessing the performative production of affective content. Both Spalanzani and Jacquet-Droz, that is, try to make robots that you can fall in love with, thus miming humanity and arguing for a fundamental mechanicity of human affect.

Olympia needs not only a song to sing, but a motivation to set herself into song, an alibi she can adopt to allow herself to have been "moved" into singing. Enter her resonant theory of natural speech: birdsong and sunlight are echoing, vibrating words of love that speak to the young girl beyond the horizon of language – and the girl, in turn, relays the message through song, a prototype telephone with Nature on the line. Olympia, like Jacquet-Droz's harpsichordist, mimes the automatism of musical affect, the seemingly compulsive, reflexive, or even excretory/extrojective character of affect-driven artistic expression. To make the robot more lifelike, Spalanzani's conceives of the life of poets – and virgins – as more and more robotic.

The second important intertextual consequence of this triple metaphor (between Hoffmann/Olympia, rooster/doll, and Vaucanson/Jacquet-Droz) concerns the limits of this replicative art of pre-robotics. As Jessica Riskin demonstrates, Vaucanson sought not only to present a triumphant spectacle of his automata's mimetic powers but also to define and delimit the precise boundaries of such power. His duck was a fake, but its factitiousness was (redemptively enough) also the source of its, and its maker's, authenticity. For Vaucanson,

<sup>237</sup> Jessica Rifkin, "The Defecating Duck, or The Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry*, 29.4 Summer 2003: 599-633, 604. Hereafter cited as "DD."

<sup>238</sup> "DD" 631.

Riskin argues, automata-building was a form of performative experimentation: “Vaucanson’s automata were philosophical experiments, attempts to discern which aspects of living creatures could be reproduced in machinery, and to what degree, and what such reproductions might reveal about their natural subjects.”<sup>239</sup> In other words, for Vaucanson, research into artificial creations was merely one way to conduct research into natural science, into the biological and spiritual natures that, ultimately, would distinguish man and machine. Paradoxically, Vaucanson’s obsession with verisimilitude would finally lead him to abandon verisimilitude entirely, in favor of the abstract process known as “scientific modeling”: “By imitating the stuff of life, automaton makers were once again aiming, not merely for verisimilitude, but for simulation; they hoped to make the parts of their machines work as much as possible like the parts of living things and thereby to test the limits of resemblance between synthetic and natural life.”<sup>240</sup> Something had to escape, then, to lie beyond the limits of representation, for there to be a remediable specificity of the “natural.” This residue lay, not in the residue excreted by the robotic duck, but in its stomach, at its heart: the duck ate food pellets and defecated different pellets, but at no point did it, through digestion, turn the one kind of pellet into the other.

Riskin rightly emphasizes that Vaucanson’s experiment thus clearly “made manifest both the process of mechanical simulation and its boundary”<sup>241</sup> and “dramatized two contradictory claims: that living creatures were essentially mechanical and that living creatures were the antithesis of machines.”<sup>242</sup> She also, suggestively, points out that Vaucanson’s imitation breaks down at a significant moment: it was a matter of some debate in Vaucanson’s time whether the “dissolution” of food particles was the work of mechanical or chemical processes.<sup>243</sup> There where the mechanical, clockwork body of the pre-Vaucansonian automaton ends, the electrochemical, post-Vaucansonian body begins. Vaucanson, defining the limit of his clockwork at the overture onto the mostly non-mechanical elements of digestion, in fact argues that the irreducible element of natural life, that which cannot (yet...) be recapitulated in mechanical form, is the set of processes associated with organic chemistry and its main scientific crux, viz., the exploration of how various flows of energy and information are structured, reproduced, and exchanged at the molecular level. Vaucanson, then, ducks out of the debate exactly where Luigi Galvani, Alessandro Volta, and Alexander von Humboldt (and later Hermann von Helmholtz) were about to make their entrance. These scientists would for the first time take as a theoretical a priori that strangely non-material electrical elements constituted the non-mechanical stuff of the human body. Their only question would be the extent to which the electrical fibers of the body that conducted “animal electricity” through the organs – whose workings could be mimetically reproduced with another 18<sup>th</sup> century totem, the Leyden jar – could be generalized.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> “DD” 601.

<sup>240</sup> “DD” 606.

<sup>241</sup> “DD” 610.

<sup>242</sup> “DD” 612.

<sup>243</sup> “DD” 609.

<sup>244</sup> For a good overview of the exchanges between Galvani and Volta (and their followers) in terms of the problematics of information technology, see Laura Otis, “The Metaphoric Circuit: Organic and Technological Communication in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 63.1 (January 2002): 105-128.

A similar division between mechanical and electrical energies plays out within the aperture-apparatus of Vaucanson's flutist as well. Vaucanson ran up against an irreducible challenge in constructing the flute-player and another pipe-playing automaton. According to classical acoustics, the intervals of a wind-instrument ought to be rational and fixed, corresponding to one set of openings in the body of the instrument (one finger-position) and one pressure of air moving through the instrument. However, it in fact requires more breath to descend in pitch on a resonating pipe than to ascend in pitch, since the overtones of the higher note resonate more strongly in the sound chamber and thus take more work to replace.<sup>245</sup> (Overtones were only first physically accounted-for in the 1860's by – who else? – Helmholtz, who finally had the logarithmic means with which to describe them.) Although human wind-instrumentalists (and vocalists) are often unaware of having to compensate for the irrational noise of overtones, they became a limiting factor for Vaucanson. Since these overtones affected the passage from one note to another, the number of intervallic changes, and thus the number of corresponding unique pressure-differentials, to be calculated increased exponentially, quickly threatening to outmatch the physical capacities of a mechanical piper. The construction of a “true” robotic wind instrumentalist would have to wait for the invention of a device that could, if not calculate these pressure-differentials in real-time, at least store a potentially immense set of data relating to pressure. Such a mass of mechanical information lay beyond the material capacity of any 18<sup>th</sup>-century automaton. Instead, Vaucanson faked it, artificially restricting the range and performance of his pipe-player and flutist. Both mark the limits of their own technologies, a “limit, if not to mechanism, at least to mechanical reduction”<sup>246</sup>: they cede ground, at the heart of their rational programming (literally based on ratios, proportions between whole-number values, and rational approximations of irrational values encoded into the machine's memory), to another form of programming which at this point remains in the realm of the “fake” – but, in time, would become the basis for a new kind of automation.

Vaucanson's decision to draw the limits of his mechanical automatism at the opening onto electrochemical processes or overtone processing reflects an underlying problem: the logic at work in his rational machines is truly, mathematically speaking, irreducible to the irrational resonances of overtones. Kittler observes that these two musics are absolutely different in structure, logic, and as thus reproducibility: “Overtones are frequencies, that is, vibrations per second. And the grooves of Edison's phonograph recorded nothing but vibrations. Intervals and chords, by contrast, were ratios, that is, fractions made up of integers.”<sup>247</sup> The concept of the rational foundation of intervals stretches all the way back to the famous divided string of Pythagoras, who gave the name of *logoi* to the fractions that resulted from his proportions of whole numbers. Edison's music, however, and the music that was positioned one step away from the replicative power of Vaucanson's piper, is entirely illogical, inasmuch as “The nineteenth century's concept of frequency breaks with all this. [...] In frequency curves the simple proportions of Pythagorean music turn into irrational, that is, logarithmic, functions. Conversely, overtone series – which in frequency curves are simply integral multiples of vibrations and the determining elements of each sound – soon explode the diatonic music system.”<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Riskin provides a longer discussion of this phenomenon in “DD” 616.

<sup>246</sup> “DD” 616.

<sup>247</sup> *GFT* 24.

<sup>248</sup> *GFT* 24-5.

Vaucanson's piper so courteously ducks out at the very beginning of this entirely inhuman music, which is no longer defined in terms of symbolic relationships between whole, knowable, analogically-comprehensible quantities, but instead by a series of "movements that are too fast for the human eye, ranging from 20 to 16,000 vibrations per second."<sup>249</sup> Joseph Fourier would only begin to lay the theoretical groundwork for apprehending this music, Olympia's sunshine and Gall's "chaleur des garçons," in his 1807 *Mémoire sur la propagation de la chaleur dans les corps solides*. However, while techniques to theorize and synthesize this irrational music were not yet fully formed, pre-electronic society did not lack for means to represent it: Vaucanson's automata demonstrate that the "purely" mechanical Enlightenment located such electronic, irrational, and supersensible music precisely in the place where Enlightened mechanics were allowed to fail gracefully, allowing "real" fakery to take over their mimetic work. Here, the authenticity of faking it is provided by the truth, left open for scientists and engineers to establish as technological, mediated fact, that mechanics and electronics, rational and irrational sounds, belong to entirely different *logoi* (if the latter can even be considered as a *logos*, since it is resolutely non-symbolic and instead claims to come directly from the non-assimilable, extra-sensory real).

As Daniel Heller-Roazen explains in *The Fifth Hammer*, his study of the relationship between rational and irrational music from antiquity to the Scientific Revolution, the Pythagoreans gave names to the other sounds that were present alongside rational harmonies. These names were taboo, and discussing these other sounds was punishable by excommunication and even symbolic death (initiates who divulged the open secret of these harmonies were buried as effigies).<sup>250</sup> Among these names are "unspeakable" and even *alogoi*.<sup>251</sup> Evidently, the strict division between logic and illogic marked in Vaucanson's engineering itself articulates itself in a wider cultural vocabulary of rationality and irrationality dating back to the shared origin of music and applied mathematics, originally considered analogous disciplines. As Heller-Roazen demonstrates, the Pythagorean tradition, in which all elements were defined as rational "assemblies of 'ones'"<sup>252</sup> mathematically commensurate with each other, became the basis for our modern techniques of musical transcription, which presume that discrete quanta of tonality and sound are based on rational divisions of pitch and time.<sup>253</sup>

Consequently, music and mathematics evolved many disciplinary strategies for finding a place for the irrational remainder. Antiquity knew it as the apotomé, "what is cut off,"<sup>254</sup> and early Baroque tuners hid it in plain sight as the "wolf" at the heart of their tunings. The problem of irrationality is not only that a continuum of "tightly-packed" irrational numbers crowd the less numerous rational numbers on all sides. Instead, irrationality is a direct consequence of rational harmony – as anyone who has had to tune a keyboard instrument is all too aware. Simply put, the sum of the tones in the scale does not – cannot, because their values are as mathematically incommensurate as a square and its diagonal – add up to the interval of an octave; jumping from C to C, you will arrive at a different point than if you had gone through the scale to get there. The disciplines of

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<sup>249</sup> GFT 24.

<sup>250</sup> Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Fifth Hammer: Pythagoras and the Disharmony of the World* (New York: Zone, 2011) 41. Hereafter cited as *FH*.

<sup>251</sup> *FH* 40.

<sup>252</sup> *FH* 28.

<sup>253</sup> *FH* 46-7.

<sup>254</sup> *FH* 36.

temperament, some of the most spectacular techniques of rational music, were all based on making up for the all-too-evident presence of a gap – a lack, even, as the name “what is cut off” suggests. The Pythagoreans were forced to abandon the possibility of dealing with this gap “in excess of human sensation [that] points to truths that only a calculus of quantities can reveal,”<sup>255</sup> in no small part because to use the mathematical means available to them (the manipulation of whole-number ratios) to manipulate the irrational gaps involved would require super-human calculating powers – just as Vaucanson’s piper had to limit its repertoire because the exponentially-increasing pressure differentials would otherwise exceed its engineer’s mathematical, programming, and data-storage capacities. To tackle this issue in practice would have to wait for the development of logarithms.<sup>256</sup> In the meantime, equal temperament, predicated on a calculation by which the octave is divided into twelve equal tones, eventually triumphed over the pre-Enlightenment systems of mean-tone and irregular temperament. Although even-temperament was first imagined in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, it too would have to wait for the development of a practical mathematical means to solve its key problem (computing the value of the twelfth root of two). Thus it was only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and even later, that even-temperament made its universal debut on keyboards and lutes, and in turn in the orchestras and ensembles whose music was coordinated from such *basso continuo* instruments.<sup>257</sup>

In Heller-Roazen’s history, musical practice and imagination develop hand-in-hand with technical practice and imagination (in theoretical and practical acoustics and mathematics): their imaginaries mutually inform each other’s developments, just as their developments in turn inform their imaginaries. Both the trajectory of music and mathematics and engineering and automation, again, lead us to the same point: the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Vaucanson’s duck and piper respond to this dialectical moment by leaving an empty space for the simulation of the inhuman. Indeed, they promise – by structurally failing to complete their projects, by fetishistically turning away at the last possible moment from the object of their investigation – the advent of a new technology that would render the inhuman, whether it be natural or divine, mimetically (even presently) available to apperception. Furthermore, Vaucanson defines both this technology and the inhumanity it will master as the realm of continuous resonant frequencies (overtones, electric currents, Fourier series, thermodynamics), described by Kittler as the imaginary of the constant flow of natural language from the mother’s mouth.<sup>258</sup> Vaucanson fetishistically prepares a retreat from the symbolic by nominating a place for the erection of an imaginary signifier, around which non-meaning will hereafter appear as residue, waste, and static, not as the necessary medium of symbolization. A century later, the *Contes* return to this signifying logic in order to replace

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<sup>255</sup> FH 37.

<sup>256</sup> FH 39.

<sup>257</sup> FH 82.

<sup>258</sup> On the function of the Mother’s Mouth, see DN 25-42; on the importance of the unbroken fluidity of this stream of sound, see DN 46-48 and in particular DN 47: “The language of culture (*Sprach*) springs suddenly out of the language of Nature without the children noting the slightest differential step.” Of course, *differentials* are precisely what’s in play here: we’ve moved from a concept in which meaningfulness inheres in the chain of language as discrete, symbolic entities (a rational schema, in other words) to one in which the key guarantor of meaning is the infinitesimally-divisible, uninterrupted fabric between those discrete points (an irrational schema), and with it from Pythagorean to electromagnetic sound.

Olympia where she always ought to have been – in-between piper and duck, in the empty space they both share and leave open for her invention.

### Thermodynamic Poetics in the *Contes* and the Tales of Hoffmann

In the *Contes*, the various waste-products or residual energies appear in Olympia's song, and indeed throughout the entire opera, in the persistence of a trope that imposes itself almost without fail in every strongly-catheted dramatic moment, at those points at which the music tends towards the "cry" or the representation of any other limit-experience – when the music is at its most operatic. This trope is the lexical field linking affective experience to the sun's heat, fire, warmth, scintillation, vibration, resonance, and electricity – which the opera metaphorizes in turn as bottled lightning, vital spirit, etc. Hoffmann, in the "Vision," describes the "chaudes ombres" of the woman with the "voix vibrante" who "aux cieux qui l'écoutait jetait ce chant vainqueur." If here he refuses to look directly at the sun that awaits his beloved's song, upon seeing Olympia through Coppélius's glasses the circuit begins to close: he cries "Ange du ciel ! Est-ce bien toi ? / Tes yeux me brûlent de leur flamme ! / Ton front resplendit, je te vois, / Telle que te rêvait mon âme !" In this (re)vision (or rêve-ision) of the Woman, Hoffmann burns with the same fire as his object, imagined as a source of heat, and this fantasy in turn galvanizes the community. The "Vision" segues from the disquieting ballad of Kleinzach to the image of the beloved, breaking from "Quant aux traits de sa figure" to "Ah ! sa figure était charmante ! ... Je la vois"; this "charm" (from the Latin *carmen*, meaning both song and magic incantation) will become the ritually-repeated baseline of the Olympia act, in which Hoffmann and the chorus obsessively describe her as "charmante." Olympia herself closes the metaphoric circle in her Doll Song (itself a re-vision of the same tropic field of the "Vision") by describing "l'astre du jour" as one of the entities that "chante et résonne et soupier tour à tour" and in so doing "émeut son cœur qui frissonne d'amour." The opera traces a thermodynamics of love: from sun to woman to man to audience, bodies resonate with heat and light, vibrating each other in an electromagnetic exchange of affective energy.

The trope is omnipresent, persistent: Hoffmann implores Olympia, "Laisse, laisse ma flamme / Verser en toi le jour ! / Ah ! Laisse éclore ton âme / Aux rayons de l'amour !"; Hoffmann in love with Olympia sighs that "Au feu vainqueur / Qui me pénètre / Un cœur va naître / Près de mon cœur !" while conjoining those who do not believe in love to "[Fermer leurs] yeux / À la lumière !"; Nicklausse, in his/her Act III aria, conflates soundboard and soul as two instantiations of the same "amour vainqueur" that manifests itself in any place where one can "[Voir] sous l'archet frémissant / Vibrer la boîte sonore," "[Entendre] le céleste accent / De cette âme qui s'ignore," or "[Écouter] passer dans l'air / Le son pénétrant et clair / De cette corde éplorée" that "console tes pleurs" and "mêle ses douleurs / À ta douleur enivrée !"; the love song of Hoffmann and Antonia "s'envole" in the manner of the song described by the "Vision" and takes flight "Triste ou folle, tour à tour" in the manner of the discourse described by the Doll Song; Hoffmann's jealous intuition that Antonia loves music more than him "trouble" him; Antonia's symptoms of musical consumption betray themselves in "[Un] pouls inégal et vif" and when "son front s'anime, et son regard flamboie !" – exactly as her love-duet with Hoffmann predicted, in its strophe that runs "Un rayon de flamme / Pare ta beauté. / Verras-tu l'été / Fleur de l'âme ?"; the dying Antonia asks "Quelle ardeur m'embrase et me dévore ?" and finally exclaims "Je cède au transport qui m'enivre ! / Quelle flamme éblouit mes yeux !"; Hoffmann, discontent with love, begins the Venice act with an ironic "Chant Bachique" that attempts to

distinguish between the fallacious transports of desire and the existentially authentic delirium of drunkenness, but quickly fails due to the overlapping metaphors used to describe each: “Que d’un brûlant désir / Votre cœur s’enflamme ! / Aux fièvres du plaisir / Consumez votre âme ! / Transports d’amour / Durez un jour ! / Au diable celui qui pleure / Pour deux beaux yeux, / À nous l’ivresse meilleure / Des chants joyeux ! / Vivons une heure / Dans les cieus !”; the evil magician Dapertutto celebrates his magical gemstones’ capacity to mesmerize the female accomplice of his black acts by singing “Tourne, tourne, miroir où se prend l’alouette ! / Scintille, diamant ! Fascine, attire-la !”; Giulietta seduces Hoffmann with a song which literally re-opens the metaphorical field of seeing sunlight, by intoning “L’amour lui dit : ‘la belle ! / Vos yeux étaient fermés !’ Puis, la touchant de l’aile, / ‘Voyez le jour, aimez !’”; Hoffmann falls back in love with love by bringing transport and fire together again, demonstrating that delirium, fire, and song – embodied in the beloved’s breath, which now is perceived through the correct organ, the *eyes* – are once more equivalent, in the famous “O Dieu ! de quelle ivresse embrasses-tu mon âme ? / Comme un concert divin, ta voix m’a pénétré ! / D’un feu doux et brûlant mon être est dévoré / Tes regards dans les miens semblent verser la flamme ! Comme des astres radieux ! Et je sens, ô ma bien-aimée, / Passer ton haleine embaumé / Sur mes lèvres et sur mes yeux !”; Hoffmann and Giulietta’s duet passes from the “ivresse inassouvie,” the “étrange et doux effroi” that Hoffmann feels on hearing Giulietta’s request for his reflection to their promise to each other, “Aujourd’hui les larmes / Mais demain les cieus !”; finally, the Muse identifies herself as “la fidèle amie” “Par qui la douleur endormie / S’exhale en rêves dans les cieus,” and brings the opera to its conclusion by commanding Hoffmann to be reborn, phoenix-like, from the hecatomb of sun, fire, and love: “Des cendres de ton cœur réchauffe ton génie !”

Does this tropological overabundance simply betray the librettists’ lack of sophistication? Does their use of the same metaphor, over and over, symptomatically signify their own automatism (they automatically and unconsciously rely on a closed, overly-restricted set of poetic reflexes) – or an automatism that would not even, strictly speaking, be “their own” (they automatically and unconsciously rely on a set of poetic devices that do not even originate with them, but emerge from a pre-existing body of poetry, in a sort of unconsidered plagiarism)? To read their repetitions as “too mechanical” would be to make a value judgment about the level of their poetic art, to define the two of them as less than heroically human – whether we would thus view them as operators of a shoddy poetic engine or instead as products of a larger, intersubjective or overdeterminant, discourse-machine. Still, the overabundance and consequent devaluation of what ought to be highly “meaningful” images results in an odd and unsettling surplus-effect: hearing virtually the same lines spoken by virtually every important character in the opera underscores once again the uncanny prophecy of Nicklausse’s couplets. The mechanization of character does not restrict itself to its proper place; instead the plague of automatism infects all the characters, even those who ought to be Romantic heroes, as they unconsciously remix one shared, rhetorically-programmed broken record. If the soul is more mechanical than it may claim to be, then the very fact of automatism has taken on a life of its own, traveling beyond the limits of the context it was supposed to narrowly define.

Repetition, echo or mechanical reproductivity, channels and mediates this contagion of life by artificial life and vice-versa. Olympia, in her song, theorizes this all-consuming, environmental repetition as “resonance” or “fremescence.” Literally, everyone here “parle d’amour,” and they are all saying the same thing (again, notice how Olympia’s song – literally – mediates between and synthesizes Nicklausse’s two bookending solo arias from the first two acts): “Tout ce qui chante et résonne et soupire tour à tour émeut son cœur qui frisonne

d'amour," and this emanated heart "fait frissonner" other hearts, "tour à tour," in an infinite promulgation of resonances and frequencies. Lacan described precisely this universe in his invocation of the broken record as the meaningless round-and-round movement of the *disque-ourcourant*, a discourse charged with an impossible love, that turns us all into the mechanisms of its constant auto-articulation. Revolutionarily, here, the *disque-ourcourant* is no longer segregated as the empty heart of the duck or the unfulfilled promise of the piper; instead, it emanates throughout the work, tracing self-consciously defined circles between machinic and human (male, female, and mass) bodies. Now, in this inverted schema, the irrational remainder (and its historical associations with heat, frequency, and the beyond of music) is on everyone's lips; no longer hidden, it now defines the very field of the superficial.

Paradoxically, when the librettists and characters are the least idiosyncratic and the most mechanically banal, they most faithfully adapt or re-vision a key rhetorical particularity of the historical Hoffmann's texts, themselves filled with equivalent, and equivalently superabundant, thematic and rhetorical material. The words that come to metonymically stand for the fits of despair and suicidal madness of Nathanael, the protagonist of "The Sandman" (the model for the Olympia act of the *Contes*), themselves name an ardent, constantly-circulating figure: "Circle of fire! Whirl round, circle of fire! Whirl round!"<sup>259</sup> This madness, which "racked Nathanael with scorching claws,"<sup>260</sup> concludes a series of scintillating and structuring rhetorical figures. First, Coppelius, the evil doctor with "fiery eyes,"<sup>261</sup> manipulates "sparkling lumps" of coal with "red-hot tongs" and threatens to "[pull] glowing grains from the fire with his naked hands" and "sprinkle them in [Nathanael's] eyes."<sup>262</sup> This opening associates the tropes of heat and fire with the purely negative figure of Coppelius, but the narrative does not tie this series uniquely to negative affect, evil, and the destructive tendency. Instead, the story soon makes it clear (in a passage that is absent from both its operatic translation and from the famous readings given and inspired by Freud's essay on "Das Unheimliche") that such heat – and in particular, Coppelius's terrific and terrifying capacity to exchange normal eyes and burning coals – is also the object of an extreme desire, both on the part of Nathaniel and of the text itself.

In a wonderful passage, Nathaniel, momentarily breaking from his fascination with the mysterious Olympia, returns to his fiancée, Klara, and composes a poem for her about his fear that Coppelius (or his incapacity to shake off his paranoid obsession with Coppelius) will lead to the downfall of their love. The poem centers on a moment in which Coppelius "[appears] and [touches] Klara's lovely eyes, which [spring] into Nathaniel's own breast, burning and scorching like bleeding sparks"; Klara, suddenly restored, turns to Nathaniel and proclaims that "That which burned in your breast was not my eyes. Those were fiery drops of the blood from your own heart. Look at me. I have still got my own eyes." When Nathaniel does indeed look into Klara's eyes, he finds that "it was death that, with Klara's eyes, looked upon him kindly."<sup>263</sup> Coppelius, the alchemist (linked by a tight metonymy to the forge and fire), the master of the arts that simulate and recreate the physical properties of originary bodies, ought to be, in what one presumes is the rhetorical structure of the story, associated with non-life, the artificial, and the mechanical. However, in Nathaniel's poetic

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<sup>259</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman," trans. L. J. Kent and E. C. Knight, in Hoffmann, *Tales*, ed. Victor Lange (New York: Continuum, 1982): 277-308, 308. Hereafter cited as "S."

<sup>260</sup> "S" 304.

<sup>261</sup> "S" 305.

<sup>262</sup> "S" 282.

<sup>263</sup> "S" 293.



reverie, Klara-cum-cold-death reveals to Nathaniel that it was his living imagination, his power of fantasy and fancy, that blazingly animated the scene. In her eyes, there is nothing but kind nothingness and nonbeing. Who, then, is animated? And what is Nathaniel's desire?

The story immediately states that Nathaniel seeks to "arouse Klara's cold nature"<sup>264</sup> – Klara is the cold machine and Olympia, perversely, the warm, living body, animated by Coppelius's Promethean engineering.<sup>265</sup> Hoffmann's German more explicitly contrasts Klara's coldness with the warmth of (Nathaniel's?) desire: "es war ihm, als müsse Claras kaltes Gemüt dadurch *entzündet* werden."<sup>266</sup> Correspondingly, Klara's advice – "throw that mad, insane, stupid tale into the fire" – provokes Nathaniel to call her the "damned, lifeless automaton."<sup>267</sup> Conversely, with Olympia the pattern is entirely reversed: although Olympia's hand is "cold as ice," Nathaniel finds upon "Gazing into Olympia's eyes" that they shine "with love and longing; and at that moment the pulse seemed to beat again in her cold hand, and warm life-blood to surge through her veins. In Nathaniel's heart, too, passion burned with greater intensity."<sup>268</sup> Kissing Olympia, Nathaniel first discovers "icy lips," but then "the kiss [seems] to warm her lips into life."<sup>269</sup> Olympia, the product of calculation and engineering, is more receptive to passion and romantic fantasies, more sympathetic to projection.

After Coppola confronts him with the disembodied eyes of his automaton lover, Nathaniel's repeats his delirious catechism: "Whirl round, circle of fire! Merrily, merrily! Aha, lovely wooden doll, whirl round!"<sup>270</sup> This stubborn return demonstrates his inability to resolve this paradox: how is it that the living girl becomes more and more mechanical the more we look at her, while the robotic girl comes more and more to life the longer we focus our fantasies upon her? And is there a way to animate her through fantasy that would lead, not to the murderous stalemate between the imagineers who dreamed her up in the first

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<sup>264</sup> "S" 293.

<sup>265</sup> Hoffmann ingeniously renders Klara's coldness as entirely unconscious and unreflexive – from both her perspective and Nathaniel's – thus leaving it up to the reader to tie the narrative links together and discover the paradoxical nature of Nathaniel's (and thus the reader's own) desire. The humor of the situation, a humor which must thus constantly implicate the reader and narrator in the game of examining the vicissitudes of Nathaniel's "overheated" Romantic imaginings, can be clearly felt in passages such as the following, which comes immediately before the scene of Nathaniel's poem and clearly draws all the narrative's strands into an amusingly ironic configuration: "Early in the morning, when Klara was helping to prepare breakfast, [Nathaniel] would stand beside her and read to her from various occult books until she begged, 'But my dear Nathaniel, what if I have to accuse you of being the evil principle that is fatally influencing my coffee? For if I please you and drop everything to look into your eyes as you read, my coffee will boil over and no one will have breakfast'" ("S" 292). Clearly, it is Nathaniel here whose eyes give off too many sparks (so many that they threaten to overheat the coffee), and Klara who counters such animation with coolly-calculated rationality.

<sup>266</sup> Hoffmann, *Fantasie- und Nachtstücke* (Munich: Winkler-Verlag, 1960) 348. Hereafter cited as FN.

<sup>267</sup> "S" 294.

<sup>268</sup> "S" 299.

<sup>269</sup> "S" 300.

<sup>270</sup> "S" 304.

place and sought to define her as purely artificial life or death, but to acknowledge her life as autonomous and not merely dependent on the whims of her fathers?

Another of Hoffmann's texts provides a possible answer. Coincidentally, it is the only one of the texts of the historical Hoffmann that the Hoffmann of the *Contes* appears to have in fact written and published, and thus provides an important indicator of how the *Contes* imagines the imaginary of its hero.<sup>271</sup> This is the highly sophisticated and endlessly complicated "The Golden Pot," which exemplifies Hoffmann's strategy of presenting multiple plots which seem to be inconsistent, unrelated, or even mutually falsifying. "The Golden Pot" offers both a fairy-tale prehistory persisting into the present day, *and* the entirely modern story of a neurotic's delusional attempts to order his life through an unthinkable, impossible, and outmoded fictional form; its plots read fairy-tale fantasy both as original truth and as compensatory hallucination. But the plots also reinforce themselves: the fairy-tale could serve as an allegory for the psycho-techno-sexual dynamics latent within the modern-day story, just as much as the modern-day techno-social world could appear as the natural extension of the problematics of the fairy-tale universe.<sup>272</sup>

The many turns and detours of "The Golden Pot" are too interesting and suggestive for me to follow here at length. Suffice to say, the hero, the clumsy student Anselmus, finds himself literally stumbling into a brave new world of fantasy when he hears "the sound of little crystal bells"<sup>273</sup> coming from an elder tree, which calls him towards the discovery of

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<sup>271</sup> In Hoffmann's Act I confrontation with his nemesis Lindorf, he asks "Comme Anselmus, rare merveille, / Venez-vous me mettre en bouteille, / Cher auteur de mes maux ?" This reference to "The Golden Pot" establishes Hoffmann-the-character as an early variant of Hoffmann (indeed, "The Golden Pot" was published as part of Hoffmann's first collection of fantastic stories in 1814), even as it distributes authorship to the antagonistic figure of Lindorf.

<sup>272</sup> One of the best examples of this technique of overlapping yet non-resolving layers of fiction appears in Hoffmann's "Die Abenteuer der Silvester-Nacht," which forms the basis – appropriately enough – for the Giulietta act of the *Contes*, the act which exists in three incompatible and unresolved versions. There is a remarkable contrast between the dead letter of the Hoffmannian text, which insists on the coexistence and multiplicity of levels of discursive information that result in a near-infinite possibility of interpretative modes, and any "live" performance of the opera, which must be predicated on a choice of only one ending to the act and thus one meaning for the characters of Olympia, Dapertutto, and Hoffmann (as far as I know, no production of the opera has dared make the ending of the Venice act ambiguous or capitalize on the textual multivalence of the score, as many productions of *Così fan tutte* have recently chosen to do). Again, the apparently fully-programmed text and the processive performance thereof seem to exchange their characters of mechanical reproductivity and living vitality.

<sup>273</sup> Kittler ties these bells – which are closely tied to resonance and harmonics in the popular imagination (think, for instance, of the danger of the prima donna's voice, which all-too-readily shatters any glass unlucky enough to be within earshot of her performance) – to Wagner's *Rheingold* prelude, which he describes as a translation of "the hallucinatory effects of romantic poesie into the technologically real" (DN 79). Again we see how what is figured in Hoffmann's discourse (and the discourse of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century engineer) as an empty space beyond the grasp of reason would quickly be turned into a mechanically-reproducible artifact representing the baseline state of human and technological systems, and how Hoffmann's

“three little snakes, glistening in green and gold” whose movements are like “a thousand sparkling emeralds.”<sup>274</sup> Anselmus falls in love with the first of these snakes, Serpentina, a love confirmed when the snakes reappear during a firework show in “the reflection of the darting and crackling sparks and flames in the water”<sup>275</sup> and fill him with a “glowing passion.”<sup>276</sup> Eventually Anselmus discovers Serpentina once again, this time in the guise of the daughter of the Archivist Lindorf, who has hired him to copy a series of increasingly more arcane volumes. In fact, Anselmus has to draw them, since their characters quickly exceed Arabic calligraphy and become unknown and unimaginable letters – passing the hieroglyphic boundary. Anselmus vacillates between Serpentina and the overly-rational and calculatedly worldly Veronica, who falls in love with Anselmus by daydreaming of her possible position as Frau Court Councillor<sup>277</sup>; Veronica doubles Nathaniel’s Klara, down to their shared names that seem to connote truth-seeing.

“The Golden Pot” juxtaposes two explanations for Anselmus’s pursuit of Serpentina: in the one, the world of archivists, academics, and functionaries remains untouched, and Anselmus has fallen victim to his own fancy; in the other, an allegorical fairy-tale unsettles his entire society, infiltrating it with witches, alchemists, ancient arcane forces, and their familiars. Even Veronica tangles with the supernatural, when she begs an old hag to construct her a magic mirror, a weapon with which Veronica can fight against Serpentina for Anselmus’s love: “Sparkles continues to sputter from [the cat’s] tail [as it circled the cauldron], and these sparkles formed a circle of fire. The coals ignited, and finally blue flames leaped up around the cauldron [...] Now the witch again added shining metals to the cauldron, a lock of hair Veronica had cut from her head, and a little ring she had long worn.”<sup>278</sup> The narrator helpfully informs the reader that, had she or he actually happened to observe this ritual, the “electric shock quivering through all your nerves and fibers with the speed of lightning”<sup>279</sup> would fill “you” with the courage needed to separate the innocent Veronica from the terrifying world of magic in which she had been embroiled. Simultaneously, though, all of the tale’s electrifying effects arise from its entangling of all of its characters and worlds into one irresolvable ganglion, every element communicating with and contaminating every other element, no matter how much we may want to precipitate out two unified worlds, the one and its “other.”

This other world is haunted by the repercussions of a long-forgotten secret history. Mythology turns out to be the necessary correlate of natural history: the rivalry between Lindorf and the witch, and the consequences of Anselmus’s choice between Serpentina and Veronica, are cosmically important in light of this more primal fantasy. Thus, the fairy-tale plot re-doubles its banal, non-supernatural twin, since the events in the fairy-tale plot are only meaningful in relation to an *other* other scene whose status is even more deeply in doubt: two partial narrators, Lindorf and Serpentina, give the reader access to this “deeper” mythos even though they are the ones who, if their story is to be believed, have the most at

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electromagnetic imaginings form the resonant core of the techno-fetishistic acoustic network that flourishes at the fin-de-siècle and beyond.

<sup>274</sup> Hoffmann, “The Golden Pot,” L. J. Kent and E. C. Knight, trans., in Hoffmann, *Tales*: 1-79, 5. Hereafter cited as “GP.”

<sup>275</sup> “GP” 8.

<sup>276</sup> “GP” 9.

<sup>277</sup> “GP” 26.

<sup>278</sup> “GP” 42.

<sup>279</sup> “GP” 44.

stake in our, and Anselmus, believing in their version of the tale alone, and not, say, the other version transmitted through the evil witch's magic mirror.

Now, this primal-primal scene concerns the love of Phosphorus for "a superb fire-lily," "its lovely leaves forming like soft lips eager to receive the mother's kiss" of the sunlight that animated it.<sup>280</sup> From their love is birthed the spark of thought, by which "the ultimate bliss, which will be kindled by the spark I [Phosphorus] ignite in you, will be the hopeless agony through which you will be destroyed, only to rise again in a different shape."<sup>281</sup> Phosphorus's prediction comes true, and his coupling with the lily leaves it on the edge of a permanent breakdown. Consequently, he later forbids the love between a salamander (alchemy links salamanders, fire, sunlight, and the conduction of thermal energy) and a green snake who lies at the heart of the lily. But the salamander, who will become Lindorf, dares to approach the snake, causing her to "[crumble] into ashes" and "a winged being who was born from her dust [to soar] away through the sky."<sup>282</sup> The salamander, despairing, spends all his stored-up flame, scorching the garden of Atlantis and becoming a burned-out shell. Phosphorus curses the salamander to exile among human men, until "a youth is found who understands [the salamander's three snake-daughters'] song – yes, if one of the little snakes looks at him with gentle eyes; if this look awakens in him an anticipatory vision of distant wondrous lands to which he can courageously soar when he has cast away the onerous lot of commonplace life; if, with his love of the snake, there arises in him vividly a belief in the marvels of nature" – in short, until three mortal husbands are found for the three golden snakes.

The narrative of "The Golden Pot" frames a showdown between its own stories: Anselmus's choice, between the various genres of fantasy he might make his own (Serpentina's fabulous mythologies and Veronica's clear-sighted daydreams of modest, achievable success), will write its ending. And the story places the source of these fantasies not in Anselmus, but in the two pairs of women's eyes, sparkling with magnetic fire borrowed from the sun-mother and her double, an evil (according to Serpentina, at least) feminine dragon from the cold, black depths of the earth. Each pair of eyes will instill its own technologies of imagining in Anselmus by telepathy or resonance (Serpentina's bell-toned voice or Veronica's closed-circuit magic mirror).

Kittler analyzes "The Golden Pot" as a fable about falling in love with a new constellation of media technologies, targeting Hoffmann's text as a case-study in the new socio-technological structure that apportioned sound, language, and meaning in a circuit running from Nature, through the voice of Woman, then through the writing of the Poet, and finally back to women, the female readership imagined but circumscribed by the masculinist organization of the discourse-network of 1800. As Kittler emphasizes, "the new fantastic is, first an endless oscillating from Nature to books back to Nature,"<sup>283</sup> from allegorically-constructed living women to texts composed by men and back to women, coordinating them in their new technological role as media (mediums?) of pre-linguistic meaning.<sup>284</sup> The dénouement of the text arrives as a letter from Lindorf to the narrator

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<sup>280</sup> "GP" 15.

<sup>281</sup> "GP" 15.

<sup>282</sup> "GP" 51.

<sup>283</sup> *DN* 91.

<sup>284</sup> As Kittler puts it, "With proper administrative method women are determined as the endless reproduction of a single Mother, whereas men are determined as the endless (re-)discovery of the Mother" (*DN* 89). Women are thus all mechanical reproductions,

describing Anselmus's idyll with Serpentina in a recovered Eden; importantly, Veronica's magic mirror has now broken, denying her access to this event, derailing her potential authority as narratee of "The Golden Pot." She functions as a simultaneously good and bad double of the potential female reader: good in that she limits her daydreaming to the scope of social reality; and bad in that she misses her destiny as a natural, if potentially deathly, woman by refusing any further engagement in fantasy. The female reader of "The Golden Pot" is consequentially encouraged to imagine herself both as a *femme fatale* and as a member of society – as one of those late-century nightmare women, an Irene Adler or Lydia Gwilt, who dialectically resolve the paradox which just a few decades earlier made it necessary to split Klara and Olympia, Veronica and Serpentina into paired doubles.

Kittler focuses on the socially-reproductive and ideological functions of handwriting. The kinds of work Lindorf assigns to Anselmus have precise technological analogues in the new kinds of writing- and speaking-instruction methodologies marketed to the circa-1800 nuclear family. Anselmus's education traces this nascent bourgeois pedagogy in reverse: he begins with samples of alphabetic writing (which he is quickly forced to acknowledge as partial, representationally and technically incomplete) and advances towards "the mythic origin of writing itself,"<sup>285</sup> the pre-Sanskrit script of symbols and hieroglyphs, even including the very stuff of nature. At this origin, Anselmus learns a new lesson about language and sound: Lindorf's teaches that the voice of nature is resistant to symbolization, but that symbolization is nevertheless theoretically possible, although it may be as of yet outside of the technical capacities of an Anselmus.<sup>286</sup> Anselmus, then, precisely repeats Vaucanson's automatic pedagogy. Handwriting is not yet good enough, since the figures of Nature's voice are too complicated for the rational system of letters to process. Hence, as Kittler shows, already Hoffmann's text prepares a site for the division between Real and Symbolic, and begins to locate the Real as that which cannot be represented by means of a discontinuous, discrete reproductive technology. "The Golden Pot" thus lays the foundation for the entire dynamic of fetishism, as the reaction against the place of nothing that must be accepted to accede to the Symbolic. More importantly, Hoffmann's text already imagines a resolution to Anselmus's problem, in the ambiguous coda telling of the student's happy marriage to Serpentina and their return to Atlantis – their travels beyond the sea to a Gainsbourgian uterine fantasy.

And this resolution is, precisely, a technological one. Kittler draws attention to the S-curves that make up Serpentina's true nature, that famous zero-degree of writing, the squiggle, which Roland Barthes will link to the "grain," "le corps dans la voix qui chante, dans la main qui écrit."<sup>287</sup> As a trace of the non-discontinuous process that produces the series of discontinuous links in the Symbolic chain, the baseline movement of the body in handwriting must be abandoned for the proper functioning of writing as a symbolic activity – hence the later success of the typewriter and its children. Consequently, handwriting can

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automatons of the soul, and the only autonomy of the (male) human heart is in falling in love all over again, as if for the first time. If Hoffmann (in life and in the *Contes*) learns this lesson as tragedy – that is, originally and "authentically" – he is always doubled (in the *Contes*) by Nicklausse, who is always able to ironize the lesson, showing that by 1880 the process is simultaneously lifelike and in the realm of the iterative and comic. In other words, human and machine will have become inseparable doubles of each other.

<sup>285</sup> DN 85.

<sup>286</sup> DN 85.

<sup>287</sup> "GV" 155.

become a fetish, a hieroglyphic, imaginary signifier providing access to the very soul of the writer – as in the study of graphology, which would rise to prominence alongside the typewriter as a means of compensating for its effects. Kittler illustrates this point with a drawing of a “snake line,” a snapshot of an oscillating function, a synecdoche for those resonant and irrational sounds that can only be calculated by means of Fourier series.<sup>288</sup> The link between Serpentina and the later function of the gramophone is not a mere analogy based on the similarities between the sinuous shape of her curves and the spiraling track of the phonograph record. Instead, the two both stand for a very particular kind of music, the music of electromagnetic transmission that begins with the gramophone but develops necessarily through radio, telephone, television, and now MP3; they are products of the distinction between rational and irrational sound that, in 1800, posits Serpentina as only fantastic, like the empty (soon to be filled) stomach of Vaucanson’s duck.

The titular image of the “Golden Pot” reinforces this link. It could refer either to the magical flowerpot of Serpentina that carries a lily now regrown, the sign of her passion with Anselmus, into the gardens of Atlantis; or to what appears as its opposite, the glass bottle in which Anselmus is imprisoned by Lindorf after he allows a blot of ink to fall on the Archivist’s original manuscripts. In the *Contes*, Hoffmann invokes this bottle in his confrontation with the Councillor Lindorf (who seems, in the opera, to have abandoned his archives and Atlantis to take on the destiny of bureaucratic success dreamed for Anselmus by Veronica). “Comme Anselmus, rare merveille, / Venez-vous me mettre en bouteille, / Cher auteur de mes maux ?” Most readers of “The Golden Pot” have interpreted the glass bottle as a metaphor for the containment of the Romantic imagination by melancholic isolation. However, the bottle itself (“die gläserne Flasche”), as presented in the story, is itself a “goldne Topf”: Lindorf appears “like a glittering beam in the middle of the flame” to pour “cataracts of fire” onto Anselmus that congeal around him.<sup>289</sup> From the inside of the bottle, “You are surrounded by brilliant splendor; everything around you appears illuminated and imbued with the hues of a beaming rainbow; all that you see quivers and shimmers and hums in the magic sheen; you swim, devoid of motion and power in a firmly congealed ether which so presses your limbs together that your mind gives orders in vain to your dead body; [...] every nerve tenses and trembles in this mortal agony.”<sup>290</sup>

As we saw above with the strange conjunction of Coppélius, madness, and Olympia in “The Sandman,” a tropological grammar links all the elements associated with Serpentina, the salamander and Phosphorus, and their lover the lily (flame, fire, blinding light, sparkles and shimmers, vibrations) to the glass bottle, which presumably should have been their opposite, just as melancholic separation from the beloved ought to contrast with being together with her in Atlantis. But what is this bottle? A glass bottle filled with “congealed ether,” it is nothing but a Leyden jar – a battery, a container for electrical energy. The *Contes* insist on this interpretation, as Lindorf proclaims his sinister power in explicitly electromagnetic terms: “J’ai dans tout le physique, / Un aspect Satanique / Qui produit sur les nerfs / L’effet d’une pile électrique. / Par les nerfs j’arrive au cœur, / Je triomphe par la peur !” (Note the almost direct transposition of the final description of life in the bottle into the terms of Lindorf’s song: both conclude by proclaiming a power to directly overload the nervous system by electronic means.) And again, the *Contes* circulate the energy that was segregated from the rest of the machine in Vaucanson and Hoffmann. This Lindorf doesn’t

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<sup>288</sup> DN 106.

<sup>289</sup> “GP” 62.

<sup>290</sup> “GP” 63.

have a shelf of glass bottles, nor does he need them: he carries his nerve-affecting magnetism with him wherever he goes. The elements that are located in specific technological sites now resonate superficially (“un *aspect* Satanique”) between a larger set of spaces and bodies.

But most importantly, Serpentina’s and Lindorf’s jars are equated because the tale defines the apparently dissimilar magical registers of both as two expressions of electronic energy. Hoffmann’s tales, seeking to imagine the workings and effects of electricity but lacking any extant technological means to do so, abandon “realism” (since there is as yet no technology to “realistically” narrate) and displace all of the practices and affects associated with what would become electronic technology into the field of magic. Thus the narrative mobilization of magic does not represent a regressive animism, a return to or of primeval beliefs. Instead, magic is a means of imagining, constructing, and analyzing a technology still to come or only yet in its nascence. Like Vaucanson, Hoffmann leaves an empty space inside his stories that represents the direction left open for future technological imaginations. Alongside descriptions of life in a functionalist bureaucracy that are entirely apt in their practical and theoretical investigations of the material media that structure and facilitate that social reality, he names another world whose technological underpinnings are “magical” inasmuch as they are not *yet* recuperable by technological means.

Both Hoffmann’s and Vaucanson’s projects strive to colonize imaginarily the technologies of the irrational that would soon be invented, before the technical fact of their material instantiation or instantiability. They are polar opposites of what Freud defines as the characteristic magical form of the uncanny. This uncanniness, “associated with the omnipotence of thoughts, with the prompt fulfillment of wishes, with secret injurious powers and the return of the dead,” presumes the return of an ancestral belief, now been exorcised by techno-industrial modernization:

We – or our primitive forefathers – once believed that these possibilities were realities [...] Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have *surmounted* these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny [...] Conversely, anyone who has completely and finally rid himself of animistic beliefs will be insensible to this type of the uncanny.<sup>291</sup>

Instead, Hoffmann’s and Vaucanson’s apparatuses and technologies are uncanny in their prescience, their sudden invocation of a technological future anterior in an archaic form. Freud’s predecessor Ernest Jentsch describes this mode of uncanniness produced by technological advances, as when “a wild man has his first sight of a locomotive or of a steamboat, for example, perhaps at night.”<sup>292</sup> Now, Jentsch’s theory is itself a repressed moment from the pre-history of Freud’s essay; like Hoffmann’s and Vaucanson’s lacunae, it extends Freud’s theory of the past repeating itself into an even more destabilizing pre-insistence of a future seeking to come into being.

Freud’s passage is clearly inflected by wish-fulfillment, inasmuch as it aims to construct a convincing and believable portrait of the person who has “completely and finally rid himself of animistic beliefs.” This Modernist hero of Freudian psychoanalysis has

<sup>291</sup> “U” 247-8.

<sup>292</sup> Ernest Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” trans. Roy Sellars, in *Angelaki* 2.1 (1996): 7-16, 11. Hereafter cited as “OPU.”

overcome his familial or ancestral entanglements through the exercise of a self-fashioning will, and now can stand alone with science against magic, disquiet, and the claims or sins of his fathers. But this progressivist impulse towards a better ego-ideal directly inverts the function of science and magic in Hoffmann's texts. As we have seen, the media of magic and those of the technological realities of everyday life do create unsettling temporal effects, but not because the everyday gives way to the magical. Instead, in Hoffmann's media constellation, the magical constantly promises and threatens to become the everyday of tomorrow (that tomorrow which will subsequently re-define it as purely magical, or render its fantastic power explicable via the medium of "the uncanny"). And it does become the everyday of tomorrow, when Offenbach finally produces the music of Olympia's song – previously available only as a brief, and silently textual, description in "The Sandman," in which her voice appears, of course, as "bell-like."<sup>293</sup>

But Hoffmann's and Vaucanson's work do not simply prophecy the thematic dimension of Olympia's song. They prepare a very specific and coordinated place for the irrational in music, mathematics, and engineering. The reversibility between Klara and Olympia, Veronica and Serpentina, glass jar and golden pot, in which each pole of the figural binary can figure automation equally well, defines the irrational as implicitly mechanically-reproducible. Perhaps Serpentina is mechanical by nature, but Veronica can figure her beloved's desire just as well by purchasing, and learning to operate, a magic mirror – although in so doing she opens herself up to the suspicion that she was originally magical, to participation in Serpentina's plot. Even in the face of data or phenomena that ought to necessitate a transformation of the systems of figuration, comprehension, and reproduction that seek to convey, explain, and imitate them, the basic meaning of automation, or technological media, somehow remains unchanged: there are natural humans and natural machines, even if they are sometimes hard to tell apart. Furthermore, technology appears as a story for children, something whose magic we can all feel but the feeling of which we must grow out of, even as we secretly enjoy it by proxy. This properly fetishistic operation allows our culture to assimilate the irrational without suffering any of its destabilizing and dehumanizing effects.

*Le Château des Carpathes*, perhaps Jules Verne's only great novel, satirizes precisely this configuration of the uncanny. The villagers of Werst, a tiny, superstitious hamlet in the Carpathians, confront a multiplicity of uncanny events – phantom sounds, ghostly apparitions, mysterious barricades – after the young shepherd Frik purchases a telescope from a traveling merchant and trains its lens on the titular castle. This merchant also introduces an explicitly Hoffmannian element, since "ces marchands de thermomètres, baromètres et patraques, évoquent toujours l'idée d'êtres à part, d'une allure quelque peu hoffmanesque. Cela tient à leur métier."<sup>294</sup> But as the first line promises, "Cette histoire n'est pas fantastique, elle n'est que romanesque"<sup>295</sup> – the novel takes over the fantastic, magical tropes of Hoffmann's tales and renders them purely novelistic, even novel (since "Nous sommes d'un temps où tout arrive" in the mode of technological engineering). The Baron has wired the town with a secret telephonic network; the phantom of the diva La Stilla is a holographic projection; the force-field surrounding the castle is an electronic fence. Recapitulating the tradition of "the explained Gothic" inaugurated by Ann Radcliffe, *Le Château des Carpathes* provokes a humorous pleasure in its reader, who reads with tongue in

<sup>293</sup> "S" 299.

<sup>294</sup> Jules Verne, *Le Château des Carpathes* (France: Libro, 2007) 11. Hereafter cited as *CC*.

<sup>295</sup> *CC* 5.



cheek, recognizing that the poor, temporally-dislocated villagers misidentify uncanniness as magic, when instead it is properly scientific. What appears first as a figure of science-fiction seems later to resemble some type of realism. The villagers do not know that they are living in the science-fictional present, but the reader, to enjoy the text, must recognize this obvious truth, and grow out of the Freudian paradigm of uncanny terror, or the fantastic epistemological uncertainty of Hoffmann's texts, into a mature, sophisticated acceptance of the uncanniness of today's technology. The generic title of "the explained Gothic" itself (of which Verne's novel is a latter-day example) defines the Gothic, the fantastic, as merely an anachronistic delay before the arrival of the promised scientific resolution to the desire for magic.

Olympia provokes the same amused response in her viewer: her uncanny aria explicitly presents itself as out-of-date, in the *passé* style of the French operetta, to contrast itself with the tacitly-understood truth that her charms are all too real, all too easily obtained by the modern world's technological marvels: "il ne se crée plus de legends au déclin de ce pratique et positif XIXe siècle [...], ni même en Transylvanie, où le cadre des Carpathes se prête si naturellement à toutes les evocations psychagogiques."<sup>296</sup> Olympia, the product of a fetishistic technology (not just that of the music Offenbach writes for her, but of the mechanics of diva training and opera production that undergird her performance), epitomizes this superficial pleasure inherent in all the technological manipulations that have become possible at the *fin-de-siècle*. As the empty, dreamed-of core of Hoffmann's and Vaucanson's mechanisms made tangible *as* fantasy, she both sacrificially condenses all this pleasure into her figured body by standing apart from the technologies that we all now hold at our fingertips, and sustains the disavowed pleasure of electromagnetic vibration in its constant circulation as the *disque-ourcourant*. Verne echoes this structural silencing of the diva – it's not that she's not singing, it's just that we're not listening – by naming the dead diva reincarnated holographically in the castle "La Stilla." She is no longer "La Stella" that Hoffmann spends the entirety of the *Contes* awaiting: if Stella did not possess an operatic voice (hers is a spoken role), La Stilla has been entirely muted. We move from the starry, constellated night ruled over by the "casta diva" to the "*stille nacht*" of the dead Stilla. In another homonym, "la stilla" also refers to the *style*, the needle, of the gramophone: both what we *never* hear (the electronic voice with its fatal threat), and the very medium endlessly producing the sounds that allow us not to hear its voice.<sup>297</sup>

Does Olympia then pronounce the last word in contemporary techno-fetishism? Not quite: "on a *presque* le droit de dire où tout est arrivé," qualifies Verne's narrator.<sup>298</sup> Only one truly fictional technology appears in Verne's novel: after an announced near-future improvement on the telephone, "[Deux personnes] pouvaient même se voir dans des glaces reliées par des fils, grâce à l'invention du téléphote."<sup>299</sup> Verne's novel contains its own hollow spot in which it dreams of a future, in which image and sound will be perfectly synched in real time – in which, that is, image will be displaced into the gramphonic/electromagnetic

<sup>296</sup> CC 5.

<sup>297</sup> Franc Schuerewegen discusses the meaning of names in *Le Château des Carpathes* in "To Hate Shepherds: Letter to an American Friend about a Jules Verne Story (or Why Technological Objects Sometimes Complicate Our Lives)," *SubStance* 33.3 (2004): 23-33, 24, 28. Schuerewegen also gives an extended discussion of the novel in his *À distance de voix: essai sur les "machines à parler"* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1994) (hereafter cited as *ADV*).

<sup>298</sup> CC 5

<sup>299</sup> CC 138.

(“reliées par *des fils*”) realm of sound technology, in which images will also become sonically fetishized signifiers. This solution was not accessible to Powell and Pressburger, as in their film cinema remains broken and fragmentary while sound maintains the consistent, sustained vibration of truth. But today, with the arrival of cameraphone technology (FaceTime, Skype, Snapchat), Verne’s dream has finally become reality; we have finally perfected Olympia by absolutely reducing the space between imaginary and reality that still remains unresolved in her performance.

In Hoffmann and Vaucanson, the present strives to cover up not a past, but a future – an event or an upheaval in imagination and symbolization yet to come, the traumatizing event almost experienced but constantly warded-off by the discourse of fetishism. In this way, their vocabularies invent an imaginary signifier, a fetish-sound with an accompanying technology, for the cybernetics that they simultaneously inaugurate and displace. Their fetishistic reaction against the technological event structurally forecasts that event’s occurrence into the undecidable future of a traumatic, rupturing event that must have happened even as it must not be allowed to happen. Olympia’s location in the fetishistic place prepared for her by literature, music, and science generates the uncanny affect she seems to produce, all by herself, in her spectators and interlocutors. So to see Olympia clearly, we will have to distinguish between the fantasy generated by her triangulation in the place of the imaginary signifier and the fantasy that would be hers.

### **Olympia’s Negative Magnetism: Stella and Antonia**

Offenbach sends a living woman to produce the sounds that were beyond the grasp of the technology of the historical Hoffmann and of Olympia’s predecessors in automation. To do so, he employs a specific set of musical signifiers to figure the robotic music of Olympia. Commentators of the *Contes* read these figures both to underline the unsettling features of Olympia’s song and to reduce its ambiguity. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” introduces the ambiguity that confronted Powell and Pressburger by orienting Olympia’s acoustic production into visual experience. Nathanael looks through Coppola’s magic glasses and sees her performance (as the coordinating tropological network of fire, heaven, and vibration underlines), its “skillful roulades” that “appeared to him to be the heavenly exaltations of a soul transfigured by love” and its “long trill” that “[echoes] shrilly through the hall” and makes him feel “as if he were suddenly embraced by burning arms.”<sup>300</sup> To turn towards the present question – how does Olympia occupy the space prepared for her by her models? and how do Olympia’s techniques of occupying that space differ from those employed both by the other heroines of the *Contes* and by the “Olympia” determined by the history described in the last chapter? – I will consider how the Doll Song translates the literarily audiovisual sequence of “The Sandman” into the operatic audiovisual experience of the Doll Song.

Olympia’s song begins, not with roulades, but with an arpeggiated motive in the flute obbligato; this motive does indeed work towards a sustained trill that introduces Olympia’s voice. She at first sings similarly disconnected notes – the “bell tones” so beloved of Hoffmann – and ends with written-out trills. The Doll Song frames its roulades between longer sections of “pure” arpeggiated figures that link Olympia to that instrument of pure intervality, the harp. As an encyclopedic compilation of all the virtuosic effects associated with the skill of coloratura the Doll Song evokes its great model, the Queen of the Night’s Act II aria from *Die Zauberflöte*, which Abbate describes as “several different aria fragments

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<sup>300</sup> “S” 299.

as one”<sup>301</sup>: both songs strive not to form coherent wholes, but instead cover over their lack of unity by shifting constantly from one fleeting, partially-developed and developed-to-partiality motif to the next. Similarly, Mozart and Offenbach give their divas outmoded arias, throwbacks to incongruous styles; the Queen of the Night and Olympia employ techniques of affective mimesis that are foreign to the general field of representation of the operas in which they appear. This aesthetic disjunction highlights the facticity of the styles of both arias, marking them as imitations of imitations, and causing the strategies of the other characters to appear both more immediate and more authentic by contrast. Such a staging of the voice produces “an unprecedented voice [...], one with no capacity for melodic conjunction”<sup>302</sup> – in other words, a purely instrumental and non-colored voice, one lacking the *melos* of the melodrama, an absolutely inhuman or uncharacterizable voice, which never resolves into Poizat’s beyond of meaning, an excess of emotive or affective baggage, but instead, “transmuted from organic to metallic, reverts to the instrumental as an uncanny sound.”<sup>303</sup> Hadlock hears Olympia’s song as even more inhuman: “Olympia sings *vocalise* and piercing high notes, rapidly repeated, and her staccato coloratura purges the voice of its human affect, depriving it of grain and texture,”<sup>304</sup> as if the composition is a machine custom-built to engineer all the humanity out of the body (now deprived of the “grain,” the residue of the bodily real) of the performer performing it.

Reversing Hoffmann’s paradoxical psycho-thermo-dynamics, Olympia sings the “cold”<sup>305</sup> music of the music box or player piano; consequently, the emotive heat that appears in her song is merely a projection onto the purely metallic magic mirror of her voice. Olympia would thus become the mere mechanical skeleton upon which the fire of Hoffmann’s ardor is projected, through the supplemental technology of Coppélius’s glasses; we could clearly state that the uncanny affect is in us, not in her. Clément portrays Olympia thusly in *L’Opéra ou la défaite des femmes*, using the doll as a rhetorical tool to frame the prima donna as “the marionette woman,”<sup>306</sup> “the prisoner of a machinery, and booby-trapped by a machination.”<sup>307</sup> This woman is forced to become a machine so as not to discomfort the male spectator whose pleasures are founded on his “horror of bodies”<sup>308</sup> in general, and in particular the horror of different bodies – the real horror of embodied non-self-sameness that the myth of the empty, castrated female body as object of fetishistic horror *vacui* was built to cover over and ward off. Clément perceptively segues from Olympia to another body engineered and finally destroyed by men, that of Maria Callas, who felt obliged to drastically change her physical appearance (at the all-too-fatal risk of damaging her voice) to better conform to the desires of her audience.<sup>309</sup>

Clément provocatively describes these figures – Olympia, Callas, Malibran, etc. – as examples of the “body dressed as a woman,”<sup>310</sup> calling attention to the facticity of “Woman” as an object. Woman is the construction of a necessarily- and obsessively-repeated drag

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<sup>301</sup> *ISO* 92.

<sup>302</sup> *ISO* 92.

<sup>303</sup> *ISO* 94.

<sup>304</sup> *ML* 79.

<sup>305</sup> *ISO* 94.

<sup>306</sup> *Ouw* 25.

<sup>307</sup> *Ouw* 26.

<sup>308</sup> *Ouw* 27.

<sup>309</sup> *Ouw* 28.

<sup>310</sup> *Ouw* 29.

show put on for and by men, at play with their life-size prima donna “mannequins.”<sup>311</sup> Clément’s epithet also suggestively distinguishes between the body, the real object of horror that must be disguised everywhere it threatens to appear, and “Woman,” the captivating image that has been created by men to stave off the danger of the body, is revealed as an imaginary signifier, fetishistically covering up for the Real of castration, which, after all, has nothing to do with the biological accident that is the penis.

Clément suggests that the discursive object called “Woman” – produced through an overlapping multiplicity of semiotic systems including language, mythology, literature, fashion, politics, art, science, desire, etc. – has always been a technological fiction. Both women and men have long had access to technological means to realize this fiction in the everyday world of “real” bodies (diets, makeup, undergarments, hairpieces, and the like). Clément anticipates and radicalizes the later concept of “gender performativity,” which considers gender (and sex) as products of iterative, creative performances of imitation without an original. Clément both dramatically asserts that femininity is a social and discursive “construct” and goes further, insisting that it is a technological production, available in the social world of “real life.” Bodies are always also automata inasmuch as the matrix of the possible meanings, movements, and messages they could produce or that could adhere to them is coordinated by various media, both immaterial (on the level of cultural archetypes or epistemes) and material, themselves constantly negotiating with each other and with the bodies around which they circulate. Clément locates Olympia as the closest point to the truth of gender’s factitiousness: “There has been all this machinery surrounding prima donnas, and now – this performance where the prima donna herself becomes a machine.”<sup>312</sup> Olympia, a true deconstructionist critic, performatively demonstrates that the supplement, or supplementation as such, lies at the origin.

But Clément reduces Olympia to a technology of argumentation, a rhetorical device, a matheme or allegory corresponding to a truth lying elsewhere, even as she passionately and insightfully reveals the discursive and coercive epistemic technologies at work in the machine of 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera. She does not allow Olympia to occupy the place of prima donna, even as she uses Olympia rhetorically to define the space Callas, Malibran, and la Tosca will later occupy. Instead, when Clément reads the *Contes*, she focuses on the doubled pair of Stella and Antonia, who represent the two sides of the diva; Clément calls them the “real” and the “fantasy,” although a stricter Lacanian analysis might not oppose the two, but instead locate them as rotational turns of each other across the axis connecting production and consumption.<sup>313</sup> Stella works; she is busy all through the opera performing in *Don Giovanni* and even afterwards, when she has to go home with an important opera fan; we see her accepting money for her labor; and she prudently saves her voice when she’s not onstage (again, hers is classically a spoken role). Antonia, meanwhile, does nothing; she hasn’t even been singing since her father forbade her to; only love provokes her into song – love for Hoffmann, and then the even more consuming love for the lost and monstrous Mother (who shows herself only through the effect she has on Antonia’s voice). The Mother’s “gift” – Antonia’s voice, unlike Stella’s, is radically anti-economic – cannot be assimilated into any bourgeois social register, any happy family romance, and thus she is doomed.<sup>314</sup> But Stella is doomed too, doomed to success; she can’t take herself off the market. As in *Les Mystères de*

<sup>311</sup> Cf. *Ouw* 30.

<sup>312</sup> *Ouw* 27.

<sup>313</sup> *Ouw* 31.

<sup>314</sup> See *Ouw* 31-2.

*Paris* or *La Traviata*, the twinned economic fictions of the prostitute and the angel are in fact two halves of the same fantasy.

At this key moment, when Clément uses Olympia as a foil to unveil the automatisms and technologies of exchange that structure the positions of Stella and Antonia, Olympia somehow vanishes, replaced by Freud's hysterics and Don Giovanni. Clément prefers the eccentricity of Antonia and Stella, who cannot be recuperated by the structure of operatic ensemble: Stella has no voice, and Antonia's voice is located outside of society and in the realm of pure fantasy – her only ensemble, besides her naïve duets with Hoffmann, is in the nightmare allegory for psychoanalysis she sings with the *père-vers* Dr. Miracle and the phallic, castrating Mother's Voice. However, Olympia can participate in the operatic ensemble – in the party scene of Act I, which resolves the problems facing Antonia and Stella. On the one hand, Olympia triumphs where Antonia fails, since the passage of a daughter from her father to her paramour succeeds (in Act III and the Epilogue, the primal fathers keep the women to themselves, and in Act II, a hysteria transmitted from mother to daughter renders the woman unexchangeable). On the other hand, Olympia triumphs in Stella's places, since the party scene is based explicitly on the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni* – both are structured by a triple-meter dance piece that coordinates the contrapuntal contributions of the principals, both hosts and guests, and chorus. Olympia's technological automation makes the colonization of the diva's body, in social reality and in fantasy, visible, but Olympia herself does not fully occupy the position for which she is a synecdoche. She figures both the technologically-constituted position of the prima donna, and the slippage that moves her beyond that position, or – perhaps more dangerously – that generalizes that position so that it becomes impossible to tell who is the automaton, Olympia or her salon, Stella or Lindorf.

Or, for that matter, Antonia, whose body and psyche both become instruments for Dr. Miracle to play on (remember Nicklausse's Act II aria that puns on the polysemy of *âme*, meaning both soul and soundboard). Antonia may be the most robotic character in the opera – the compositions of others almost absolutely determine all her performances. Clément reads Antonia as a puppet acting out a masculine fantasy in which female impotence becomes the medium of an orgasmic, if mendacious, transference leading the Woman beyond the grave and towards the divine. However, Hadlock sees Antonia as something of a double of Clément herself. For Hadlock, Antonia herself chooses to stay true to the feminine legacy that a masculinist musical practice or career would silence: "Bonds between female generations must be severed so that each cohort of daughters may be fully assimilated into patriarchal order; however, this repression has not been completed in Antonia's case. The prima donna mother remains alive both 'outside' the family and 'inside' her daughter, encouraging her to rebel against silence and domesticity."<sup>315</sup> Certainly Hadlock aims to align the authentically feminine and the uncanny by positioning the object of repression as both malignant outside force and secret, hidden core – Dr. Miracle's capacity to walk through walls demonstrates that in this topography of repression the outermost outside and the innermost inside are one.

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<sup>315</sup> *ML* 74. Hadlock may oversimplify here. As Kittler demonstrates (and with him Deleuze and Guattari), the medium of control and social reproduction in the family unit is not the *severing* of intergenerational ties, but the *channeling* of communications between the generations into discourse-technologies that simultaneously construct and restrict the possibilities of meaning.

Hadlock, surprisingly, argues that Dr. Miracle is “Antonia’s own alter ego rather than her opponent,”<sup>316</sup> and that the shadow haunting the Crespel home is the specter of Antonia’s own desire to find her own voice. When Antonia sings, then, she suicidally declares her feminine autonomy, emphatically clinging to her *écriture féminine* at all costs. Hadlock positions this interesting reading of Antonia uncomfortably close to a catalogue of all the sources for Antonia’s actual death-song, most notably the trio “Anges purses, anges radieux” from Charles Gounod’s *Faust*.<sup>317</sup> If Antonia’s death-song adapts such problematic models, then the mother-voice in Antonia – which Hadlock links to the “pre-Oedipal or Imaginary mother” of Lacan and Julia Kristeva – may not be “a *supplement* of undomesticated female power that survives in each generation,” but instead a masculine fantasy of that female power covering over a potentially more unsettling force.<sup>318</sup> Here Hadlock conflates two very different theoretical models of the voice: the “pre-Oedipal” theory of the enveloping maternal voice put forward by Kristeva, Mary Ann Doane, Guy Rosolato, Michel Chion, and others, in which the infant is supposed, historically, to have been suspended in a uterine acoustic bath; and the “Imaginary” theory, legible in the work of Silverman, Jean Laplanche, Gilles Deleuze, and Mladen Dolar, which views this trope primarily as a fictitious and retroactive fantasy, a fetishistic screen projecting a fictive unity in place of a reality of fragmentation.<sup>319</sup> Antonia’s autonomy may itself be a fantasy within a fantasy, another turn of the same old compensatory fantasy.

While Hadlock humanizes Antonia, other interpretations have sought to give new life to Stella. In their *The Diva’s Mouth*, Susan Leonardi and Rebecca Pope revisit Clément’s reading of the *Contes*, repeating her dismissal of Antonia. (They twist the knife a little bit: their Antonia is a ditzzy anti-Faust who succumbs to the artificial paradise of the unnatural voice all too readily, hardly capable to reflect critically on her position, let alone to make Hadlock’s Promethean bargain.<sup>320</sup>) Leonardi and Pope seize upon Stella as a proto-Madonna: Stella must be aware that she, “as diva, is a field for the projections of others” and thus a specular surface that offers the space for “critique, the possibility that the narrative is turning back on itself.”<sup>321</sup> Of course, as a mirror, it does depend who’s looking into Stella; Leonardi and Pope’s claim is that Stella’s self-reflexiveness enables a female community of “resisting readers” to stand in for her specular image, performatively creating a Stella who is her own resistant reader, a “Stella speaking for herself, not speaking Hoffmann’s or the librettist’s lines, not speaking or singing, as Olympia does, the words of another who is male.”<sup>322</sup>

We may well wonder whether a trope’s mobility, the structural capacity for a cultural product to be re-mobilized in a different context, immediately leads to the undoing of that form’s political and social ramifications. As Adorno argued above, a certain amount of unfaithful “misuse” is not only allowed but expected for the fetish-object of entertainment to succeed in its work of producing the illusory, even “resistant,” anti-subjective subjectivity of the consumer. More pertinently, this reading differentiates Stella from Olympia by claiming that Stella can be a mirror for readings that carry an unsettling extra value, while

<sup>316</sup> *ML* 66.

<sup>317</sup> *ML* 76.

<sup>318</sup> *ML* 76.

<sup>319</sup> Silverman summarizes these two opposed theories in *AM* 72-73.

<sup>320</sup> Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope, *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, Prima Donna Politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996) 13. Hereafter cited as *DM*.

<sup>321</sup> *DM* 14.

<sup>322</sup> *DM* 15.

Olympia can only say the same thing, over and over. For Leonardi and Pope, Stella crystallizes her reflexivity with a traditional gesture, used in many performances of the *Contes*: she throws her rose at the feet of the prostrate Hoffmann as she leaves the stage with Lindorf. Stella here repeats the audience's gesture of showering the prima donna with flowers, disturbing the expected schema of operatic exchange by putting one diva too many – and a male diva at that – on the opera stage, and thus unmooring the discursive position of divahood from its naturalized association with the singular body of the female singer.<sup>323</sup>

But is this theory of a sudden excess of divas appropriate in the context of the *Contes*, in which the prima donna is already at least tripled into three (or four or five, if Stella and Nicklausse/the Muse count as well) starring roles? Doesn't the interest of the *Contes* lie in its obsessive demonstration that the machinery of prima donnas lends itself all too well to an infinite, serial repetition – in its serial form which, in microcosm, presents an entire season of operatic plots? And is Stella's gesture really that original or subversive? Certainly, it participate in the long line of semi-improvised, non-scripted gestures passed from diva to diva – such as Tosca's arranging of the crucifix on Scarpia's body, an action invented by Sarah Bernhardt and then imitated by legions of prima donnas, thus showing that the capacity to produce insistent operatic signifiers is by no means restricted for men. This gesture subverts as a stock action, relying on the overwhelming normalcy of such a gesture to construct its difference. Stella's power borrows and prolongs the force Olympia displays in her paradoxical, virtuosically banal, song.

Like Olympia, the *Contes* insistently declares that opera is, and always has been, a medium based on technological reproduction, a rite that must be temporally restaged, over and over. As Nicklausse exclaims, “Je comprends ! Trois drames dans un drame : / Olympia, / Antonia, / Giulietta, / Ne sont qu'une même femme : / La Stella !” The “star” of opera is not and has never been the transitory female body appearing in any one night's performance; instead, opera, like other serial forms, founds itself on the missed encounter with the heavenly ideal, paradoxically defined as inaccessible by the very discourse that constitutes itself around its repeated, delicious failure to live up to such an ideal. The mechanics of opera recapitulate the repetitive, insistent structure of the Lacanian drive, in particular the play between various forms of the fetish-voice and the virtual other voices it silences or forestalls. In this sense, we fixate on Stella as a necessary reaction against the image of Olympia, who reveals herself as pure, mechanical drive-insistence and nothing more. Stella, who does not sing, is necessary to the plot, inasmuch as she forces the audience to imagine what she could have sung – thus positioning the cathected vocal object (whether the object of masculinist or liberatory feminist/queer theoretical fantasy) outside of the operatic text. In a pure operatic bait-and-switch, the carefully-coordinated non-song of Stella encourages us to imagine what could have been sung, thus keeping us inside our own fantasy-apparatus, and distracting us from the truly unsettling song of Olympia, whose mechanical song renders the structure of fantasy, as mechanical, all too visible.

In similar ways, these readings fixate on the couple Antonia-Stella as a means of escaping the gravitational pull of Olympia: one pole of the Antonia-Stella couple makes itself available as a space for the projection of excess fantasy-energy that the figure of Olympia was not able or refused to satisfy (the fantasy of the subversive hysteric asserting her subjectivity by embracing her subjectivization, the fantasy of the postmodern pop sensation asserting her subjectivity by embracing empty subjectivity's reliance on a fictitious set of cultural forms). These readings of the opera do not so much gravitate towards the Antonia

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<sup>323</sup> See *DM* 14.

or Stella acts as they are repelled by the negative force of Olympia's song, perhaps echoing the structure of the opera as a whole.

Hadlock demonstrates that the opera structures its acts so as to move the audience, operatic or critical, away from the Olympia act and towards the other voices of Antonia and Stella – the sublime voice of pure emotion and the zero-degree-voice of speech, the cry and the anti-cry. Throughout the *Contes*, Offenbach plays with a variety of operatic technologies or genres, alternating between the techniques of opéra-comique (which Offenbach had celebrated in a 1856 manifesto<sup>324</sup>), the emergent German vocabulary of post-Wagnerian opera seria, and an almost avant-garde “naturalization” of operatic modes (as the Prologue and Epilogue aim to motivate their musical flights through realist devices). In opposing Antonia and Olympia, opéra-lyrique and opéra-comique, the opera risks a dangerous affective politics, contrasting French artificiality to German authenticity. “Olympia embodies French operetta”<sup>325</sup> as a body literally constructed to mechanically imitate human sentiment in amusing but superficial ways, as if to confirm Wagner's dismissal of French opera as “a masterpiece of mechanism.”<sup>326</sup> Conversely, Antonia represents the body that cannot deceive, the hysteric's body that never ceases to declare the truth of its woundedness: if “the scene of Antonia's death makes Gounod-style sincerity into another kind of deception,”<sup>327</sup> the force of the scene – in which Antonia is entirely taken in by the power of Dr. Miracle's derivative music, and in which she entirely transmits the rapture of her surrender to its lyricism to the audience – lies in Antonia's inability to take a second look at what's happening to her. The opera provides us with stable affects that trap and contain the undirected and anxiety-producing affects set loose by the all-too-insincere, insincere to the point of insincerely being insincere, Olympia act. Hadlock expresses the problem quite well, describing how the Olympia act, “in the gaiest [sic] and most tuneful way possible, manages to endorse the general contemporary verdict on operetta as destructive and false,”<sup>328</sup> as destructive inasmuch as it is false, according to the well-trod devaluation of mimesis that stretches back to Plato. But can we trust falsehood to debunk falsehood honestly?

The Olympia act runs up against this entirely appropriate epistemological stalemate produced by the playful use of mimetic play to unveil the truth of its falsehood, both thematically and in its use of various effects that provide glimpses of the paradox of operatic mastery:

[The Doll Song's] brilliant language, the prima donna's native tongue, has been deliberately drained of expressive meaning. The singer must efface herself and the fact of her performance if she is to be effective. The song, which has two identical verses, leaves no room for the diva to indulge in the vocal inventiveness that she might have regarded as her right, either in improvised cadenzas or with new and more elaborate ornaments for the second verse. A brief survey of recordings of the opera in this century reveals that most performers have nobly resisted the urge to vary the ornamentation in the second stanza. The regular phrase structures, unvaried repetition of the verse, and generic waltz accompaniment

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<sup>324</sup> *ML* 7.

<sup>325</sup> *ML* 93.

<sup>326</sup> Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, cited in *ML* 97.

<sup>327</sup> *ML* 107.

<sup>328</sup> *ML* 98.



all contribute to the ‘programmed’ effect of the piece, which conceals the laboring human performer.<sup>329</sup>

For Hadlock, this effect reveals the labor of the human performer as something inhuman, as mechanically instrumental. The diva’s human “nobility” inheres in her redefinition of the performing body as just a machine, one that produces the pleasure of imagining this voice – the voice made by a machine defined as the human body minus its human voice – as the true voice of the machine. The game, and the fun of playing it, rests solely in the sameness of the enterprise, in the way that, “tour à tour,” over and over, the mechanical voice is purely mechanical.

However, in the act’s finale – another translation of *Don Giovanni* into the artificial world of the opéra-comique – Olympia comes to life, singing her only word, “Oui !” (in “The Sandman” it was “Ach!”) to double or reproduce the orchestral waltz theme. Hadlock describes the surprise of this tour de force: “almost immediately she exceeds that theme’s formal constraints, and the orderly expectations set up by her Doll Song, as she runs away with the tune: her *roulades* get out of control; she gets stuck in the cadential trills; she rewrites the piece to the surprise and alarm of everyone around her.”<sup>330</sup> Olympia’s voice moves from the staccato arpeggios of the Doll Song into a coloratura based on roulades and melismas; in Abbate’s terms, Olympia follows the Queen of the Night’s trajectory in reverse, moving from the coloratura signifiers of automation to those of human expressivity. Just as the staging of the virtuosic, and thus next-to-impossible, Doll Song provides the audience with the added enjoyment of seeing, in the obvious strain of her labor, just how hard the prima donna’s human body has to work to reduce itself to a mechanically-reproductive technological artifact, the rhetorical argument of the Olympia act moves from the artificial imitation of artifice and to the artificial (yet human) imitation of artificial life. Both produce “humanity” as a tangible, irreducible remainder that stains any attempt to imitate the machine – to be a machine, since a machine is by definition imitative. Humanity precipitates out of the imitation of imitation. No longer the source of a Promethean detour, humanity emerges as the interference of the mechanical with itself (and vice-versa).

Olympia is, in a radical way, undecidable. She cannot be redeemed in the same optics of generalized Romantic or Naturalist humanity as Antonia and Stella, since she presents herself as a creature of artifice. If she is humanized from within her automatism, it is not because she is, at her core, human. Neither does she, as another mechanical, rational construct, simply simulate the irrational or irreducible kernel of embodied humanity, since her concluding music, triumphantly, constitutes itself out of and imitates, in its serpentine, sinusoidal lines, not merely humanity but also the machine of the future, the electromagnetic vibrations that were out of reach of Vaucanson’s piper. Unlike Vaucanson, who stopped at the limits of clockwork, Offenbach simulates the body of the non-mechanical machine with a human body.

Factitious imitation can no longer be cordoned off, safely circumscribed, and opposed to the “real” artificial replication of life – the Olympia act bases itself on a generalization of factitiousness and insincerity. In so doing, Olympia throws the consistency of her “reality” into doubt as well. Is she simply a fantasy, the fantasy of Vaucanson and Hoffmann, more tangible, more consumable as “real,” since engineered with the vastly superior materials provided by the medium of opera and the skilled workmanship of the

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<sup>329</sup> *ML* 80.

<sup>330</sup> *ML* 81.

prima donna? Or does she prove that the technological innovation that lay outside Vaucanson's grasp, the irrational music that lay beyond the order of Pythagorean harmonies, and the other science that Hoffmann had to call magic has been achieved, once and for all, in the absolute penetration of the prima donna's body by the technology of vocal reproduction, in the generalization of a mediatized and technological world shared by the opera's composers, performers, and listeners? Is Olympia a creature of fantasy, or does she, as a pure product and producer of fantasy, demonstrate that our very world has become the hyperreal actualization of our fantasies – thus making her the only authentic voice in a world based on the ideological fantasy that the fetish-voice props up and sustains?

### **Unheimlicher Fetischismus, oder Fetischistische Unheimlichkeit?**

Olympia's undecidable existence, her unsettling and unsettled life, continues between the first two acts of Freud's paper on the uncanny. Astonishingly, Freud, out of all the readers of Offenbach's opera, grants Olympia more animation, even more humanity, than any other commentator, when he introduces her near the beginning of his discussion of "[der] Erzählung 'Der Sandmann,' aus welcher die Figur der Puppe Olimpia in den ersten Akt der Offenbachschen Oper *Hoffmanns Erzählungen* gelangt ist." As is always the case with James Strachey's translations of Freud, the mistranslation of this sentence precisely indicates the key problematics of the paper on "The Uncanny." Strachey renders this phrase as "the story of 'The Sand-Man' in Hoffmann's *Nachstücken*, which contains the original of Olympia, the doll that appears in the first act of Offenbach's opera, *Tales of Hoffmann*."<sup>331</sup> Obviously, Strachey's translation undoes the Freud's animation of Olympia through of the verb "gelangen," which David McLintock more recently and more accurately translates in his "from which Olympia found her way into the first act."<sup>332</sup> Strachey's translation doesn't merely undo the rhetorical and projective animation of Olympia by removing Freud's verb that presumes a willing agent; he also institutes a binary opposition between the "original" of the doll Olympia and its (re-?)"appearance" in Offenbach's opera. Strachey simultaneously opposes original and copy, thing and semblance, repeating the very gesture that structures and orients the Western ideology of mimesis. Freud's glance at Olympia grants her enough life of her own to "find her way" or "wander" outside of the frame of one text and into another; Freud animates her not only as a figure-cum-character, but as an animated trope and the trope of animation. If Strachey's description of "artificial life" presumes a split between the thing-in-itself and its representation, opposing artifice and life and thus making "artificial life" legible only as "the artificial, inorganic, deathly imitation of life," Freud's transferential parapraxis suggests a way of thinking "artificial life" as "the life that the artificial – the machine, the imitation – already possesses."

"The Uncanny" seeks to define "uncanniness" as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,"<sup>333</sup> or, in Schelling's words, "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light."<sup>334</sup> For Freud, the uncanny is the affect accompanying, heralding, or preparing the return of the repressed, the supplement to its return. "The Uncanny" has the following metatheoretical plot: its definition of "the uncanny" as "the return of the repressed,"

<sup>331</sup> "U" 227.

<sup>332</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin, 2003) 136.

<sup>333</sup> "U" 220.

<sup>334</sup> "U" 224.

emphasizing the essential unity of the original and the insistent repetitiveness of its imitation and orienting meaning away from a panoply of degenerate copies towards the meaningful and meaning-producing Event, is itself uncanny inasmuch as it insistently signals toward a content which it covers over, represses, and holds at bay. “The Uncanny” obeys a fetishistic logic: the uncanny gains its consistency, as a theoretical or textual object, by its holding-in-abeyance of a more destabilizing content. Its all-or-nothing, real-trauma-vs-signifiers-of-trauma, binary structure mimics the fetishist’s substitution of a phallic-or-castrated binary onto the site of a more ambiguous gendering. If we discover that “The Uncanny” plays out a fetishistic epistemological game, it cannot be merely gratuitous that it does so in the space of an uncertain or excessive undecidability between woman and automaton, or between the question of woman (of gender) and the question of the automaton. Why must Olympia’s unstable animation provide the barely-repressed content that threatens to break through the textual screen of Freud’s essay, the content that his faithful translator strove so valiantly to elide?

In “The Uncanny,” Freud attempts to demonstrate that his definition of “the uncanny” is better than Jentsch’s. Freud first invokes a “fertile but not exhaustive” paper by Jentsch on the subject of the uncanny,<sup>335</sup> but delays any engagement with Jentsch’s own definition until the second chapter of his essay, which turns towards “The Sandman” and the automaton lurking within it. Freud writes, with a palpably indulgent largesse, “Jentsch has taken as a very good instance ‘doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata.”<sup>336</sup> By the way, Jentsch had other examples: he even provided an inverse case of uncanniness, that of “epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity” that “excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity.”<sup>337</sup> Although neither Jentsch nor Freud has explicitly said as much, the locus of uncanniness in “The Sandman” (as in the *Contes*) is simultaneously divided and singular – the first case, of a mechanical thing seeming alive, inheres in Olympia, while the second case, of a living thing revealing itself as mechanical, inheres in Hoffmann/Nathaniel himself, either in the stupidity of his desire for Olympia, or in Freud’s later claim that he is mechanically compelled to repeat his childhood trauma in the face of his father.

These two cases may seem separate, but in fact they exemplify two facets of automatism more generally, which, in a paradox commented upon by Mark Seltzer and explored at length by Minsoo Kang, can be mathematically expressed as follows: the “automaton” is both an originally mechanical thing *plus* life (a spectacularly “lifelike” doll or robot) and an originally human thing *minus* life (the automaton-woman of Jean Paul, the bureaucratic automaton, or the automatism of the *Wiederholungszwang*).<sup>338</sup> The imaginary of the automaton includes this ambiguity as the secret heart of its interest and allure. Freud follows the history of Nathaniel’s love for Olympia, attending to Jentsch’s claim that “one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in

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<sup>335</sup> “U” 219.

<sup>336</sup> “U” 226.

<sup>337</sup> “U” 226.

<sup>338</sup> See Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately.”<sup>339</sup> But suddenly, after so animatedly describing Olympia, Freud finds his analytic gaze captivated by Coppélius/Coppola and by Nathaniel’s own insistent drive to stare at the terrifying pair of doubles – in other words, by the captating force of the ambiguous, always-doubled spectacularity of the Imaginary itself. Freud concludes that the story is not at all about the ambiguity of animation, but about the precariousness of an identity performed and derived through the specular relation and its Imaginary duality: “This short summary leaves no doubt, I think, that the feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the figure of the Sand-Man, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes, and that Jentsch’s point of an intellectual uncertainty has nothing to do with the effect.”<sup>340</sup> For Freud, “The Sandman” centers not on the paradoxical and perhaps irresolvable status of Olympia, but on the completely and rigorously analytical question of Nathaniel’s own epistemological inquiries into his world. Psychoanalytic theory can firmly establish the relation between Nathaniel’s obsession with the image of Coppola/Coppélius, his unresolved childhood complexes, and the repetition-compulsion that – haunting “The Uncanny” in advance of its triumphant crystallization in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – drives Nathaniel to restage his childhood traumas, even to the point of his own suicide. No doubt, no uncertainty, need remain, after Freud has chosen the correct objects and optics for his psychoanalytic science.

Rhetorically, Freud casts himself-as-implied-author as an animated, impassioned speaker, an excessive animation that interferes with his arguments. When he writes “this leaves *no doubt, I think*,” the interpolated “I think” uncannily signals the recurrence of the same epistemological doubt which Freud’s argument seeks to repress or overcome. Similarly, in insisting that Olympia’s uncanniness is purely supplemental, because “Uncertainty whether an object is living or inanimate, which admittedly applied to the doll Olympia, is quite irrelevant in connection with this other, more striking instance of uncanniness,”<sup>341</sup> Freud repeats Jentsch’s association of the uncanniness of the automaton and a technical sleight-of-hand that diverts the reader’s gaze away from the paradoxical animated/mechanical object and towards another problem, making it impossible to see “clearly” through to the true nature of the troubling object. Freud’s epistemological strategy repeats this structure on a metapsychological level – diverting the psychoanalytic reader’s gaze not towards any object of visual scrutiny and investigation, but towards the gaze itself, and in so doing leaving the uncanny remainders of Olympia and Jentsch’s “uncertainty.”

“The Uncanny” foreshadows the forthcoming revision of drive theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* while domesticating that revision in advance. In the latter text, Freud’s investigation of the compulsion to repeat leads him to reconsider the meaning of “drive.” He will move away from the theory of drive as (animal) instinct first elaborated in the essays on childhood sexuality and towards a later definition of drive as the inhuman, even inanimate, mechanical-mathematical management of vital energies in the nervous system of the human psyche-soma. Freud thus redefines drive in terms of the regulation of electromagnetic flows, as Lacan would emphasize in his demonstration that drive theory is based on the laws of thermodynamics and as Olympia has already proclaimed in her song celebrating love as a system of diffracted energy-flows. Indeed, as Hélène Cixous suggests in

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<sup>339</sup> “U” 227.

<sup>340</sup> “U” 230.

<sup>341</sup> “U” 230.

her essay “La Fiction et ses fantômes,” Olympia ought to be seen as the very embodiment of drive energy, as an avatar of “l’automatisme de répétition sourd et aveugle, dominant, le plus intime des ressorts psychiques (c’est-à-dire la poupée la plus archaïque et la plus secrète).”<sup>342</sup> Nathanael and his analysis, however, are able to fully measure out psychic energy in terms of the economics of the reality and pleasure principles, restoring a pleasant regularity to the unmasterable thermodynamics of the drive.

Freud tellingly refuses to connect Nathanael’s incessant repetitions of his childhood trauma to the figure of the doll: the two quasi-mechanical beings must not *concern* each other theoretically. Instead, Freud imagines the purely technical character of the drive in a purely human, hence imaginary, in that it presumes the stability and integrity of the meaning of “human,” light: as “primitive belief,” as superstition. Freud’s argument obeys the same logic that would assign a seemingly-implicit deep meaning to an arbitrary signifier such as a number; he argues that the loss of the eyes (a mobile, literary symbol or trope) is precisely and universally equivalent to castration, by invoking mythology, conventional wisdom, and old saws such as “the apple of our eye.”<sup>343</sup> Freud asserts that an ambiguous signifier (the eye)<sup>344</sup> must mean only one thing,<sup>345</sup> a relation of simple equivalence he will reuse in the formula “Decapitation = castration” from “The Medusa’s Head.”<sup>346</sup> Similarly, as a whole, “The Uncanny” attempts to salvage, against the present threat of a disturbance of the critical gaze, a moment of fixed meaning, to redeem the signifier = signified formula underlying the imaginary figuration of signification. Death spectacularly figures mythological castration, and not the drive-impulse or barredness of the symbolic itself, which through its arbitrariness constantly shifts and undermines the stability of meaning. The “castration” feared and obsessively imagined by castration anxiety is merely one of the effects of this symbolic cause.

“The Uncanny” imposes a fixed, ordered system of signification on a more ambiguous set of signifiers unassimilable to the productive binary systems employed by the psychoanalytic or critical gaze. Freud employs a double rhetoric to reduce the significance of the uncanny. First, he imposes a teleological meaning upon “recurrence” in this text, assuming a logocentric model of mimesis by which originary events return in reiterated,

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<sup>342</sup> Hélène Cixous, “La Fiction et ses fantômes,” in *Prénoms de personne* (Paris: Seuil, 1974) 13-38: 30. Hereafter cited as “FF.”

<sup>343</sup> “U” 231. Lacan’s witty undoing of Freud’s procedure here (in which Freud somehow forgets about the arbitrariness of the signifier and instead views a signification as gnomonic, unchangeable, and given) can be found in *Encore*, when he teasingly unsettles the stability of the maxim “il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu.” See *E* 64.

<sup>344</sup> The ambiguity of the eye in “The Sandman” (the ambiguity that Freud manages not to see) can easily be glimpsed when we look to the place where we ought to see an eye – as an evident phallic symbol, it ought to be on the figure of the castrating father – and see only a “coppola,” from the Italian “coppo,” eye-socket. Of course, this irony ought to demonstrate that what is at stake in “The Sandman” is not loss of the penis, but instead symbolic castration, the entry into the symbolic order.

<sup>345</sup> Cixous neatly expresses the way in which Freud’s explanation of the symbolism of the eye cannot simply be halted there where Freud wants it to end: “Si l’histoire d’œil renvoie toujours à la castration, ce n’est pas une simple histoire d’Œdipe ; par le jeu incessant de la substitution, l’œil est multiplié et le travail familial de l’œil devient l’énigmatique production des doubles éparpillés, grains de feu, étoiles, lorgnettes, lunettes, vision de trop loin ou de trop près, secret théâtral que le texte freudien mime, frôle et encore fuit.” See “FF” 15.

<sup>346</sup> “MH” 273.

imitative forms, implying and instituting a clear division between the thing-in-itself and its representation in signifiers. Second, he insists on the stability of a one-to-one signifier/signified relationship only in the special case of the phallus. Neither one of these arguments is necessarily characteristic of Freud: In the case of the Wolf-Man, Freud suggests that a rigorous distinction between historical primacy or hallucinatory historical recreationism is unnecessary for clinical or psychoanalytic work; and in his later discovery of a pre-Oedipal – and thus unstructured by the erstwhile stable phallic signifier – phase of sexuality in girls, as surprising a discovery as that of “the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece,”<sup>347</sup> suggests the possibility of other organizations of the bodily Real that are not originally phallic.

When Freud institutes an epistemological structure of “decidability” that defines stability as the halting of *signifiance’s* vacillation, he simultaneously associates maleness with truth, clarity, and proper possession of the phallus and femaleness with fiction, double-vision, and improper embodiment. Confronted with Olympia, Freud seizes upon a theoretical object that guarantees a proper and decidable interpretation of “The Sandman”: the phallus, a supplemental (remember Coppola’s telescope) but necessary signifier allowing Freud to resolve the question of Nathaniel’s true complex. Freud’s enterprise, then, is perfectly fetishistic: threatened by the loss of self-possession and mastery introduced by the undecidability of Olympia, Freud slips back to the penultimate object in the chain leading towards Olympia – Nathaniel’s gaze – and erects it into a phallic substitute. Using Nathaniel’s gaze as a yardstick, Freud can measure Olympia’s value: “The automatic doll can be nothing else than a materialization of Nathaniel’s feminine [i.e. voyeuristic-exhibitionistic, in Nathaniel’s masochistic desire to have his gazing interrupted by his father’s punishing exoculation] attitude towards his father in his infancy,” “Olympia is, as it were, a dissociated complex of Nathaniel’s which confronts him as a person.”<sup>348</sup> Olympia’s value now derives solely from the movements of the phallic signifier – from Nathaniel’s castration-complex, itself emerging only from a confrontation between originally-phallicized men, the double set of good and bad fathers.

“The Uncanny” seeks to look away from the woman, and to establish that narrowly-averted glance as stable and permanent. Samuel Weber locates moments at which Freud refuses to read the explicit surface of Hoffmann’s text, which clearly states “Klara stood in front of the glass!” and instead imagines a glance passing only between Coppola and Nathaniel, thus removing Klara from his theoretical *Perspektiv*. Freud the reader must sidestep the female figure to preserve a solid subject-position, avoiding the stain of otherness or non-self-sameness that would otherwise taint his gaze and problematize his claims to theoretical mastery.<sup>349</sup> Similarly, Cixous notes that, if Freud were really to take Olympia as a detached complex of Nathanael’s, he would have to analyze her song and dance, to read them as dreams of Nathanael’s, yet he cannot bring himself to do so.<sup>350</sup> In this way, Olympia (and Klara) appears as a sideshow attraction in the more vital game of assigning and defining masculine value; we can clearly see the function of what Sarah Kofman has called the “Privilège donc de l’homme pris à titre d’*exemple* ou de point de *comparaison* même lorsqu’est

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<sup>347</sup> “FS” 226.

<sup>348</sup> “U” 232.

<sup>349</sup> See Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 17 et passim.

<sup>350</sup> “FF” 26.

reconnue la spécificité irréductible de la sexualité féminine.”<sup>351</sup> Feminine sexuality, and woman per se, does not appear as the ruins underneath the edifice of masculine subjectivity, but instead as an accidental reduplication of a phallic logic that has taken itself as its own cause, fetishistically misidentifying cause and effect.

Immediately after concluding his discussion of “The Sandman,” however, Freud returns to the scene of the ambiguous doll, remarking that:

in their early games, children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects, and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people. In fact, I have occasionally heard a woman patient declare that even at the age of eight she had still been convinced that her dolls would be certain to come to life if she were to look at them in a particular, extremely concentrated, way. [...] But, curiously enough, while the Sand-Man story deals with the arousing of an early childhood fear, the idea of a ‘living doll’ excites no fear at all; children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be an infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief. There seems to be a contradiction here; but perhaps it is only a complication.<sup>352</sup>

After triumphantly asserting and demonstrating his own epistemological gaze, Freud suddenly admits the existence of a different gaze, one not based upon the fearful looking-away from a traumatic or fear-inducing object. Instead, this gaze is the product of fantasy (wish or belief) even as it itself produces fantasy. At this moment of denial – it is the woman who believes, not I, Freud – Freud also seems to describe his own “extremely concentrated” glimpse of Olympia, in which he described her as “making her way” from text to text, from fantasy to fantasy, without concern over her origin or originality. Freud, after so carefully refusing to look at Olympia, gets too close; toying with his patient’s story about her toy, he implicates himself, rhetorically playing with the female patient or the female robot in the same way the patient played with “her” dolls – as if in response to Cixous’s rhetorical questions “Et si la poupée devenait une femme ? Si elle *était* vivante ? Si, en la regardant, on l’animait ?”<sup>353</sup>

Even as Freud defines Olympia’s ambiguity as the anxious ambiguity of the phallus produced by the castration complex, he simultaneously admits, defers, and performs another kind of ambiguity. He and his female patient share a transference belief, and Freud presents Olympia’s undecidability (her resistance to a phallogocentric epistemology) not (just) as an object of fear but as a potential object or means of desire in itself. Correspondingly, Freud imagines life as the sustained practice of animation, vehicle by a gaze that would not be fatal or re-animating in the manner of Coppola’s glass that brings the non-living, falsely, to life. For the female patient, like Freud in his animation of Olympia, does not lose a previous position of scopophilic mastery when the doll comes to life; instead, beyond the mortifying dialectic of the gaze, both the observer and the doll come to life, and to a practiced non-mastery, together, by exchanging the particularity of their glance with each other.

In “The Uncanny,” one single movement of fetishistic-epistemological investigation gives rise to two kinds of ambiguity, each with different consequences for our understanding

<sup>351</sup> Sarah Kofman, *L’Énigme de la femme: La Femme dans les textes de Freud* (Paris: Galilée, 1980) 46.

<sup>352</sup> “U” 233.

<sup>353</sup> “FF” 27.

or examination of Olympia. Kofman begins her reading of the epistemological stakes of fetishism by focusing on the double ambiguity produced by all fetishism, first asking what, exactly, this discursive and productive machine called “woman” is to Freud. The association of woman and representation/animation, the opposite of a masculine originality (“la caractéristique du sexe féminin, à savoir son inclination à s’appropriier tout le sexe masculin”<sup>354</sup>) capitalizes in advance on all those imitations that might degrade or compete with phallic masculinity, by demonstrating that they all refer back to an ideal coupling of maleness, the phallus, and originality itself. Offering a first decision on undecidability, this operation defines decidability and undecidability themselves as rigorously separable opposites. But if females are naturally oriented in the province of unstable orientations, what natural force will save men from the risk that women will constantly lose their orientation towards men?

Something must ensure that woman’s oscillating or destabilizing energy is not energetic enough – must normalize and regulate the irrational remainder so that it will not explode the harmony of nature and the harmonious structure of heterosexuality (this problem presents obvious Pythagorean resonances). As a solution, Freud proposes penis envy, with a constant and anxious glance towards biological causality. The theoretical *deus ex machina*<sup>355</sup> of penis envy resolves all the “enigmas” of feminine or infantile sexuality – the reversibility of active and passive, the non-correspondence between active and passive and masculine and feminine, the mysteriously unmoored nature of erogenous zones that do not inhere in any one place on the body, the baseline bisexual orientation of humans, and above all the non-gendered nature of the libido as an irrational and undifferentiated energetic impulse. Penis envy redeems the world from the drift of feminine desire by orienting all such desire as detours around the phallic pole, as variations from a baseline penile orientation that, like a pendulum swinging back and forth, always maintain their oscillation in terms of distance from the a natural resting position. Freud’s phallicization repeats the establishment of the necessary, characterless, and universalized temporality that wave-science requires in order to categorize all frequencies as equivalently different in their rates of oscillation. Kofman suggests that the universalization of electronic music may preserve the underlying beat of rationality, the measured tempo of standardized time.

This results in an endless confusion of nature and culture: penis envy sometimes appears as a natural consequence of feminine phallic lack in the Real, and sometimes instead as the result of cultural forces that would be needed to discipline the real body into the Imaginary and sexed body in which the penis and the clitoris (“the real little penis”) could effectively be distinguished on the level of phallicization (this disciplining force is provided by the network of sexual interventions in the child’s early life). Penis envy also allows Freud to ground his naturalization of the phallus in either the Real or the Imaginary (“anatomy” = “destiny”), thus mooring the phallus in the Imaginary or Real body of the male; in this way, Freud avoids the need to theorize castration as Symbolic, to view individual bodies, male, female, and otherwise, as all being marked by their entry into language. Even worse, the developmental approach that Freud presumes to adopt in writings such as the essays on

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<sup>354</sup> Kofman, “Ça cloche,” in *Lectures de Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 1984): 115-151, 119. Hereafter cited as “CC.”

<sup>355</sup> Kofman winks toward this term at the beginning of her discussion of penis envy; slyly, she is already hinting at the notion of *mechanization* (which goes hand-in-hand with the erection of God as a figure of fetishistic belief) that will come to characterize the woman’s workings in Freud’s theory. See “CC” 121.



childhood sexuality reveals that, at many points before the proper disciplinary structure of sexuation has been imposed, activity and passivity, “masculine” and “feminine” relations to one’s genitals and libidinal organizations, resist any stable mapping onto male and female bodies. Kofman emphasizes the strange temporality of penis envy: as a theoretical concept, it can only be read backwards, from a differentiated and disciplined adult sexuality onto a (from then on) correctly aligned childhood pre-history: “Parce que l’opposition sadico-anale actif/passif se soude au moment de la puberté à l’opposition des sexes, il devient possible d’affirmer après coup que dès l’origine il y a de ce point de vue des différences entre la fille et le garçon, que la première est déjà plus passive : si les deux sexes manifestent, par exemple, une préférence pour le rôle actif, ils ne renversent pas les rôles avec la même *énergie*.”<sup>356</sup>

We arrive at the fetishistic origin of penis envy – “La ‘theorie’ de l’envie du pénis est une speculation, une fiction, une réaction à la panique que provoque le sexe de la femme, de la mère : panique analogue à celle qui suscite l’écroulement du trône et de l’autel. Elle est une solution apotropaïque.”<sup>357</sup> Thereafter man becomes the key factor in and arbiter of generativity. Man now authentically stands as man inasmuch as he is master of the generative, imitative technological force – that is woman. Consequently, the machine of imitation and the imitative power of machinery are reincorporated into a proper division of human and mechanical labor. Mechanical productivity will produce either humans or machines (inasmuch as they are coordinated by a naturalized social field that locates them precisely in terms of gender), but no object that would be completely irreducible to either one of the two contrasting fields.

Now, the narrative of fetishism – in which the boy “discovers” the truth of feminine lack and creates the fetish so as to convince himself that he need not suffer the same fate – relies on an already-generalized fetishistic cosmos, in which specular supplements for gendered bodies easily and immediately communicate the truth about those bodies. Kofman explores this problem in light of Freud’s ambivalent relation to the theory of fetishism: Freud simultaneously celebrates the virtuosic happiness of the fetishist and attacks the fetishistic perversion as pathological. Theorizing fetishism would simultaneously provide him with an absolute confirmation of his naturalizing theory of phallicization (since the fetishist discovers castration as an independent researcher, and in early childhood) but would also, in reiterating the general structure of psychoanalytic epistemology, risk ironically unveiling psychoanalysis’s fundamental tenet of sexual difference to be a speculative fiction, a fantasy-formation.<sup>358</sup> For this reason, Kofman will argue that to critique the psychoanalytic fantasy we must not seek to *evacuate* fetishism, but instead to *generalize* its theory, as the “première étape d’une déconstruction de phallogocentrisme.”<sup>359</sup> To examine psychoanalysis’s fantasy of gender, we must not pathologize fantasy, as Freud would do, but allow it to contaminate our scientificity, and thus even to destabilize ourselves as subjects of an epistemological inquiry.

Kofman suggests as much in the citation of Jacques Derrida she takes as chapter title, “Mon émoi c’est l’oscillation”: oscillation does not simply *excites* or *incites* me to perform a theoretico-speculative analysis, but also, literally, “*moves* me,” puts me in a place where I no longer coincide with where I saw myself to be. This citation, by synecdoche, introduces the

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<sup>356</sup> “CC” 127.

<sup>357</sup> “CC” 131.

<sup>358</sup> “CC” 132.

<sup>359</sup> “CC” 132.

arguments of Derrida's *Glas*, such as Derrida's demonstration that there exist, in Freud's text defining the fetish, what he calls "des énoncés indécidables."<sup>360</sup> For Derrida, the fetish gains its consistency by materializing or instantiating its inconsistency as a sign, and thus deconstructs the binary of truth and falsity, imitation and thing-in-itself: "la moindre consistance du fétiche suppose déjà quelque liaison à des intérêts opposés et s'inscrit elle aussi dans une économie générale de l'indécidable. Bref, le fétiche, en general, par son indécidabilité, comporterait une puissance d'excès par rapport à toutes les oppositions qui ferait osciller l'opposition *Ersatz/non Ersatz*, déni/affirmation."<sup>361</sup>

Subsequently Derrida will accuse Freud of bowing to the logocentric paradigm by equating the *non-Ersatz* and the original/originary.<sup>362</sup> However, Kofman notes, Freud makes one final move in his paper on "Fetishism," by claiming that the fetish is not a substitute for the phallus-as-thing-in-itself, but instead by arguing that the fetish is the replacement for "a particular and quite special penis"<sup>363</sup> – the fantasmatic maternal penis. And this origin story "rompt avec la métaphysique, avec l'idée du pénis comme 'chose même' puise le pénis don't le fétiche est le substitut est un pénis fantasmatique, est qu'il n'a jamais été perçu comme tel, que le pénis de la mère, 'la chose même,' est toujours déjà un fétiche fictionné par l'enfant, une *croissance* impliquant à la fois le déni et l'affirmation de la castration."<sup>364</sup> In this way, if the fetish memorializes an originality, that originality is itself the originality of *fantasy*, of a perspective on things-in-themselves that is radically inflected by imagination and desire. The subject of fetishism must constantly negotiate between the two halves of an undecidable paradox: "Il n'y a jamais eu de 'chose même,' mais seulement de l'*Ersatz*, du postiche, une prothèse, une supplémentarité originaires."<sup>365</sup>

For Kofman, this repositioning is anything but final, since "Si l'*Ersatz* est originaire, il ne saurait plus y avoir d'opposition *Ersatz/non-Ersatz*."<sup>366</sup> Since the *Ersatz* here means "that which is constituted through and by difference to itself," after placing the *Ersatz* at the point of origin both *Ersatz* and *non-Ersatz* appear to contain, negotiate, and even generate their opposites. Consequently, any sexuality based on this generalization of the fetishist operation defining the chiasmus between fantasy and reality as the point of origin will differ radically from Freud's originary bisexuality. By postulating a "divided" libido, a libido that can be easily decomposed into two interlocking but separable halves, the theory of bisexuality assures subjects that their non-self-sameness is itself self-same, that their oscillating difference is stable. In this way "On ne jouit jamais vraiment, on oscille seulement d'une posture, d'une postulation à l'autre ; on 'joue seulement à jouir'"<sup>367</sup>; such an alternation is a compromise-position, a way of warding off the prospect of oscillation.<sup>368</sup> Male pleasure is a

<sup>360</sup> "CC" 135.

<sup>361</sup> "CC" 135.

<sup>362</sup> "CC" 136.

<sup>363</sup> "F" 152.

<sup>364</sup> "CC" 136.

<sup>365</sup> "CC" 136-7.

<sup>366</sup> "CC" 137.

<sup>367</sup> "CC" 141.

<sup>368</sup> This replacement of oscillation with alternation is visible, of course, in Freud's attempts to separate and individually define the "parts" of the coupled drives (exhibition/scopophilia, masochism/sadism, passive/active, etc.), while an examination of the mechanism of such drives overwhelmingly demonstrates that a stable segregation of such component parts is impossible, since the components share the same mechanisms.

strategy for avoiding feminine enjoyment; male pleasure is a fetishistic deferral/denial of feminine pleasure.

In contrast to this evenly-divided and stably-alternating sexuality, Kofman poses the sexuality of her “generalized fetishism,” “un sexe double, diabolique, qui dans sa duplicité rompt avec toutes les oppositions et toutes les hiérarchies [...] ni féminin ni masculin, ni castré ni non castré, non parce que bisexué mais parce que battant entre les sexes, parce que sexe toujours déjà double, qui gaine et bande doublement obéissant à un *double Bind*.”<sup>369</sup> This sex is not composed of two equal and stable psychic and bodily organizations corresponding to a stable division between heterosexual and homosexual orientations. Instead, its body and psyche are marked by constant auto-differentiation, by biological and psychological changes that never cease to render it different from what it was – by a doubly affective and mechanical process of “émoi,” of being moved, corresponding to exactly what was so incomprehensible in Olympia’s song.

To this new, generalized fetishism corresponds a re-defined genital, as “[un sexe] entamé, incisé, tailladé par l’autre. D’autant plus puissant que divisé, coupé,”<sup>370</sup> encompassing any erogenous zone on the body, whether “male” or “female.” The psychoanalytic definition of an erogenous zone oscillates, loses its stable mooring in a gender or a sex, and appears quite differently than expected. Qualifiers such as “lack” or “phallus” no longer hold specific meanings in relation to particular genital organizations, since every genital, produced through a negotiation between the real of the body and fantasy, bears the mark of alterity, prosthesis, and supplementarity. Similarly, sexuality cannot be organized according to the possible orientation of a stably-gendered body towards a set of other stably-gendered bodies. Instead – to use a paleonym – we might think of it as “heterosexual,” constituted through an encounter with the alterity of bodies, and the bodies of others, with which it continually and non-teleologically negotiates.

In her conclusion, Kofman considers the “*mélange des genres*” that would “sonne le glas du phallogocentrisme, la fin de toutes les oppositions, celle de l’homme aussi bien que celle de la femme, au profit d’une ‘jouissance féminine,’ si par féminin l’on entend l’oscillation indécidable.”<sup>371</sup> Kofman reworks the Derridean motif of the “glas” or knell, suggesting that the listener’s act of “entente” (“si par féminin on *entend* l’oscillation indécidable”) differentiates her understanding of other *jouissance* from Lacanian feminine *jouissance*. Kofman’s project to undo fetishism by generalizing its power passes through this return to the *auditory* field of fetishism that the specular model of fetishism both relies on and forestalls.

Entendre-as-hearing (presuming a resonant oscillation as the communication of sound waves via their interference with their own and other bodies) haunts entendre-as-understanding and critically destabilizes the epistemologically phallogocentrist paradigms of rational inquiry and understanding. Pleasure in hearing (which is not just pleasure, or not simply pleasure) also constitutes a potentially radical affective response to the “*mélange des genres*,” the undecidable exchange between and even within genders. Such an “entente” brings both the pleasure of “understanding,” of being confirmed in one’s position of rational mastery, and also the phantom pleasure of “hearing” something else, of finding oneself displaced within a sonic field. We may even feel pleasures we have never known how to feel, and suffer the displeasure of having our selves displaced into new coordinates within this

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<sup>369</sup> “CC” 144.

<sup>370</sup> “CC” 145.

<sup>371</sup> “CC” 150.

general field. Freud, replacing the potentially ego-subversive desire for exorbitant vacillation with the egotistically fatal image of Olympia's ex-orbing and the empty Coppola that would result, uses his model of uncanny displeasure to resist and deny the other jouissance.

Olympia, who finds herself submerged in an electric-acoustic bath of radiating waves, is certainly not stably at home there. Instead, new waves, new interlocutors, new sounds constantly confront her, passing through her *âme*, her vocal affective-instrumental body, and vibrating her differently. She spills out of her programming by thus picking up on musical cues that were not programmed into her repertoire. Perhaps Clément is right, and we do experience a satisfying, ego-affirming pleasure, the pleasure of the opera-lover, while hearing Olympia's song. But this pleasure must contain within it something entirely different, Olympia's own pleasure. Olympia's (im)pure ersatz fantasy is contagious and catching; to listen to her song – and not to understand it – we have to allow ourselves to be brought into her world, as Kylie Minogue will insist, displaced back into a truly *fantastic* universe.

But isn't the world already fantastic, or wasn't it fantastic when Olympia first sang her song? Once technology begins to fulfill its imagined role as realized equivalent to the *Ersatz* of the fantasized maternal phallus, once technological generativity works palpably alongside and through the bodies with which it used to be rigorously distinguished, once the artificiality of mechanical life appears too similar to the obviously male bodies that stabilize masculine subjectivity – then a techno-fetishistic solution must be improvised, and the corresponding fantasy enacted everywhere. Then Olympia must sing, and sing a double song: she must totemically crystallize fantasy, so that we can see her as fantastic and not our world and our bodies; and she must in so doing generalize fantasy, by singing the truth of how our bodies are already imbricated in technological circuits that keep the binaries of male/female, human/technological in constant oscillation.

### Re-fantasizing the Fantastic

Silverman, among others, observes that, in "Fetishism," Freud defines the feeling the young boy experiences upon seeing his mother's missing penis as "uncanny and traumatic."<sup>372</sup> Consequently, his male body must already be marked by an earlier encounter with "castration" ("castration" being the Freud's term for non-self-sameness, which, given the epistemological privilege of wholeness, will always appear as an undesirable woundedness):

According to the terms of Freud's own argument, if the spectacle of female castration strikes the male viewer as "uncanny," he must already have experienced castration [...] the recurrence of the word *uncanny* in the essay on fetishism reminds us that even before the so-called castration crisis, the male subject has an intimate knowledge of loss – that he undergoes numerous divisions or splittings prior to the moment at which he is made to fear the loss of his sexual organ. Thus, what seems to confront him from without, in the guise of the "mutilated" female body, actually threatens him from within, in the form of his own history.<sup>373</sup>

Fetishism is uncanny, but the uncanny is fetishistic as well; the two processes collude to reduce the epistemological-affective field of knowledge to the specular binaries of the imaginary, forestalling an encounter with the real-symbolic structure of sustained, constant

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<sup>372</sup> "F" 155.

<sup>373</sup> *AM* 17.

displacement. The specular, properly “Uncanny” order borrows its stability from the slippages and resonances of this other order; consequently, the generic affiliation of “uncanniness” is always vulnerable to a sudden, moving displacement.

Kofman discusses a “mélange des genres,” mixing the signifieds “genders” and (literary) *genres* and recapitulating the question of genre that preoccupies Freud in “The Uncanny.” Freud defines “The Sandman” as a “fantastic tale,”<sup>374</sup> and “aesthetics” as “the theory of the qualities of feeling.”<sup>375</sup> The “fantastic” as a genre must then relate to a specific affect with determinable limits; for Freud this would be the displeasure provoked by the return of the repressed – but is this a definition of “fantastic” literature or an evacuation of its fantastic qualities? In his monograph on the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov defines its feeling in temporal and epistemological (and thus not *prima facie* affective) terms: “Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons [...] se produit un événement qui ne peut s’expliquer par les lois de ce même mode familier. Celui qui perçoit l’événement doit opter pour l’une des deux solutions possibles : ou bien il s’agit d’une illusion des sens [...] ou bien l’événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous.” But the fantastic does not simply presentat this choice to the reader; it also suspends the reader’s capacity to choose between these two options, the inconsistency of our perception of the world or the inconsistency of the world itself; our failure to master the world, to provide it with a specular order, or our participation in a larger, universalized breakdown of order: “Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude ; dès qu’on choisit l’une ou l’autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique pour entrer dans un genre voisin, l’étrange ou le merveilleux.”<sup>376</sup> In the time of the fantastic, it is impossible to locate a traumatic fracturing: the “division” or “splintering” described by Silverman is felt, but cannot be pinned down, the wound cannot be located as definitively in the world or in ourselves, in the real or in the imaginary. Todorov even understands the “pure” fantastic as a cut or suture linking two opposed fields: “Le fantastique pur serait représenté, dans le dessin, par la ligne médiane, celle qui sépare le fantastique-étrange du fantastique-merveilleux ; cette ligne correspond bien à la nature du fantastique, frontière entre deux domaines voisins.”<sup>377</sup> This oscillation of generic pleasures explodes at the end of “The Uncanny,” where Freud, exasperated, cannot figure out why certain figures (such as amputation) can sometimes be comic and other times horrifying. But perhaps this oscillation between pleasure and displeasure, as Todorov suggests, is precisely what makes the fantastic fantastic – in it, we really don’t know what we’re feeling.

Todorov’s “fantastic” translates Jentsch’s “intellectual uncertainty”; Jentsch, for his part, named Hoffmann’s writings as “works of fantasy,”<sup>378</sup> works that have as their origin fantasy’s very *working* – its strange, mechanical, unbounded productivity. In Freud’s “The Uncanny,” the uncanny first appears as a special case or possible attendant to the fantastic,

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<sup>374</sup> “U” 227.

<sup>375</sup> “U” 219.

<sup>376</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 29. Hereafter cited as *ILF*. Todorov does not claim to invent this definition; instead he adapts it from a history of attempts to define the genre dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (and it’s not a coincidence that the project to codify and delineate the fantastic is contemporary with Offenbach’s and Freud’s revisions of Hoffmann); see *ILF* 30-31.

<sup>377</sup> *ILF* 49.

<sup>378</sup> “OPU,” 13. Strachey translates this passage as “[Hoffmann’s] fantastic narratives,” “U” 227.

but by the conclusion of the essay the fantastic is a province of the uncanny (now an “integral part of reality”), as the final and tentative turn towards the literary uncanny demonstrates. But the uncanniness of literature still troubles Freud, who calls literature “a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life.”<sup>379</sup> Freud of course presumes that life is real, and resolves the fantastic’s dilemma by arguing that the fault of misrepresentation, itself representing the stain of fantasy, lies purely in the human mind. Fiction, however, preserves this fantasticness, repressed by the theory of “real-life” uncanniness, this “work of fantasy” that makes reality (at least certain important and highly-cathected realities, such as the missing maternal penis) itself generative of and produced by fantasy.

Cixous notes that fiction “n’est pas irr elle, elle est la ‘r alit  fictive’, la vibration de la r alit . L’*Unheimliche* dans la fiction d borde et comprend l’*Unheimliche* de la vie r elle. Mais si la fiction est une *autre* forme de la r alit , on comprend que le secret de l’*Unheimliche* ne renvoie pas   un secret plus profond qu’  celui de l’*Unheimliche* qui enveloppe l’*Unheimliche*.”<sup>380</sup> Cixous’s “vibration de la r alit ” and Kofman’s “m lange des genres” both theorize the same’s constant oscillation with itself that moves it always into the different, making mechanicity and humanity, pleasure and displeasure, equally productive of their opposites. Olympia’s voice can still be heard, in its unsettling present, as the locus and engine of this oscillation that disseminates difference and re-fantasizes the fantastic. In 2009 the understudy Rachele Gilmore made her Met d but, replacing Kathleen Kim in the role of Olympia. Gilmore availed herself of the Doll Song to produce what immediately became famous as “the highest note ever sung on the Met stage.” Already in this anecdote humanity and automaticity collide: its plot turns on the human interest of the understudy’s rise to success, while, in a technical triumph, a note makes its Met d but, not a performer.

Reality and fantasy also intermingle. The blogger Andy Ihnatko, “internationally-beloved technology pundit,” links Gilmore’s success in “the coloratura equivalent of a scene in which giant robots throw each other into skyscrapers” to her not “[necessarily needing] to protect her voice for the next two weeks of performances.”<sup>381</sup> This common narrative emphasizes that Gilmore could only produce the A-flat because she could break her voice; the single performance allows her to sing a note that would leave her unable to sing for days. But in a 2013 interview, Gilmore constructs a different narrative:

A lot of people think that note was just something I threw in because it was my Met debut and I wanted to make a good impression or whatever. But those cadenzas in the Doll [aria] are the ones I’ve been doing since I was in my early 20s; those are just the ones that I’m the most comfortable with. When you’re learning a piece that has a lot of coloratura and cadenzas, you have to kind of work those things into your voice; for me to change the cadenza would have been more dangerous than singing the one with the high A-flat.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> “U” 249.

<sup>380</sup> “FF” 35.

<sup>381</sup> Andy Ihnatko, “Rachele Gilmore’s 100MPH Fastball,” <http://ihnatko.com/2012/03/02/rachele-gilmores-100-mph-fastball/>.

<sup>382</sup> “Coloratura Rachele Gilmore on the heights of opera,” *Philadelphia City Paper*, April 16, 2013, <http://citypaper.net/article.php?Coloratura-Rachele-Gilmore-on-the-highs-of-opera-12107>.

Gilmore responds to the interviewer's question, which has repeated the common myth that her A-flat was only producible as un-reproducible, by tying the danger of breakdown not to her production of the note, but to its avoidance. Ihnatko and Gilmore both justify the aesthetic pleasure of the note in terms of a dangerous technological breakdown, but in opposite ways: for Ihnatko, the note's pleasure emerges from the exceptional functioning of a machine that would, in other circumstances, run normally; for Gilmore, the note's pleasure arises from the exceptional normal functioning of a machine that would, if asked to run normally, risk a breakdown. But for Ihnatko Gilmore's song also represents the normal state of what Abbate calls opera in performance; in other words, technical breakdown is simultaneously exceptional and, in its link to danger, terrifying; but this exceptional lapse of normal technical function is also the baseline state of opera, the moment when the tape of everyday reality breaks and something magical, not yet engineered, suddenly crystallizes onstage. Finally, to explain the pleasure of this note both Ihnatko and Gilmore fantasize, producing speculative narratives (of dubious truth-value) to augment and define the technological artifact her song produced. But this technology, in inspiring and generalizing fantasy, does not determine it; instead, it opens up a space of multiple overlapping, contradictory, and mutually-revising fantasies that in turn redefine the meaning and force of the human or technological event.

Importantly, Gilmore's performance was recorded and disseminated via a YouTube video.<sup>383</sup> In other words, if Gilmore's performance exemplifies Abbate's notion of "liveness" in performance, it also refuses to tie the "live" to the present and the unrepeatable. The machine breaks, but recording does not stop. In so doing, her interpretation returns Olympia's song to the ambient circulation of informational waves that it describes, displacing us, the audience, into her world. Certainly the world of opera has never lacked for technological means to disseminate its myths – word-of-mouth, bootleg recordings, *Opera News*, all the other ephemera that Koestenbaum explores, all of which challenge the seemingly evident truth that opera happens mostly in opera houses.<sup>384</sup> But Gilmore's YouTube success absolutely literalizes Olympia's temporalization of the event of falling in love as an endlessly-reiterated and circulated technological replay, each of us refashioning the event *tour à tour*, but in so doing ensuring that Gilmore's doll-play is never quite the same. This quintessentially and mythologically "live" event perhaps only happens at the technological distance, established over and over, of a fantastic replaying of the scene. Commentators on the performance accept this distance from the originary event as the price of admission into the world of Gilmore's Olympia: Ihnatko writes "The popular consensus is that her A-flat above high C was the highest note ever sung in a Metropolitan Opera production. Whether it was or it wasn't, just look at [the audience's] response!"; another opera blogger insists "Whether it is the highest note ever sung at the Met is irrelevant. Gilmore is the real thing," before linking to the YouTube video, putting hyperreality in the place of "the real thing."<sup>385</sup> In these commentaries, the fetishistic gesture of "whether or not" certainly proceeds to the definition of an even more "real" thing, the audience's pleasure or Gilmore's talent. But always these discussions link us back to YouTube; Gilmore did in fact make history by singing the highest note ever *recorded* at the Met, and from the

<sup>383</sup> "Rachele Gilmore – Met Debut – Olympia": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHp4LLnlKIg>

<sup>384</sup> See *QT* 46-83.

<sup>385</sup> Alan Sherrod, "The Highest Note Sung at the Met?", <http://classicaljournal.wordpress.com/2009/12/30/the-highest-note-sung-at-the-met/>.

believably “real” fetish-object we pass back into the network of technological replays that produces that fetish, slipping from the humanist signified into the machinery of signification.

Watching the video, we can clearly see the two supernumeraries or chorus members sitting in the onstage audience directly behind her, and clearly see their shock when Gilmore first breaks out of the Doll Song’s traditional ornamentation pattern. As she continues through the second half of the song, onstage chorus evinces a palpable and obvious discomfort, as they wonder what she’ll do next, and what they’ll have to do in response: they laugh, they squirm in their chairs, they are amazed. At the end, once that A-flat has made its Met début and arrived on the opera stage, they clap – for once, not playing the role of audience members at Spalanzani’s salon, but instead being those audience members, those characters. They fall off the stage and into the audience – but in so doing, they play their parts as audience-members without any intermediate mediation. The protective apparatus of their roles and the structure of the operatic fantasy no longer isolates them as actors from their existence as characters. They experience exactly what they are supposed to simulate in the opera’s diegesis – they encounter a technical marvel that is both profoundly unsettling and deeply moving. Olympia’s inanimate animation is infectious; she shows the two supernumeraries that they are no more human, no more robotic, no more triumphant, no more defective, than she, but instead they intensively occupy all these opposed poles in an unmasterable oscillation.

Gilmore’s performance, for that matter, is not flawless – she rushes her tempi, she doesn’t land every note. Resisting assimilation into a star-is-born fantasy of triumph, Gilmore foregrounds both her humanity (her anxiety, her individual style) and her inhumanity (her now super-human vocal machinery). Like Olympia, that endearing but imperfect robot, Gilmore looks, *tour à tour*, like a human, then like a machine, and her body animate, then inanimate. Furthermore, she makes us uncomfortable, makes us feel our bodies as machines as well, communicating the shattering breakthrough or mutual breakdown that is the shared origin of humanity and technology. Gilmore crystallizes Cixous’s “vibration de la réalité”: the chorus and supernumeraries find themselves in a Jentschian position, unable to determine whether what is happening is real or fictional. Instead, the “reality” of the performance and the “fiction” of the diegesis reveal themselves to be vibrations, resonances, of each other. And their faces register the immense affective power of this realization: their fantasy, in other words, has been re-fantasized, rendered fantastic, taken back to its paleological roots, and they feel displeasure and pleasure simultaneously. They squirm, they stand up too early, they clap too enthusiastically. The fantastic, as a form of the other *jouissance*, is at work doing and undoing the feelings of the uncanny – and destabilizing the relation of reader to text, since the fantastic forces the reader to maintain, if only provisionally, a position of epistemological impotence. A fantastic fiction captivates the reader by allowing him or her to feel the vibration of the bodily real; in properly fantastic texts such as Hoffmann’s no final word can be given about how the various levels of the text (reality, imagination, magic) relate to each other, their stability cannot be definitively established. A theory of the uncanny is necessary to forestall and orient the experience of one’s own embodied subjectivity as properly fantastic, of seeing the body as a site of the double production of reality and fantasy, to view such a possibility as a supplemental or pathological exception to the rule of a stable social practice of gender, and most importantly to define such an experience of non-self-sameness as necessarily displeasurable – and not as an other *jouissance*. But Olympia, insistently re-fashioning herself by means of all the technologies at her disposal, remediating the technologies that mediate her – literature, psychoanalysis, opera, Rachele Gilmore, Internet video – and in so



doing making her way forward by constantly re-making herself in her own way, shows us the other side of this new world, in which, in the field of a generalized fetishism, everything speaks, sings, and shivers with love, as irrational, moving, and electrifying as it can be.

### Science-Fictions of the Fembot: Edison's Super-Modeling

- D'ailleurs, cet opéra-là, murmura Miss Alicia Clary, c'est du *fantastique*, tout cela.
- Et le fantastique a fait son temps ! c'est juste. Nous vivons dans une époque où le *positif* seul a droit à l'attention. Le fantastique n'existe pas ! conclut Edison.

Milord, dit-il, je dois vous prévenir que nous allons, maintenant, quitter ensemble les domaines (inexpliqués, sans doute, mais trop parcourus, n'est-ce pas ?) de la vie normale, de la Vie proprement dite, - et pénétrer dans un monde de phénomènes aussi insolites qu'impressionnants. Je vous donnerai la clef de leur chaîne.

- Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Ève future*

In Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (1886), men are in peril. In this text, men, quite literally, confront the terrifying possibility of their own extinction – their extinction at the hands of a new creature, a successfully, and all too concretely, techno-fetishized woman – and the greatest male thinkers of the age are compelled to do anything and everything they can to prevent this male apocalypse. Technology has spread through the bodies of the world's females like a plague, and these women now have a terrifying power: the power to drive men inexorably to suicide, a power all the more unsettling for how squarely Villiers situates it on the side of the everyday, the already-engineered. If Thomas Edison, the main character of this remarkable blend of alternate history and science fiction (*L'Ève future* is a Steampunk text from the very era fetishized by Steampunk, a Steampunk dream from exactly the era Steampunk is supposed to be dreaming about), manages to save the day for his fellow men by inventing an ideal technology of pure fantasy, his feminine opponents have no need of such recourse to the ideal to wage their war of the worlds. They have already – to anticipate a pun – taken up arms against their male antagonists. *L'Ève future* thus brings us to the very heart of the fin-de-siècle end of man; but what form does this end – and Edison's attempt to survive it – take? Are the inventions of Villiers and his Edison the birth of a cyborg lifeform as “post”- (that is, coming after the) human, and thus a mode after the division of the genders that defines and orders the human? Or is the kind of suicidal strategy employed by Villier's lovesick hero Lord Ewald a means of prolonging indefinitely the very ending of “man” as gendered, of universalizing “man”?

The novel's invention of Hadaly, the titular “future Eve” and one of the most alluring robots in the history of the mechanistic imagination, has come to be seen as a perfect example of the spontaneous, natural, and culminatingly explosive expression of masculine fantasy. In Schor's formulation, “Villier's futuristic fantasy of a female android is the logical conclusion of a century of fetishization of the female body”<sup>386</sup>; by providing the totalized image of a woman constructed entirely by and for men, according to Schor, Hadaly completes the work of fantasy that defines the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary imaginary. Hadaly becomes the most *natural* expression of male literary subjectivity, a field which remains constant across the apparently different genres of realism, naturalism, decadence, and even science fiction, which may be – well, along with pornography – the genre defined the most emphatically as generically different from the institution of “real” literature, as the site of generic difference within the literary archive. *L'Ève future*, in this very common framing, represents, by means of an uncanny displacement, precisely what “real” literature most really

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<sup>386</sup> BC 146.

wants: the seamless incorporation of female bodies and subjectivities into the technological apparatus of its pleasure-producing machine. Edison's invention of Hadaly appears as an instance of pure reverie, the dream of the perfect woman, but in so doing it conceals what the novel explicitly names as "LE SECRET," the traumatic kernel at the heart of Edison's desire. If *L'Ève future's* plot does seek to associate women and machines in a particular way, as lifeless, soulless dolls – automatic but not autonomous – created by and for men's pleasure, this may not be the final end of its intervention: the subjugation of women as robots (and, correspondingly, of robots as thoughtless, inanimate "machines") may simply be the most efficient or the only expedient means to a different end, that of salvaging some form of "male life" from the devastation wrought by the generalization of technology in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

It seems that some odd resistance to a fully-critical reading is programmed into *L'Ève future*. The most important and obvious intertext to the novel – the one everybody notices – is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which blatantly defines "The Modern Prometheus" as the engineer of *Promethean* robots. *L'Ève future* in fact encourages or nourishes this view, desiring to become legible in light of a Promethean narrative: "On voit que tout se passe à l'exemple de l'éclair, chez les électriciens,"<sup>387</sup> the text announces, insisting that its game models itself on the vital force, Frankenstein's lightning "spark," that unites the human nervous system and the contemporary, post-clockwork automaton. Later, the text will explicitly announce that "cette étincelle" is "léguee par Prométhée" – both as the mythological Prometheus' spark of fire that inaugurates the human pursuit of technology and as *The Modern Prometheus's* narrative spark that brings the robot-construction narrative into being. The self-evidence of this connection blinds us to another intertext, lurking right next to *Frankenstein* – Shelley's *The Last Man*, in which a Frankenstein-like figure bears witness to the viral extinction of all human life. *The Last Man's* global extinction event itself recapitulates *Frankenstein's* conclusion, in which the frigid polar reaches, which freeze the dialectic of man and his creation without resolving it, stand in for the heat death of the universe, that fatal thermodynamic indifference to which we may one day be subject.

As I will show, *L'Ève future* adapts both of these novels; the brilliance of its performance inheres in the way in which it seems to adapt merely the Promethean narrative, how seamlessly it hides its biopolitical apocalyptic vision in plain sight, how elegantly it traps us within its desire and makes us want to ignore the mortal threats posed within its pages. *L'Ève future* culminates in the realization of a very powerful fantasy but also demonstrates the hidden mechanisms that drive the production and choice of this specific fantasy. When male (or *masculinized*) writers and readers desire Hadaly – or desire to read about Hadaly – the novel insists that this desire for this peculiar kind of technologically-produced woman (produced both by Einstein's science-fiction engineering and Villiers's *science-fiction-engineering*) is only economically desirable as the alternative to complete annihilation at the hands of an army of other (and otherwise) technologically-determined women. If this is what literature really wants, and if, in turn, these fantasies turn out to inform and construct the technological reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then literature's wanting is predicated on an attempt to escape or reject a different potential reality – a reality, paradoxically, that literature had once dreamed of or longed for. Again, what is most astonishing about *L'Ève future* is how well it manages to hide the threat to male subjectivity that its plot explicitly turns upon, so well that readers including Schor and Kittler present the novel as a philosophical utopia, not

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<sup>387</sup> Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Ève future* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992) 135. Hereafter cited as *EF*.

as a disaster narrative. But, to refer once more to the model of *R.U.R.*, the robotic, amorous utopia only comes after the annihilation of all human life.

I locate this strategy of looking for the secret secret within a new way of reading Villiers's novel – and Decadence as a whole – in which literature does not emerge within or against a predetermined techno-scientific horizon, but instead, as Asti Hustvedt argues, “[provides] a context for the writings of Charcot” and other scientific re-evaluations of the human body in general and the female body and its relationship to technology in particular.<sup>388</sup> In this reading, “science” follows upon and consolidates or domesticates the groundbreaking and perhaps more radical insights of fiction. This reversal of causality allows Hustvedt to argue, again on the side of feminism but now against Schor, that Villiers “appropriates, internalizes, and finally subverts the psychiatric discourse” of hysteria<sup>389</sup>; for Hustvedt, *L'Ève future* is an almost impossibly ironic text, “a fiction made from this fiction” called “hysteria,” in which “the anatomy of an artificial hysteric becomes fully articulated and exposed for what it is: an empty space filled with the dreams of men.”<sup>390</sup> Schor and Hustvedt both agree that Villiers's text restages and radicalizes a desire that either was or would become structurally implicit in the scientific constitution of modern woman; however, their conflicting evaluations of that text – is it a litmus test, mechanically reproducing an overdetermined sexism, just with particularly lurid coloring, or is it instead a self-aware satire that pretends to buy into a fantasy to demonstrate its potentially apocalyptic consequences? – point towards the fundamental indecidability or instability of Villiers's fiction.

Such indecidability is perhaps the generic luxury of Villiers's Decadence. After all, the defining feature of the Decadent artwork is its peculiar resistance to definition; Decadent “artificiality” forces the reader to view the text with suspicion, never knowing how many veneers of irony constitute its tone. But this indecidability also rhymes with a particular feature of the novel: its insistent definition of Hadaly as a “black box” or, as Hustvedt would probably say, a Lacanian *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*: “she is impenetrable, a sealed, closed being who can never be sexually penetrated [...], the sign of a sign of a sign.”<sup>391</sup> But this is not only the definition of Lacanian desire; it will also become the definition of the theory of mind borrowed or perfected by cybernetics, in which the interiority of a mind is rigorously unaccessible or unobservable and all science can hope to do is to mimic its effects, and by scientific modeling, in which the fundamental laws governing physical phenomena, since they would require too much processing, are discarded in favor of instead replicating their more or less predictably observable consequences (Vaucanson's piper and duck are early examples of such a black-box model). Villiers – like his “Edison” – phrases this black-box methodology as part of an analogy with woman, and, in so doing, invents the Turing test 60 years too early. Human creativity, then, can be technologically reproduced, even without understanding the superhuman logics behind any act of creation.

In this chapter, I will first follow the plot of the novel, paying careful attention to the ways in which it defines women, men, and machines, and how its practices and theories of creation and reading intersect with those definitions. My aim is not to demonstrate that these definitions, as they emerge and develop throughout and beyond the text, are precarious at

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<sup>388</sup> Asti Hustvedt, “Science Fictions: The Future Eves of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Jean-Martin Charcot,” in *The Decadent Reader*, ed. Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998): 498-518, 499. Hereafter cited as “SF.”

<sup>389</sup> “SF” 499.

<sup>390</sup> “SF” 514.

<sup>391</sup> “SF” 514.

best; instead, I will show that, if the novel indeed constructs several ambiguous relationships, it simultaneously attempts to minimize or direct those ambiguities in significant ways, which have important repercussions for the ways in which various forms of technology, humanity, and creativity can be conceptualized in its wake. After all, this is the text that brought the term “android” into our cultural lexicon, even if the android constructed by Edison will be something else, an “androsphyngé” with its own secrets, so we should not be surprised if the text turns out to in fact have determinate consequences on the development of cyborg minds. In the second half of this chapter, I will pull back somewhat and consider two critical theories of gender science that Villiers’s text indeed “contextualizes.” By showing the high, apocalyptically high, stakes that men, women, and machines are playing for in this fin-de-siècle battle royale, and by revealing the shocking sacrifices one party is willing to make to preserve some manner of dominating order, Villiers’s novel allows us to understand the paradoxes and possibilities of the techno-fetishist world we inherit from its inventors and engineers.

### Engineering Equilibrium, or, The Balance of Terror

“Tout d’abord, étant donnés le fluide électrique et les aimants, l’Équilibre était nécessairement possible.”

- *L’Ève future*

Villier’s novel opens on a vision of male fantasy as entirely free and uncoerced – as dangerously free and uncoerced, even. But before this, the first chapter begins first by plagiarizing the epigram to Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Domain of Arnheim,” a story about a proto-Wagnerian artistic Superman who devotes his life to the creation of a truly original Gesamtkunstwerk (in the field of landscape architecture, by the way; Arnheim is associated with his titular “Domain” in the same way that Edison will become “The Wizard of Menlo Park”). Inscribing itself in a chain of male-to-male transmission of genius and influence, the text recapitulates both the poetic inspiration and the transatlantic literary transmission metonymized by Poe in the history of French literature, as well as the link between creative writing and “fancy” so well distilled in the figure of Poe. This citation (winkingly?) suggests that the imaginative, unfettered genius of Villiers and Edison will be legible to the reader precisely because the male mode of dreaming a dream that will shatter, transcend, or repair generic boundaries is itself an iterated and iterative model. The novel emphasizes the stereotypicality of its twinned protagonists, Villiers and Edison, by name-dropping an engraving by Doré displaying “presque le visage de l’artiste *traduit* en un visage de savant. Aptitudes congénères, applications différentes. Mystérieux jumeaux. À quel âge ressemblèrent-ils tout à fait ? jamais, peut-être.”<sup>392</sup> Now, that’s a plagiarism of Baudelaire, not of Poe: the “jamais, peut-être” is lifted wholesale from “À une passante,” and then the reader cannot help but complete the association, linking the mirroring relationship between the two authors to the fatal struggle between reader and writer described in *Les Fleurs du mal*’s “Au lecteur.” Villiers thus extends the game of mutual influence and resemblance, rewriting the “passante” as a specifically male figure of identification and mirroring (“mon semblable, mon frère !”).

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<sup>392</sup> EF 100.

Edison lights up his cigar, “lui si peu fumeur, le tabac changeant en reveries les projets virils.”<sup>393</sup> Smoking is the motif of the first section of the novel; and the reader follows Edison’s thoughts as “sous l’action subtile de cette atmosphere, la pensée, habituellement forte et vivace, du songeur – se détendait et se laissait insensiblement séduire par les attirances de la reverie et du crépuscule.”<sup>394</sup> Villiers’s sentence locates Edison, qua “songeur,” precipitously on the fault line between “la pensée” and “la reverie”; the next epigram, Nathaniel’s cries upon catching sight of the Sandman in Hoffmann’s tale, confirms the danger masculine research runs as it continuously plays on the tenuous boundary between thought and dream – if it catches sight of something beyond the grasp of the human, it may receive a Promethean punishment. But this is Edison’s whole technique: unmanned dreaming, for the scientist, consists of dreaming “comme un simple mortel”<sup>395</sup>; scientific dreaming is measured, controlled mortal dreaming.

Edison’s dream aims to im-mortalize man, thus to scientitize him, by technologically restoring to him those experiences that his mortality – his truncated life-span – have robbed him of, by inventing a device to capture, phonographically, all of the past noises that were not, phonographically, captured, that evanesced into the silence of time. Edison expands on this point, arguing that “*c’est en nous que s’est fait le silence*” since “une réciprocité d’action est la condition essentielle de toute réalité” and “on peut affirmer que les *murailles seules de la ville de Jéricho entendirent le son des trompettes de Josué, puis seules elles avaient qualité pour cela.*”<sup>396</sup> Silence becomes a form of divine punishment; in a literalization of Isaiah’s prophecy, “You hear, but you do not understand,” humans are not biologically gifted with the ears they would need to resonate with the sound of the trumpets that will bring down all our protective walls. Edison dreams of giving man new organs that would allow him to hear these sounds of divine creation (the *Fiat lux*) and destruction (the battle of Jericho). Edison’s new testament of sound echoes the “*Que celui qui a des oreilles pour entendre, entende !*” chosen by Villiers as another chapter epigraph<sup>397</sup>; however, Edison aims not to open the ears with which man has already been endowed, but instead to put new ears in his head, to eliminate all “mysterious” sounds and to ensure that “De nos jours, d’ailleurs ... il n’est plus de bruits surnaturels.”<sup>398</sup> If there is no longer anything beyond the natural for us to aspire to, this is not because we have heard the beyond, but instead that we have normalized it; all that remains, in terms of the sonic universe, is the mathematical sublime: “je puis, par compensation, en enregistrer d’assez importants, comme le bruit de l’avalanche, du Niagara, de la Bourse, d’une eruption, des canons de plusieurs tonnes,” etc.<sup>399</sup>

Obedying the “Devises de temps modernes,” “*Pourquoi pas ?*,” included by Villiers as yet another epigraph – his text is almost obsessively stitched together in the gaps between these fragments of other texts, both real and fictional – Edison falls in with Paul Virilio’s characterization of modern science as organized around the “prohibition to prohibit,” the radicalization of the social structure of the taboo through which taboos themselves become taboo. Edison seems truly puzzled when he asks himself “Comment le monde a-t-il pu se

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<sup>393</sup> EF 101.

<sup>394</sup> EF 101.

<sup>395</sup> EF 103.

<sup>396</sup> EF 113.

<sup>397</sup> EF 112.

<sup>398</sup> EF 113.

<sup>399</sup> EF 113.

passer du Phonographe jusqu'à moi ?"<sup>400</sup>; his inability to answer this question ("Je m'y perds," he confesses) suggests that the Phonograph, and his science, belongs to a different ordering of technology and knowledge. And belief – for, in recording the voice of God (or the voice of Nature), Edison realizes that he would ensure that "*dès le lendemain il n'y aurait plus un seul athée sur terre !*"<sup>401</sup> Without any possibility of doubt, there is no need of belief; God would become an object of human knowledge. But Villiers quickly has Edison realize some of the disturbing consequences of this intervention:

Dieu, comme toute pensée, n'est dans l'Homme que selon l'individu. Nul ne sait où commence l'Illusion, ni en quoi consiste la Réalité. Or, Dieu étant la plus sublime conception possible et toute conception n'ayant sa réalité que selon le vouloir et les yeux *intellectuels* particuliers à chaque vivant, il s'ensuit qu'écarter de ses pensées l'idée d'un Dieu ne signifie pas autre chose que se décapiter gratuitement l'esprit.<sup>402</sup>

Villiers has Edison defend non-knowledge in the name of, not man's relationship to God, but man's relationship to himself, the foundation of his own identity.<sup>403</sup> Edison here appears as a proto-Virilio, condemning the same principles that he had just moments ago so wholeheartedly endorsed or assumed as given. But then, almost immediately thereafter, Edison forgets this moral consequence of the difference (or indifferenciation) of the mortal and the divine: "Je suis de cette race de médecins très bizarres qui ne croient guère aux maux sans remède," declaring himself as one who refuses the very definition of "mortality," the inescapable imposition of a castrating wound, a sickness unto death.

This is one of the key peculiarities of Villier's novel: *L'Ève future*, thematically and structurally, cannot seem to resolve the question of its tone, of its attitude toward the fabulous fictions Edison engineers. Commentators have pointed out that this instability is reflective of Villier's own problematic desire for Hadaly, the android that Edison will go on to create, as well as his difficulty in situating himself within the various creation narratives, Promethean and Judeo-Christian, that defined his particular mode of artistic creation, and his troubled relationship to the technological innovations taking place in his era. Franc Schuerewegen writes:

il y a sans doute une bonne part de refoulement dans la fascination troublée qui est l'attitude de Villiers à l'égard de la science en général et les télécommunications en particulier. Le romancier est séduit par les machines construites par Edison [...] Mais Villiers est aussi pris de panique devant les conséquences de sa fascination. [...] La thèse triomphe du roman. Villiers est, semble-t-il, incapable d'aller au bout de son intuition.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> EF 123.

<sup>401</sup> EF 129.

<sup>402</sup> EF 130.

<sup>403</sup> The possibility of such an argument already demonstrates that man has taken the place of God by means of the instable analogy God : man :: man : robot. In other words, even Villiers's most theological arguments include a moment in which God is eclipsed or replaced by man, in which God no longer creates man in his image (symbolically) but appears instead as one of the exchangeable and equivalent faces of man.

<sup>404</sup> ADV 38.

Schuerewegen's analysis is complicated and seemingly paradoxical: at once, Villiers's writing appears as captivation by his fiction, seduction by Edison's machines, and as resistance to such fiction, a re-establishment of fiction's subsidiary relationship to the message it is supposed to illustrate or convey – of progressing from *romance* to *roman à thèse*, of imposing a “thèse” so as to delimit or bring to term the much more peculiar way in which we might fall in love with the “romance.” The book's conclusion explodes with this paradox: even though Edison certainly triumphs in his Promethean exploits, he is punished and his creations are destroyed by a narrative *deus ex machina* named in the text as a celestial “Fatum,”<sup>405</sup> coming from another order than that of Edison's diegetic, novelistic universe. The *author* of the text thus dramatically, violently cuts short, draws an endpoint, to the creation of the *characters*. The author and his characters are fatally locked in a struggle over the very *creativity* of the text. Is Villiers ever in danger of losing control to Edison, or is the game, here of Edison-the-character's attempt to steal creative power from Villiers-the-author, rigged from the start?

Analyzing Villiers's style of fantasizing about his character (which is, after all, what authors of fiction really do), Schuerewegen defines Villiers's attraction as follows:

Le lecteur est en droit de se demander si la conception de l'altérité qu'il entend défendre ici, conception idéaliste et paradoxalement, une sorte d'hommage aux nouvelles machines à communiquer qui apparaissent alors en France et en Europe. Immobiliser la communication, la bloquer à un stade pré-interlocutif, cet instant où l'autre m'appelle sans que je sois obligé de lui répondre, évacuer la durée, reproduire infiniment cette ‘heure idéale’ où tout est possible et où rien n'arrive..., il n'y a guère d'autre façon d'interpréter ce rêve, ou ce fantasme, qu'en se référant à l'imaginaire de la machine. Villiers nous propose, semble-t-il, et malgré lui, une rêverie phonographique.<sup>406</sup>

Villiers's mode of desire is explicitly fetishistic, seeking to halt the dialectic of desire in a stable, anterior moment before one's own place towards the other is challenged or otherwise moved. But if Schuerewegen argues that Villiers, in order to sustain his fetishistic fantasy, turns to the model and the impetus of the phonograph – of the machinic voice – he neglects to point out that this is simultaneously, perhaps, a fetishistic fantasy *of the phonograph* as well. Villiers recourse to this particular anti-communications medium is possible only if the phonograph has been defined as purely *recreative* and absolutely *uncreative* in itself; Villiers's fantasy thus depends on another fantasy, in which creative power is given absolutely to man and forbidden to machines. Autonomy and automation have been sundered from each other. The rules of this definition must apply equally well to the relationship between author and character, so Villiers cannot have been at all endangered by his attraction to Edison. Truncating the character's creative power, drawing a final limit to his capacity of production, becomes a necessary maneuver in the attempt to stabilize the author's subjectivity. In other words, Villiers can only be an author up unto the point of a necessary, apocalyptic “Fatum” that tolls a death-knell for the possibility of literature; literature is a means of avoiding – yet generalizing and multiplying – its final destiny, the end.

The reader's subjectivity is in question here, as well. The reader is the phonograph playing the record of Villier's text back, exactly as it was written and performed by the master; this is certainly a form of that mechanization of leisure – the eradication of

<sup>405</sup> EF 409.

<sup>406</sup> ADV 36.



unbounded creativity or play from “free time” – described by Adorno, Habermas, and Baudrillard. This performance includes the moments of Villiers’s doubt, the times when his attraction to Edison or to his creation threatens to overcome the resistances programmed in to the text (for Edison is Villiers’s “passant,” the figure whom he *could have* loved, had circumstances only been otherwise). The novel would thus have the form of a traumatically insistent dream, the ambivalence of which so puzzled Freud and led him to think for the first time that something might escape the economy of the pleasure principle.

The text insists on this notion of an inescapable dream: Edison exclaims “Je travaille toujours, même en dormant, - même en rêvant ! Je suis une sorte de *Dormeur éveillé*, comme dirait Schéhérazade.”<sup>407</sup> Edison does not seize the authorial power to define himself as a character, not yet, but instead suggests that he might have been written by some other author. Not just any other author, but Scheherezade, who herself does not believe that the figures of dreams cannot have a creative effect (remember, she uses the particular form of lucid dreaming she seduces Shahryar into enjoying as a means of political action). Scheherezade is roused into dreaming; she begins her nocturnal fantasies as an action of last resort, the only recourse possible to prevent the massacre of her sex. Scheherezade engages in dreaming *as* action in the real world in order to save femininity from an apocalypse, to restore the economy of sexual intercourse, to restore the possibility of a sexual relation to her people, in short, to fight for life – not a pure life, but a life as a couple, to which the transformative and constantly metamorphosing force of fiction would be restored (against the Sultan’s fundamentally mortifying, since obsessively preservative, fantasy of putting his wives to death so as to preserve or salvage their love from the possibility of loss or failure).

But although Edison, too, is awakened into dreaming, we cannot be sure that his aims are the same. The clamor that comes to disturb Edison’s half-slumber (but also to maintain him in the state of “wakeful dreaming”) also introduces the plot. Into Edison’s study storms Lord Ewald, who has, he realizes, received a fatal blow. For the first time, he has fallen in love; unfortunately, as he realizes all too well, his object, a certain Miss Alicia Clary, is not on its own level: “en tout être vivant il est un fond indélébile, essentiel, qui donne à toutes les idées, meme les plus vagues, de cet être et à toutes ses impressions [...] le *caractère*, enfin, sous lesquels, seulement, il lui est permis d’éprouver et de réfléchir. Appelons ce substrat l’*âme*, si vous voulez. Or, entre le corps et l’âme de Miss Alicia, ce n’était pas une disproportion qui déconcertait et inquiétait mon entendement : c’était un *disparate* [sic].”<sup>408</sup> We’ll have to consider the oddly *masculine* appearance of “un” here; certainly, this particular form of “contrast” or “disparity” masculinizes Alicia in that a sort of “instabilité” of soul and body “fait partie du charme féminin,”<sup>409</sup> and Alicia’s “disparate” is not such an “instability.” Instead, “les lignes de sa beauté divine semblaient *lui* être étrangères ; ses paroles paraissaient dépaysees et gênées dans sa voix. [...] Oui, parfois, il m’arrivait d’imaginer, *très sérieusement*, que, dans les limbes du Devenir, cette femme s’était égarée en ce corps, - et qu’il ne lui appartenait pas.”<sup>410</sup> Could it perhaps be that Alicia is masculinized – “un disparate” – inasmuch as, precisely because, her objects do not belong to her by natural right, that is, because she is *castrated*? Ewald’s parapraxis reveals that he unconsciously recognizes this kinship between his masculine body and Alicia’s strangely, inappropriately

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<sup>407</sup> EF 133.

<sup>408</sup> EF 140.

<sup>409</sup> EF 140.

<sup>410</sup> EF 141.

feminine body – but that he cannot, or will not, allow the symmetry between his body and Alicia’s to become a matter of conscious knowledge.

Schor rightly suggests that Villiers’s women, not Emma Bovary or Nana or Cousin Bette, are the apotheoses of 19<sup>th</sup>-century French literature as an institution. Indeed, if the novel is a bourgeois epic, Alicia is its “Déesse bourgeoise”<sup>411</sup> – a Goddess without idealization, a Goddess planted firmly in the networks of the exchange of signifiers, a Goddess whose symbolic dimension has been extracted and replaced with assailable prosthetics. In the novel’s most famous joke, Alicia is brought up short only when Ewald realizes that she is the mirror image of the “VENUS VICTRIX,” Villiers’s mistaken name for the Venus de Milo, the legendary and legendarily armless statue in the Louvre; Alicia experiences a vertiginous moment of terror in front of her image, but quickly recovers: “Tiens, MOI ! L’instant d’après, elle ajouta : ‘Oui, mais moi, j’ai mes bras, et j’ai l’air plus distinguée.’”<sup>412</sup> Now, a good goddess need not possess any “distinguished air” beyond that of her ideality; by being more distinguished – more complete – than a goddess, Alicia demonstrates that she is no goddess at all. As Freud writes in “The Medusa’s Head,” if a body is adorned with a multiplicity of phallus-substitutes, this is a sure sign that that body lacks a phallus of its own. Alicia’s arms – she is the hyper-real version of the Venus de Milo – are the proof of her castration, even as they provide her with an ostensibly “complete” body. Hence, the “disparity” of Alicia’s body lies not only in her body’s non-correspondence with her soul, but with her body’s non-correspondence to itself, in its supplementary *realization* of its ideal final form.

If Ewald, the naïf, cannot characterize this strangeness within Alicia, Edison certainly can, and his characterization begins with his observation that “Alicia Clary” is – fictional or not – a “nom de guerre.”<sup>413</sup> As in Shahryar’s kingdom, the sexes are here at war, although it is not yet so clear that this is the case. Edison secretly fears that Ewald will repeat the traumatic, mechanically-inflicted death suffered by one of Edison’s other male friends. Edison will call this story “*mon secret*.”<sup>414</sup> And, perhaps surprisingly, the novel does not spend too much time or energy preparing its revelation; the hermeneutic revelation of the mysterious primal scene is not constantly announced as the desired and delayed source of the reader’s epistemological and affective enjoyment. In the early chapters we see Edison in conversation with some disembodied and unexplained voice named “Sowana,” but the conversation there serves mainly to announce the mystery of Hadaly, the eponymous “Future Eve.” In other words, the text structures itself around the revelation of Hadaly, but not of Edison’s motives for creating Hadaly; the latter will appear as a pendant, even as a surprising intrusion, that cuts short the text’s exultation in the presence of Hadaly. Villiers, then, frames the revelation of Edison’s secret – of the fact that Edison has a secret, since it forms the hidden secret next to the textually open secret of “what is Hadaly?” – as a curtailment of the pleasure promised us by the very title of the text; as readers, we cannot help but want to get through the Edison backstory and return to the android that, after all, the novel is “about,” so we experience the section as a skimmable distraction. The text manages its pleasures so as to be read as about the Future Eve, and not about what the next section, “Le Secret,” will introduce in a chapter cryptically entitled “Miss Evelyn Habal.” “Evelyn” contains “Ève” within it; “Habal” is almost graphically indistinguishable from

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<sup>411</sup> EF 148.

<sup>412</sup> EF 163.

<sup>413</sup> EF 144.

<sup>414</sup> EF 241.

“Hadaly,” except for the “b” that is the mirror image of the “d” – and, of course, Hadaly is granted that extra, Greek appendage “Habal” is so evidently lacking. It’s so strange, then, that what we remember from the novel is only one *half* of its secret. How is it that the shadow or reflection of Hadaly, Evelyn Habal, evanesces so readily? And how is it that Edison’s secret, his motives for creation, is so eagerly forgotten in favor of contemplation of his creation in its finished state?

Anyway, the story goes as follows: Edison’s friend, a Mr. Edward Anderson (notice the similarity between Edward and Ewald), finds himself at a production of Gounod’s *Faust*, even though his wife, channeling Calpurnia, has warned him away from the theater. There, he meets Miss Evelyn, one of the dancers in the opera ballet; Evelyn immediately irritates him, for some strange reason. Nevertheless, Edward finds himself drawn inexorably into an affair with Evelyn, much to the sorrow of Mrs. Anderson – and, it turns out, himself. His attraction to Evelyn, already itself based on an irritation, turns into an “irritabilité nerveuse extrême,”<sup>415</sup> and, no longer able to stand his frenzied emotions, he kills himself. But this suicide only generalizes the symptoms of nervous distraction, and Edward’s death perturbs Edison as a scientist and as a man. Although Edison declares his technician’s impartiality, but the rhetorical fury of his oratorical performance in his eulogy of Edward belies his own irritation. For Edison, Edward’s death is not an isolated case, but instead the symptom of an apocalyptic contagion (with *The Last Man*’s viral structure), an undiagnosed biopolitical crisis:

Les statistiques nous fournissent, en Amérique et en Europe, une moyenne ascendante, se chiffrant par dizaines de milliers, de cas identiques ou à peu près, par année. [...] Adieu famille, enfants et femme, dignité, devoir, fortune, honneur, pays et Dieu ! - Cette contagion passionnelle ayant pour effet d’attaquer lentement le sens quelconque de ces vocables dans les cerveaux inoculés, la vie se restreint, en peu de temps, à un spasme pour nos gallants déserteurs. [...] La moyenne dont nous parlons (et qui fut, approximativement, d’environ cinquante-deux ou trois mille, seulement, pour ces dernières années) est en progrès au point de donner à espérer des totaux doubles pour les années qui viennent, – au fur et à mesure que les petits théâtres s’élèvent dans les petits villes... pour éclairer les niveaux artistiques des majorités.

Edison’s panicked diagnosis sounds like a fin-de-siècle echo of Rousseau’s letter to d’Alembert on the theater, except here the terrifying power of the theater is modeled not on the structural-anthropological format of the division of spaces, but instead on a biopolitical model of contagion, infection, and degenerescence – demonstrating conclusively that for Edison the body is not defined as a bounded unity, but instead as a permeable membrane inescapably transversed and penetrated by alien elements and forces. Edison, correspondingly, moves from a model of quarantine to a model of control: if we can’t exile the theater, we will have to manage the symptoms it produces, since it’s too late to inoculate ourselves against its power. The terror of the threat posed by such women as Evelyn Habal lies solely in the fact that we are already infected by her, she is already lodged firmly inside our heads, inside our desires: she is the literalization of our Ideals. We got what we wanted.

Now, again, the problem is not that Evelyns exist – not even that they are assimilating the bodies of women and desires of men the world over. It’s not even that Evelyns are inherently irritating to the spirit. Instead, the problem is that Evelyns irritate a small portion of the population in the wrong way: they are “abaissantes et fatales *que* pour

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<sup>415</sup> EF 250.

des hommes d'une rare et droite nature."<sup>416</sup> This election goads the reader into a certain kind of identification – here, with the moral “straightness” of Ewald, his capacity to be fatally irritated by the problematic existence of an Evelyn such as Alicia, his need, in short, for a linear and absolute solution to the epistemological problem posed by Evelyn’s body. Edison’s research goal, then, will not be to cure his patients of their love for Evelyns, since it’s too late and we’re already infected; instead, it will be to construct an acceptable substitute for Evelyn, one similar enough in structure and function to replace a beloved Evelyn but different enough to allow the patient to escape death. Now, since Evelyn is fundamentally “une simple illusion,”<sup>417</sup> Edison wants to engineer another fantasy of Evelyns, another way to enjoy these modern women, “ces êtres de rechute pour l’Homme”<sup>418</sup> (*rechute* insisting that men are already fallen, and that these future Eves will only bring to fruition a process long begun). The goal of the text is not an escape from fetishism; instead, it is to prolong – to universalize – this fetishism.

Edison’s curiosity thus piqued, he begins to conduct a scientific exhumation of the Evelyn phenomenon. His most important observation comes almost immediately: “le *joli* de leurs personnes ne tarde pas à devenir d’une qualité le plus souvent *artificielle*, et TRÈS ARTIFICIELLE entre-temps. Certes, il est difficile de le reconnaître d’un coup d’œil : mais *cela est*.”<sup>419</sup> The attractive quality of these women, vampires or striges,<sup>420</sup> dark sisters of that famous Owl of Minerva, flying now in the twilight of our era, lies in their oscillation between the “artificial” and the “very artificial” – an interesting distinction, and one that we must question further. In fact, even as Edison suggests that these women are more animalistic, more biological than others, he simultaneously argues that they are defined not by a return to an earlier bodily form, but instead by their lack of a body:

Il est inexact d’avancer de ces femmes qu’elles sont belles, ou laides, ou jolies, ou jeunes, ou blondes, ou vieilles, ou brunes, ou grasses, ou maigres, attendu qu’en supposant, même, qu’il soit possible de le savoir, et de l’affirmer avant que telle rapide modification nouvelle ne s’accuse en leurs corporéités, - le *secret de leur malfaisant charme n’est pas là* : - bien au contraire ! [...] *Leur action fatale et morbide sur LEUR victim est en raison directe de la quantité d’artificiel, au moral et au physique, dont elles font valoir, - dont elles repoussent, plutôt, - le peu de séductions naturelles qu’elles paraissent posséder. C’est, en un mot, QUOIQUE jolies, ou belles, ou laides, etc., que leur amant (celui qui doit en succomber) s’en passionne et s’en aveugle ! Et nullement à cause de ces possibilités personnelles.*<sup>421</sup>

The body, here, is not the source of desirable characteristics that a lover might love. Instead, these bodies are nothing – but why? Are these bodies originally void or meaningless so that they can be more successfully prosthetized? Or are these bodies only seen as unimportant when contrasted to the over-valued surplus-enjoyment inhering in the prosthesis?

The only object that Edison’s inquiry – “Miss Evelyn Habal ! – me disais-je : qu’est-ce que CELA pouvait bien être ?”<sup>422</sup> – can thus seize upon is the strange body of the fetish-

<sup>416</sup> EF 255.

<sup>417</sup> EF 254.

<sup>418</sup> EF 256.

<sup>419</sup> EF 261.

<sup>420</sup> Villiers insists on this quality of his artificial women. Cf. EF 259, 262.

<sup>421</sup> EF 262.

<sup>422</sup> EF 264.

objects that adorn her. These do not readily emerge for our observation; as we've seen, Edward and Ewald are both incapable of determining, with their naked eyes, what is faulty in the perfect vision an Evelyn presents for our viewing pleasure. For this reason, Edison has to conduct a technological postmortem. Edison has described how one cannot see the fractured or compound nature of Evelyn with the naked eye; indeed, Evelyn had already died and decayed away by the time Edison began his inquest. But for Ewald – and for the reader – Edison has perfected the means of revealing Evelyn's paradoxical form. He has put together a cinematic double feature (not bad, considering that he wouldn't actually file the patent for his Kinematographic Camera until 1891). This séance isn't double merely in that it is *double*, presciently accompanied by sync-sound – or rather, out-of-sync-sound, since the precise linking of the images of Evelyn's dancing with the sounds of Evelyn's singing displays the first fracture in her character, since her voice shows itself to be too weak for her body.<sup>423</sup> Edison's *Ecce puella*<sup>424</sup> goes one better by not only juxtaposing the visual and auditory Evelyns, but the *two visual Evelyns* (her voice is quickly shunted aside by the fiction); the live footage of her performance and the technologically-reconstructed image of her stripped of her makeup. In the gap between these special-effects films appears a third technology, as a positive entity: in the terrifying chasm between Evelyn's (generic) beauty as a dancing-girl and the image of “un petit être exsangue, vaguement féminin, aux membres rabougris, aux joues crueses, à la bouche édentée et presque sans lèvres, au crane à peu près chauve, aux yeux ternes et en vrille, aux paupières flasques, à la personne ridée toute maigre et sombre” appears, solidly and distinctly, the extremity of the “progrès de l'Art de la toilette dans les temps modernes.”<sup>425</sup>

Now, cosmetology might certainly seem like a minor art, but Plato himself found it necessary to condemn aestheticians as dangerous con-artists in the *Gorgias*. But it is in fact the heart and soul of the threat Evelyns pose for Edward, for Ewald, since it is the sole source of their attraction. Their bodies are only “vaguely feminine” – a fascinating turn of phrase, suggesting both that Evelyn's body is indeterminate, between genders, undecided in its sexing, but also, perhaps, that Evelyn's body is feminine in that it is vague, not entirely committed to any gender orientation; “femininity” appears here both as the underlying baseline state of ungenderedness and as the final finished costume that Evelyn will eventually put on. Femininity is simultaneously a way to describe bodies without characteristics and something that can be added, as a characteristic, to such bodies, thereby resolving or dangerously amplifying their feminine vagueness.

In the next chapter, literally entitled “Exhumation,” Edison is assisted by Hadaly, acting as one of Barker's Beauties (or as a Kraftwerkian “showroom dummy,” or a Mallarméan “lampadophore”), in a spectacular, anaphoric catechism, enumerating each of the minor, subliminal prosthetics that summed up, as in integral calculus, into the image of “Evelyn.” As Edison speaks the magic words, Hadaly illuminates them with a perfumed torch: the wigs and weaves, the blushes and rouges, the false teeth, false breasts, corsets, control-top pantyhose, posture-correcting shoes, even the perfumes that covered Evelyn's odor of decay and allowed her to smell like a natural woman. The “oraison funèbre” concludes with Edison's rhetorical question: “Pourtant ne sont-ce pas là *ses vrais ossements* ?”<sup>426</sup> – isn't *this* the “real body” of Evelyn Habal, the prosthetic body that she strapped on to

<sup>423</sup> EF 265-266.

<sup>424</sup> EF 267.

<sup>425</sup> EF 267.

<sup>426</sup> EF 273.

herself every day, not an intact body but instead merely an endless series of extensions? This monstrosity reveals the genius of Villiers's science fiction, and demonstrates that Villiers is the true inheritor of Verne. If science fiction is supposed to be defined by its "speculative" character – by its imagining of the extension of a technology far, far into the future, past the point where that technology becomes something radically different, radically new – Villiers's inspired intervention in the genre is to create a technology that feels radically, terrifyingly new out of parts that already exist.

In other words, Villiers's fiction creates another android besides Hadaly, and this android is Evelyn Habal *qua* modern woman. To resume Edison's oration: "si l'Artificiel assimilé, amalgamé plutôt, à l'être humain, peut produire de telles catastrophes, et puisque, par suite, à tel ou tel degré, physique ou moral, toute femme qui les cause tient plus ou moins d'une andréide, - eh bien ! chimère pour chimère, pourquoi pas l'Andréide elle-même ?"<sup>427</sup> (We've seen this "pourquoi pas" before, as the "dévises des temps modernes" inserted as an intertitle by the text's author; Edison turns out to have internalized this structure of Villiers's compositional practice.) Fascinatingly, Evelyn Habal – mind her initials – turns out to stand for "l'être humain" in Edison's analysis, proving that this process of "amalgamation," of the interpenetration of human and machine bodies, is not a priori restricted to females, even as Edison's project will aim to assert that the form of this interpenetration is the feminine in its purest sense. Indeed, the creation of Hadaly – or, rather, the accessorizing of Hadaly, since the hardware has already been designed – will follow, in expanded form, the model of Edison's "exhumation" of Evelyn; the fifth main sections traces, chapter by chapter, Edison's plans for replicating Ewald's beloved Miss Clary by means of a series of prostheses (false teeth, glass eyes, and of course the construction of a phonographic voice for Hadaly that will match Alicia's) corresponding to those employed by Evelyn. The text thus employs a particular double logic: if it identifies Hadaly as the android of fantasy, the center of its fiction and the titular "*future* Eve," it also insists that this fantasy is no more and no less than the exact duplication of the contemporary female (or was it the contemporary human?), that there is, in its vision of the future, "rien de nouveau sous le soleil."<sup>428</sup> Indeed, for Hadaly to take on the consistency of "l'Éternel féminin,"<sup>429</sup> the text must in fact labor to construct an unbroken continuity between the Hadaly of the future, the Alicia of the present, and the Evelyn of the past: as the "Éternel féminin," the "Ève future" (again, follow the initials) is old news.

But Edison is sweating away in the laboratory to produce, not exactly a female robot, but a future for mankind, for men like Ewald who incarnate the racial features that Edison finds desirable in the male race. What if we read the title not as meaning "Hadaly is the Eve of the future in that she foreshadows the engineering and production of a new partner and helpmeet for man," but instead "Hadaly is the Eve of the future in that she represents a new way for men to dream of woman, a new way for men to organize their fantasies so that they will be able to productively find partners and so that their lives will be made significantly easier"? In other words, what if we took the text somewhat at its word, and suggested that Hadaly is not a mere reinscription of a continuous and historically unchanging "eternal feminine," but instead that Hadaly represents and condenses the production of a new "eternal feminine" – an "eternal feminine" in which a future for mankind can become imaginable? It's not that we will, tomorrow, all be loving Hadalys, but instead that by loving

<sup>427</sup> EF 275.

<sup>428</sup> EF 286.

<sup>429</sup> EF 300.

Hadaly we may make it through the night and live to see another day, because in Hadaly all of Evelyn Habal's anxiety-inducing vacillations or irritations are resolved through Edison's clever interventions. Edison is, again, not engineering an object that can better satisfy Ewald's desires, but re-engineering Ewald's desires themselves, so that they can be more happily satisfied. In an Evelyn Habal, we'll constantly be irritated by our epistemological uncertainty about where the real woman starts and the sham woman begins, but with Hadaly we can happily enjoy the whole woman once we've learned to forget that she's entirely fake. But in both cases the Ideal woman is built integrally, piecemeal, out of component fetishes.

We see this orthopedic or pedagogical thrust of the text in the next section of the text, when Edison describes the ways in which Hadaly will be constructed as a duplicate of Miss Clary. This enumeration begins, suggestively enough, with the voice, the object around which "Le Système vivant, intérieur, qui comprend l'Équilibre, la Démarche, la Voix, le Geste, les Sens, les Expressions-futures du visage, le Mouvement-régulateur intime, ou, pour mieux dire, l'Âme"<sup>430</sup> of Hadaly will crystallize. The novel situates this voice in an overdetermined organ, the "poumons d'or de l'Andréide"<sup>431</sup>; Edison explains that, in a human, the respiratory nerves link the lungs to the medulla oblongata ("Une piqûre d'aiguille, ici, vous le savez, suffit pour nous éteindre à l'instant même"<sup>432</sup>), and that he has followed this model in constructing the workings ("jeu") of Hadaly. In other words, the lungs and the vital on-off switch are one and the same organ, in both humans and androids.

Nicklausse's song about Antonia's "âme" similarly compared the soundboard of the violin, the vital strut without which sound is impossible, to the biotechnology structuring Antonia's existence: for Antonia, to sing is to live as a thinking, feeling human being (even if this singing proves fatal, and even if her singing becomes hardware that can be reprogrammed by an external engineer like Dr. Miracle). The polysemy of the French "âme," and of the Latin "anima," give rise to a wonderful, original dream – what if song and soul, breath and spirit, were the same thing, their production the same gesture? Now it is phrased neither with the terror surrounding Antonia's song, as she finds herself *qua* resonant body open to a radical, reductive instrumentalization in the hands of Dr. Miracle, the master violinist, nor with the wonder of Olympia's song, as the young robot discovers that to be a singing machine is to be a feeling body thanks to the reversibility at the heart of the song-soul metaphor, but instead with a new layer of Decadent irony or "raillerie." Is Villiers ironizing on Edison's pun-making, or is the tiredness of the joke in fact the source of its interest? Are we mocking naïve dreaming, or is mockery the inspiration for our sophisticated fantasies? These are the kinds of questions that are properly unanswerable, and in typical Decadent fashion this is the point at which the text, in its unstably or suspiciously ironic/sincere relationship to the cultural material that inspires or informs it, bows out of literary criticism, and the literary critic must gently, politely, pass on offering judgment. Villier's first page dedicates the novel "*Aux rêveurs, Aux railleurs*," and it's up to the reader to decide exactly what kind of "rêveur" or "railleur" he would like to be – to decide how to take this structural overlapping of voice and soul, to decide what kind of pleasures it will inspire. Will it inspire dreaming, or ironizing? Or ironic dreaming, or dreaming that salvages an irony? Or some other, more sophisticated and recursive, combination of irony and dream?

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<sup>430</sup> EF 279.

<sup>431</sup> EF 281.

<sup>432</sup> EF 281.

All that would be nicely academic were the novel not also to re-introduce the idea of a critical syncope into its narration at precisely this moment, when Edison is revealing the heart of his engineering project to Ewald and the reader, the heart that is formed by the voice-brainstem (same organ) of the android. The contemplation of Hadaly's heart, her electromagnetic vocal/cognitive apparatus, opens a new chapter in the history of love, for, as Edison asks rhetorically, "Quelle Juliette supporterait un tel examen sans que Roméo s'évanouit ?"<sup>433</sup> Again, it is precisely the syncope, the evanescence, the passage out of consciousness, of the *Romeo's* subjectivity that is in question here. The live dissection of Juliet that would render "le spectacle du *processus vital*" of her organism available to the amorous gaze of her lover would also cause him to be unable to bear to look at the heart that he presumably desires. Edison describes the affect triggered by viewing the inside of the body as "une sensation où le Lugubre le disputerait à l'Absurde et à l'Inimaginable": something like a cool cousin to the funereal horror experienced by the viewer of Edison's exhumation of Evelyn, but also as something that provokes dolorous mourning by the passage beyond the sayable or, more properly, the imaginable. The inside of the human body is beyond the reach of the Imaginary, of what can be put into images; structurally, its obscenity, the impossibility of phrasing it in visually-recuperable forms, in fact gives consistency to the Imaginary. In Lacan, the inside of one's own body, the invisible and rigorously non-understandable biological workings and disruptions of one's insides, appears as another name for the big-O Other. It's not only in that Romeo identifies with the body of Juliet, in that he recognizes himself in her and thus feels the dissection of her body as the dissection of his own, that her vivisection would disturb him to the point of fainting; instead, any such vivisection, by revealing what Edison defines as the other of language, of intelligibility, and of consciousness, takes Romeo beyond the limits of his identity as defined and articulable. But in the android, however, "tout est riche, ingénieux et sombre. Regardez."<sup>434</sup>

In fact, the inside of Hadaly's body is all phrased along the lines of the intelligible, and the self-evidently, visibly intelligible: inside her are not nerves or wires, but rather disks of metal and reinforced glass. Here electricity – for all is indeed electric, and Hadaly "*ne sera qu'un peu plus animée par l'Électricité que son modèle* : voilà tout"<sup>435</sup> – is visualized on the model of the phonograph; rotating disks explicitly provide the model for the visualization of the energy flows that power this android. Edison sets everything up, as in his stage-managing of the cinema sequence, so as to readily come to the eye, and in a positive form – Hadaly's body is an amalgamation of hieroglyphs, and, as Adorno and Kittler observed, the phonograph record provides the means by which the constant flow of the Real can easily be digested, internalized, by the spectator. Ewald ought to be very well satisfied by this display, since the vision of the disks that make up Hadaly's "âme" allows him to luxuriate in the visual contemplation of his beloved's heart without that contemplation taking him out of the world of the imaginable, since he has words for all that he sees in his android partner. Hadaly's very body herself this easy, one-to-one translation between the words engraved on her soul and the conversation in which she will engage her lover.

### Super-Models: Villiers's Hyper-Realist Science Fiction

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<sup>433</sup> EF 281.

<sup>434</sup> EF 281.

<sup>435</sup> EF 198.



The supermodels are already mutants ushering in an unprecedented event: *the premature death of any living language.*

- Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*

However, at this moment Edison's plan seems to go awry: Ewald begins to feel faint, not as if he will pass out, but as if his desire for Hadaly has begun to fade. In place of Romeo's syncope we get a polysemous aphanisis. Witnessing Edison's latest "spectacle" and learning of the limits of Hadaly's memory capacity, Ewald raises two concerns, both of which relate precisely to the en-cipher-ment of Hadaly. First, he fears that his intercourse with Hadaly will soon become "monotone,"<sup>436</sup> and, second, he fears that, knowing that Hadaly is an android, he will be unable to "aimer zéro," to love a body without a soul.<sup>437</sup> The heart of Edison's teaching pitches itself against precisely these two concerns, the points at which Ewald's desire needs the most orthopedic correction. At this point, Edison launches into his most complete modeling of desire. To conclude this exploration of *L'Ève future's* text, let's take a close look at this model, and the model of modeling that it represents, as it operates within the fiction of the novel, as it sets a particular program for the history of dreaming about androids, and as it locates Villiers's masterpiece within the history of "science fiction."

Edison's model centers on two postulates, matching Ewald's conscientious objections point by point. First of all, Edison argues that human desire is profoundly opposed to novelty: according to him, "le rêve de tous les êtres humains" would be to "éternaliser une seule heure de l'amour" and to "rééprouver cette unique joie : la grande heure monotone !" Now, Soren Kierkegaard already tackled this problem – and in precisely acoustic terms – in his 1843 *Either/Or*.<sup>438</sup> But for Kierkegaard no properly consistent solution was possible: to hold to the ideal of the "first kiss," one would need to be radically deprived of self-consciousness (the solution incarnated by Don Giovanni), the solution that is most proper to the opera and as such is impossible for any human; to exist as the cynical, self-deluding seducer who imitates Don Giovanni as closely as possible as an ironic revolt against the unavailability of the model of immediate desire given by opera (the either); or to choose the absolutely un-aesthetic but at least morally consistent life of a monogamist who relives the firstness of the kiss by measuring the difference between the first kiss and the present kiss, or who hallucinates this persistence of pleasure in order to spice up what is otherwise a purely formal philosophical maxim (the or). But Edison – or Villiers – has a new ideal acoustic object: the phonograph record, which escapes time by always being the same and thus foreclosing the liveness or livingness of performance. In other words, Kierkegaard idealizes opera because in its iterated performances it provides a way of interweaving, although not resolving, the two aspects of temporality, novelty and duration. Edison, however, doesn't find this ideal worthy of being desired, because it isn't "positive" – Edison's watchword in Villiers's novel – enough. Instead, Edison solves the problem by creating forms that absolutely resolve the dialectic of the new and the lasting: a record, for Edison, can repeat things exactly, thus eliminating duration by neutralizing change and eliminating novelty by neutralizing uniqueness. Edison chooses Don Giovanni's solution to Kierkegaard's either/or, without noticing that he has picked the one solution that was

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<sup>436</sup> EF 288.

<sup>437</sup> EF 289.

<sup>438</sup> See Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). Of particular interest is the chapter on "The Immediate Erotic Stages," 45-135 in that volume.

neither the either nor the or. The result is a dehumanization of desire, or, in Kierkegaard's terms, a removal of the dialectics of time or alterity (for an existentialist like Kierkegaard, they're the same thing) from the problem of desire.

"En effet, on sent que le mieux est de *réentendre* les seules paroles qui puissent nous ravir, précisément parce qu'elle nous ont ravi une fois déjà," Edison explains.<sup>439</sup> New technologies, the emerging media of absolute reproduction, will serve as engines allowing for the minting of eternal pleasure, finally being able to "monnayer cette heure d'or."<sup>440</sup> This turn to a financial register is telling: by redefining desire as stable and unchanging, and by defining production as strict reproduction, Edison has created a perpetual moneymaking engine. This constitutes, in effect, a complete articulation of the logic of the contemporary capitalist discourse. Edison also suggests that our deepest desire is to turn into such absolutely reproductive phonograph records ourselves, hearing over and over again the words that have been engraved on our hearts (our bodies, again, being structurally indistinguishable from Hadaly's – her heart, too, her lung-brainstem complex, being nothing more than an acoustic engine replaying prior experiences). So it's not, then, that Edison discovers repetition; it's that he markets it by giving it a standardized exchange-value. Just foreclose difference, he says, merely imagine a world where nothing can ever change, and you can enjoy objects like phonograph records or cyborgs as much as you would like.

Villiers's text marks this new model of desire as something like voluntary euthanasia. Edison concludes that "entre deux êtres qui s'aiment toute nouveauté d'aspect ne peut qu'entraîner la diminution du prestige, altérer la passion, faire envoler le rêve. [...] Ce n'est même qu'une *différence* d'avec leur rêve qu'ils constatent encore, ici ! [...] car le mieux est l'ennemi du bien – *et ce n'est que la nouveauté qui nous désenchante.*"<sup>441</sup> The goal of Edison's project is to generalize total somnolence, to put everyone into a medically-sustainable coma, to counterfeit mass suicide so as to prevent it. (Later on, Hadaly will explicitly implore Ewald "ne te réveille pas de moi."<sup>442</sup>) Why else would the absolute enemy of his project be any difference that might trigger an awakening from the dream?

Edison's proposal for consumption is doubled by his establishment of a production model; he aims not only at redefining the dream but also the waking world. According to him, "la *Réalité*, elle-même, n'est pas aussi riche en mobilités, en nouveautés, ni en diversités que vous vous efforcez de le croire !"<sup>443</sup> The kettle logic of this statement is obvious: We would prefer sameness to the difference that our Protean world forces us to confront, and the world doesn't change that much after all. Edison obeys the model of scientific reality that Lacan describes in the maxim "The Real is that which always returns to the same place."<sup>444</sup> Here, as Kittler demonstrates, Edison establishes the model of the Real that will become determinant in the constellation of media that emerge around the phonographic-electrical nucleus. Soon Edison has radicalized and generalized this qualified statement – Reality isn't as novel as you think – into an absolute one: "vous croyez donc que l'on improvise quoi que ce soit ? qu'on ne récite pas toujours ? [...] En vérité, toute parole n'est qu'une redite : - et il n'est pas besoin de Hadaly pour se trouver, toujours, en tête-à-tête avec un fantôme. Chaque métier humain a son ensemble de phrases, - où chaque homme tourne et se vire jusqu'à sa

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<sup>439</sup> EF 291.

<sup>440</sup> EF 290.

<sup>441</sup> EF 288-289.

<sup>442</sup> EF 381.

<sup>443</sup> EF 290.

<sup>444</sup> FFC 49.

mort; et son vocabulaire, qui lui semble si étendu, se réduit à une centaine, au plus, de phrases types, constamment récitées.”<sup>445</sup> Edison here makes a rather spectacular argument: given the number of speakers and the finite number of words in the dictionary, eventually – maybe someday soon, maybe even sometime in the past – human speech will reveal itself to be the true model for phonographic repetition, and each speaker will only repeat typical speech situations that have already been “invented” by others. However, these acts of seeming “invention” are instead merely necessary consequences of the eventual combinatoric exhaustion of linguistic possibility. The foundation of Claude Shannon’s *Mathematical Theory of Communication* is precisely this linkage of combinatorics (stochastics) and thermodynamics. Edison here radically mistakes the Derridean concept of linguistic “iterability”; but the point is to mistake repetition as the insistence of the same and not to take it as the emergence of difference. In other words, everyone is equally automatic in terms of the expression of their “souls”; thus, Hadaly will provide, empirically speaking, the full girlfriend experience – the same communion of spirits that a professional human companion could furnish Ewald with. Again, we see Edison insisting on the absolute conformity of Hadaly to the humanity on which she is modeled. Again, Villiers’s project aims not only to imagine a Hadaly but to re-imagine the consistency of “reality.” And again, we see that Hadaly becomes perversely preferable to Miss Clary by hiding her constructedness, her artificiality, by foregrounding it.

Alicia, after all, is problematic because she is too vapid, too soulless, and too obvious when she attempts to conform to the model of Ewald’s desire – she doesn’t successfully transcend her artificiality (thus is the fate of all women held up to the consistency of a male-constructed Ideal in the classical model of the feminine *pas-tout*). Paradoxically, Alicia’s personality is problematic because she is not artificial enough – her imitation always holds something in reserve, it is never identical with itself, it isn’t “phonographic” in its replaying of Ewald’s desire but foregrounds the tension between the body’s performance of Ewald’s idealization and the body’s own ends. Miss Clary is frustrating, irritating, because she iterates rather than reiterates. Edison has to cure Ewald’s desire “par le poison,” by “réaliser [ses] vœux !”<sup>446</sup>; in other words, in the laboratory, where “le naturel ne pouvait être que l’extraordinaire,” Edison will deliver “non plus la Réalité, mais l’IDÉAL” of Ewald’s desire.<sup>447</sup> Edison has already declared of Alicia that “cette femme serait l’Idéal féminine pour les trois quarts de l’Humanité moderne !”<sup>448</sup>; in other words, the difference between his Idealization and the already-Idealized nature of Alicia is already in question, and, again like a virus, Alicia’s mode of Ideality is catching (remember that all women are already tricked out in all those prosthetics found on Evelyn’s corpse). As we constantly see in this text, the defining logics constructing the characterizations and distinctions of thematic motifs shift back and forth with the tides of Villiers’s ambivalence towards his creations, and, indeed, within the very analogical structure that defines the android in Villiers’s fiction. Earlier, for Edison, to dream beyond himself meant to dream as a man and not as a superman. Here we see the corollary of that, in the tension between an “extraordinary nature” – a supernatural nature – and the “reality” that it rejects in favor of some “ideal” that must consequently be at once more natural and less real than Alicia’s ideal.

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<sup>445</sup> EF 292.

<sup>446</sup> EF 168-169.

<sup>447</sup> EF 172.

<sup>448</sup> EF 160.

Edison invents his “*chair artificielle*” so as to correct the natural *faultiness* of nature, “de manière à confondre la suffisance de la ‘Nature’ - (Et, entre nous, la Nature est une grande dame à laquelle je voudrais bien être présentée, car tout le monde en parle et personne ne l’a jamais vue !)”<sup>449</sup>; the foundation of man lies not in his naturalness, but in the way in which man turns his natural penchant for artificiality, for creation and cultivation, towards the extinction of the natural – that is, the way in which the natural never stably orients itself towards nature or culture, biology or technology. To stabilize this foundation, the exorbitant orientation of nature towards culture (and vice-versa) will have to be channeled; Edison’s (and Villiers’s) stabilizing technique is to erect a double analogy comparing the actors and products of natural creation – God and man – and the actors and products of artificial creation – man and android. God naturally invents artificiality; now humans must fulfill their destiny, becoming supermen, by perfectly – artificially – imitating this natural artifice. To imitate God, to escape mortality, man must imitate man.

By instituting precisely this analogical structure – which equates man and android so as to distinguish them – Edison, incidentally, invents the Turing test (a fact which has escaped commentary until now). By creating an android, Edison argues, we would “faire sortir du limon de l’actuelle Science Humaine un Être *fait à notre image*, et qui nous sera, par conséquent, CE QUE NOUS SOMMES À DIEU.”<sup>450</sup> For Descartes, once upon a time, the existence of God enabled the philosopher to be certain that other people were other people and not robots. Edison, similarly, invokes God as a way of maintaining his distance from his creation: if man stands to android as God does to man, then man and android, man and machine, man and the female body already colonized by mimetic technologies, are as radically different as God and man. But the specific method of creation implied by this analogy – absolute, reproductive re-iteration, distinguished as the technological mode of creation as distinguished from divine and inhuman iteration – means that man and android can be nothing but perfect doubles of each other. Man can only save himself from the encroachment of technology by becoming absolutely, but deniably, technological. And when faced with the android that would result from this salvaging process, Edison cautions, “prenez garde qu’en la juxtaposant à son modèle et en les écoutant toutes deux, *ce ne soit la vivante qui vous semble la poupée.*”<sup>451</sup>

Now, this is exactly the model for the experiment to prove that machines think that Alan Turing will provide in his 1950 essay, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence.” That essay begins with a signal move: rather than attempt to answer the question “Can machines think?” as posed in that precise form, Turing will translate it into an equivalent form that produces a properly experimental situation.<sup>452</sup> This equivalent form is the famous “imitation game,” in which an operator poses a set of questions, and then attempts to determine whether the answers to those questions were produced by a human or a computer. Since the operation by which we answer the question “Can humans think?” is structurally identical to this second operation – whereby we judge whether the responses they give to our linguistic interventions are revelatory of thought or not – if a particular computer can “win” the imitation game as often as a human, then that computer can be said to “think.”

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<sup>449</sup> EF 182.

<sup>450</sup> EF 190.

<sup>451</sup> EF 190.

<sup>452</sup> Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” in *Mind Design II: Philosophy, Psychology, Artificial Intelligence*, ed. John Haugeland (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997): 29-56, 29. Hereafter cited as “CM.”

At least, this is the form of the imitation game provided by Turing by the end of his essay; tellingly, it doesn't exactly begin in this precise place. The first imitation game "is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex."<sup>453</sup> A attempts to make C choose him as the woman – thus the basis of the game is the capacity of man to imitate woman, or, to put it more strongly, the capacity for gender to be defined in terms of mimesis, not of biology. Gender is assumed a priori to be "performative" and performable if the game is ever to work (and suggestively the quality to be imitated is the feminine capacity for imitation). But what the engineer finally aims for is the replication of a particularly masculine way of imitating the feminine; the computer aims not to outplay woman, but to outplay the man in his performance of the woman, leaving C to decide between a woman pretending to humanity and a machine pretending to woman's pretending to humanity. Therefore, the question "Can machines think?" is first replaced by "What will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game?"<sup>454</sup> – precisely the question posed by Edison and Villiers as they place Hadaly and Alicia side by side for the judgment of the third party who is both Ewald and the reader, and precisely the question that Edison and Villiers both answer with a "nothing," although the meanings of their responses are indeed different. But subsequently, another elision will allow the game's grammar to compare or couple not women and machines, but instead men and machines; Turing begins to use the generic, rhetorical "man" as the name for all *homo sapiens*, and then he explicitly reshuffles the roles of the game: "Is it true that [one particular digital computer C] can be made to play satisfactorily the part of A in the imitation game, the part of B being taken by a man?"<sup>455</sup> If in this new scenario C is recast as A, and A as B, then B must rotate into the third position, that of the interrogator. "Woman" is put in a new position as the Turing test reshuffles its terms – that she now occupies the eccentric pole that aims to tell the difference between man and machine, or to cause them to resemble each other in a non-threatening way. Now, man and machine resemble each other inasmuch as they sometimes look a lot like the absent third party, "woman." This is an interestingly redemptive rhetorical maneuver. What we normally think of as so threatening to masculinity – its contamination by femininity – here turns out to be a small sacrifice to make so as to ensure that masculinity is not contaminated by machinery. Man will accept that his masculinity is prosthetic, in the same way that Evelyn's alluring female body is something that she puts on, in order to contrast between the natural prosthesis that constitutes his body and the artificial supplementarity of the machine universe.

But this does not mean that men will henceforth be deprived of objects to love and enjoy. Ewald is going to choose Hadaly over Alicia, just as Nathaniel falls in love with Olympia and neglects Clara. But Hadaly is a different beast than Olympia, founded on a different logic of imitation and repetition. Olympia only had one word, and not even a word at that – instead, she possessed or was endowed with nothing but the fetish-sound "Ach!" If she was able to respond to the developing conversational context, it was both only inasmuch as her word was not fully a word – that it wasn't restricted to one meaning – and that in so failing to be entirely a word it attained the status of a fetishistic arch-signifier – that it delivered a meaning beyond any restriction and that could be effortlessly plugged into any given fantasy. Certainly this suggests a relative restriction of the field of fantasy, as it isn't imaginable that anything Nathaniel could ask his beloved would fail to be answered by

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<sup>453</sup> "CM" 29.

<sup>454</sup> "CM" 30.

<sup>455</sup> "CM" 38.

“Ach!” Edison gives an exploration of this principle by considering how a lover might modulate the questions he poses to Hadaly in order to produce a desirable intercourse with the automaton:

Ne pourrez-vous donc les [your questions] modifier, *comme dans la vie*, aussi ingénieusement que vous le voudrez, - de manière, toutefois, que la réponse attendue s’y adapte ?... En vérité, *tout, je vous assure, peut absolument, répondre à tout* : c’est le grand kaleidoscope des mots humains [...] n’importe quel vocable peut toujours s’y adapter en un sens quelconque. [...] Il est tant de mots vagues, suggestifs, d’une élasticité intellectuelle si étrange ! et dont le charme et le profondeur dépendent, simplement, de *ce à quoi ils répondent* !<sup>456</sup>

Edison demonstrates the “vagueness” of all words with “déjà” – repetition is very much in question here, as is the generalization of the kind of fetishistic non-meaning found in Olympia’s “Ach!” across the whole of human speech, in a way that would radically change the meaning of human understanding. Edison’s postulate – the corollary to his earlier idea that all combinations of vocables had been or eventually would be produced, thus rendering all human speech to the droning reiteration of these ideal snippets of dialogue – concludes that all language is radically meaningless, simply because no word can be restricted to a finite number of meanings, and that its saying – its “vocalization” – can correspond to a non-finite number of internal movements of thought, just as “Ach!” expressed all of Olympia’s impassioned and reasoned reactions to Nathaniel’s loving speech. If anything I say could express potentially any affective or intellectual mental state, then you have no way of knowing what I’m thinking or feeling, so you might as well just think that I’m thinking what you want me to think. No meeting of the minds is possible for us; structurally, there’s no way for us to become conscious of each others’ consciousness, to become mutually conscient. Etymologically, conscience has been replaced by science.

Correspondingly, fiction has been redefined. If science is now a self-knowing that by definition cannot include knowledge of the other, fiction is now understood as a process of fantasy that meets no resistance from reality, that never encounters reality. We see this process extolled quite explicitly by Hadaly in her speech aimed at converting Ewald:

il n’est, pour l’Homme, d’autre vérité que celle qu’il accepte de croire entre toutes les autres, - aussi douteuses que celle qu’il choisit : choisis donc celle qui te rend un dieu. Qui suis-je ? demandais-tu ? Mon être, ici-bas, ne dépend que de ta libre volonté. [...] Oh ! de quelle merveilleuse existence puis-je être douée si tu as la *simplicité* de me croire ! si tu me défends contre ta Raison ! À toi de choisir entre moi... et l’ancienne Réalité, qui, tous les jours, te ment, t’abuse, te désespère, te trahit.<sup>457</sup>

What kind of fiction is this that no longer emerges from a conversation with reality? What else, except that nicotine-derived form of dreaming both desired and feared by Edison at the novel’s *incipit*? (Remember, smoking “*changent en rêveries les projets virils*” – in the dream, there is no more space for what used to be a “virile” or lively masculinity. Edison finally situates us in the twilight of masculinity, in the twilight of life itself – inasmuch as “life” includes “death.”)

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<sup>456</sup> EF 285.

<sup>457</sup> EF 381.

Halady simply restates Edison's command to the expert wigmaker weaving a replica of Miss Alicia's hair (which is therefore a command for the spinner of any text or tale): "Surtout ne faites pas MIEUX que nature !!! Vous dépasseriez le but ! *Identique* ! Rien de plus."<sup>458</sup> If we are to engage in imitation of, embroidery upon the natural, we must constrain ourselves to the "identical." But then to so restrict the field of one's mimesis would be to imitate better than one naturally would; to hit the target is to refuse to overshoot it. Nature's imitation would therefore be exorbitant. If we want to deliver the ideal, we must foreclose the natural reality of transformation and reversal. Edison allows us to live in the world of a scientificized, integral and self-confirming, reality – not in the real world of change, exchange, or interchange. If we want the former, the latter can only be disappointing inasmuch as it necessarily misses its aim, even though we ourselves must choose to miss our own marks, to cut ourselves short, in order to stay away from the seductions of the real world: Edison offers to us precisely the means to "préférer désormais à la mensongère, médiocre, et toujours changeante Réalité, une positive, prestigieuse et toujours fidèle Illusion. Chimère pour chimère, péché pour péché, fumée pour fumée, - *pourquoi donc pas ?*"<sup>459</sup> The "sorcier de Menlo Park" has made reality itself vanish in a puff of smoke.

As such, and in ways that trouble *L'Ève future's* location in the history of science fiction, Edison and Villiers announce and generalize a field of hyperreality avant la lettre. What *L'Ève future* calls for is no more and no less than a drastic rewriting – or reprogramming – of the entire field of reality. Reality must be parcelated, broken down into its minute constituent parts (the "vocables"), and then resimulated, put back together, or, as Baudrillard would say in a play on the Leibnizian fundamental operation of calculus, "integrated." Reality must be provided with its integrity – exactly what nature fails to provide it, or succeeds in not providing it – and consequently reality will be located at exactly the right place for our desires to hit it directly, not to diverge, to fall short of or go beyond their target. The best example of this is, again, Edison's desire to give Hadaly as broad a vocabulary as possible – because his goal is not merely to engineer one virtuosic fetish-object but instead to re-engineer all human language into an array of fetishistic signifiers.

*L'Ève future* is therefore anomalous in the history of science fiction in its refusal to be utopian, inasmuch as utopian science fiction defines itself on a temporal or qualitative difference between the utopian fiction and present reality. Baudrillard describes how science fiction, sometimes called "speculative" fiction, as a genre inherits utopianism; unlike the philosophical utopias of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and before that act as (distorted) mirror images of society, science fiction is projective, based on extending the distance between reality and fantasy as dramatically as possible. The fin-de-siècle fictions of H. G. Wells provide a good example of what Baudrillard describes as the "unbounded projection of the real world of production, [...] not qualitatively different from it"<sup>460</sup>: *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, for instance, takes a scientific technology (vivisection) and a scientific notion (the continuity between man and animal asserted by evolutionary theory) and extends the first to its breaking point so as to explore the latter, while *The Time Machine* extends a scientific notion (the stratification of classes) to its apogee by means of an imaginary technology (time travel). In these fictions, "Mechanical or energetic extensions, speed, and power increase to the nth power, but the schemas and the scenarios are those of mechanics, metallurgy, etc."<sup>461</sup>; Wells's

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<sup>458</sup> EF 362.

<sup>459</sup> EF 333.

<sup>460</sup> SS 122.

<sup>461</sup> SS 122.

novels stretch the recognizable to or beyond the limit of the imaginable, rendering the familiar uncanny or revealing the uncanny depths of the familiar.<sup>462</sup> Reality is fractured and opens up onto the multiplicity of many possible worlds.

Villiers, meanwhile, attempts the opposite: his text strives to render the uncanny familiar by replacing the instability of the real with the coherence of the mechanically-engineered. His goal is not to projectively isolate one element of the real and to thus criticize its value, but instead to re-project his models of nature and reality onto the world around him, making of it a screen for his modeling (as we saw him do before with the two films of Evelyn), and quite explicitly making the world into and out of his images. In this way, Villiers is akin to Verne, whose science fiction aims similarly at eliminating the uncanny or the fantastic, at exorcising the Hoffmannesque or the Olympian dimensions of fantasy (remember *Le Château des Carpathes*'s "Cette histoire n'est pas fantastique, elle n'est que romanesque"). Edison, in the same vein, proclaims that "Et le fantastique a fait son temps ! c'est juste. Nous vivons dans une époque où le *positif* seul a droit à l'attention. Le fantastique n'existe pas !"<sup>463</sup> If Offenbach completes Hoffmann's work, Villiers and Verne are drawn to Hoffmann so as to neutralize and silence his fantasies, to inaugurate a new era where Hoffmannian fantasy will be impossible or undesirable.

Tellingly, Verne and Villiers are equally obsessed with basing their fictions not on projected or imagined technologies, but instead on technologies that already exist: telephone networks, false teeth, wigs, gramophones, electrical shocks, operatic arias... We hear another gasp of Edison's paean to *déjà*: just as the word "déjà" can take on any imaginable meaning – thus freeing us of the need to imagine any more words, any more contexts – the technologies we already have can serve as the basis for any fiction, can satisfy our every desire – thus freeing us from the need to imagine any new technologies, or to relate to them in any new ways. In this way, these modeling fictions "no longer constitute the imaginary in relation to the real, they are themselves an anticipation of the real, and thus leave no room for any sort of fictional anticipation [...] *nothing distinguishes this operation [of simulation] from the operation itself and the gestation of the real: there is no more fiction.*"<sup>464</sup> *L'Ève future* does little to hide this: indeed, it explicitly points out to the reader that the creation of Hadaly is exactly congruent to the creation of Evelyn, and that it employs the same techniques and technologies.

*L'Ève future*, like *Le Château des Carpathes*, appears as the inverse of the contemporary science fiction celebrated by Baudrillard, particularly the work of Ballard, whose *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974), *High Rise* (1975), *Super-Cannes* (2000), and *Kingdom Come* (2006) similarly avoid any "speculation," and instead reflect realities that are not only imaginable, but fully realizable given the current state of technological advancement. However, according to Baudrillard, Ballard does not need to imagine in order to introduce the dimension of fantasy into his works; instead, he need only write realistically, capturing, however, not the illusory depth of the modern universe, but instead its much more difficult superficiality. In such a science fiction, "there is neither fiction nor reality any more – hyperreality abolishes both,"<sup>465</sup> but in this abolishment hyperreality also institutes the reversibility of fiction and reality. That is, if Baudrillard claims that there is no more fiction

<sup>462</sup> Marxism, in its deploying of Hegelian dialectics, can be seen as another such mode of science fiction.

<sup>463</sup> EF 342.

<sup>464</sup> SS 122.

<sup>465</sup> SS 125.



in the world inaugurated by Edison, there is nevertheless a way to fantasize – and this is to seize upon the exiled Real, “our true utopia [...] that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object.”<sup>466</sup> To re-dream reality would be a means of restoring the dynamic of reality and fiction to the fossilized or flash-frozen universe of simulation; fiction would then “evolve implosively, in the very image of our current conception of the universe, attempting to revitalize, reactualize, requotidianize fragments of simulation, fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world.”<sup>467</sup> Taking life as a dream – and daring to dream life – would be a means of escaping the bind of hyperreality, of restoring the absent Real to the dream, to the place of the absented Real.

But this is exactly what *L'Ève future* does not seek to do, or seeks not to do. Instead, its fiction attempts to bring an end to fiction, to provide it with a limit and to neutralize its further effects, just as its language, by absolutely generalizing the potential of language to mean, neutralizes the differences that have up until now been generative of different meanings. In his final gesture, Villiers sinks Hadaly in the Atlantic and condemns Ewald to death, leaving Edison alone in his Arhneimian garden, where, “son regard étant levé, enfin, vers les vieilles spheres lumineuses qui [...] sillonnaient, à l'infini, l'inconcevable mystère des cieux, il frissonna, - de froid, sans doute, - en silence.”<sup>468</sup> This gesture has commonly been read as Villiers's final, finally pious revolt against the text's all-too-successful attempt to wrest control of imitation away from nature, his final destruction of the idols his novel has threatened to produce, his final offering, that is, to an absent and jealous God. But instead, I would argue, Villiers's destruction of Hadaly cements the simulation of his text – which, after all, produced not only the image of the perfectly resolved automatism of Hadaly, but also the image of the similar, if not absolutely perfect, simulations incarnated in Evelyn and Alicia. If Hadaly turned out to be the Platonic Ideal of these everyday robot-women that was appropriate or fitting as a romantic partner for the idealist dreamer Ewald, we should remember that Ewald – himself an Idealization of man – is the exception and not the rule. Edison and Villiers engineer the couple Hadaly-Ewald as the idealization of love in the aftermath of technological femininity; all that suffices to generalize the *modeling* of this love, and to render it impossible to judge this generalization as modeling, is to smash the originals, and thus eliminate any critical distance or difference between model and original in which we could judge or evaluate this modeling. If there is projection in *L'Ève future*, it is perhaps in its self-fashioning as an aspirationally ironic Decadent text, and in its definition of Ewald and Hadaly as Aesthete versions of everyday lovers. By finally eliminating this projective distance, the fiction collapses the cybernetic, “operational” order of simulation onto the “operatic” world of “theatrical and fantastical machinery,”<sup>469</sup> leaving Edison quite simply alone, in a silent, darkened, cold world, with nothing left to say, nothing left to invent. With nothing left to sing. The puppet-theater is closed, home only to the phantoms that we are.

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<sup>466</sup> *SS* 123.

<sup>467</sup> *SS* 124.

<sup>468</sup> *EF* 412.

<sup>469</sup> *SS* 127.

## Orpheus Out of the Underworld: Silencing the Noisy Ghosts of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*

Gender = grammatical category; in principle is not restricted to the sexual: = “ensemble of the phenomena through which language translates the primitive ontological division into classes of the mass of nouns representing the various beings” --> The distribution may differ from one language to another. Example: *animate/inanimate*; *android* (men, gods)/*metandroid* (women, animals, things).

- Roland Barthes, *The Neuter*

Education in a technological world of replaceable and expendable parts is neuter. Technology needs not people or minds but “hands.”

- Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*

An unsettling reversal takes place partway through Gaston Leroux's 1909-1910 serial *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, when its male hero becomes its sacrificial feminine victim. The plot of the novel is almost too well-known to rehearse here: Raoul de Chagny finds, miraculously, his lost childhood love, the singer Christine Daaé, in the Palais Garnier; their mutual rediscovery is threatened and deferred by two conjoined forces – the manufactured and spectacular rise of Christine as a great diva, and the possessive love felt for Christine by the backstage engineer of her success, Erik, the titular Phantom. The novel, whose pace and structure are borrowed from Leroux's other works, the hybrid *romans-à-enigme-cum-newspaper-procedurals* *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* and *Le Parfum de la dame en noir*, takes the form of a double investigation. In the past, Raoul seeks to discover the identity of Christine's voice coach and paramour, while in the frame narrative an investigative reporter named Gaston Leroux (taking the place of his fictional detective-journalist doppelganger Rouletabille) seeks to discover what really happened in the course of Raoul's case, and in so doing to demonstrate that, as the incipit puts it bluntly, “Le fantôme de l'Opéra a existé.”<sup>470</sup> Apparently – and as a century of readings and adaptations have tended to assume – the key structure in the novel is the love triangle between Raoul, Christine, and Erik, in which the two males (Raoul and Erik) struggle for the soul and affections of the beautiful Christine. Indeed, the role of Erik is normally considered to be the compellingly masculine lead in the narrative (witness the recent casting of Gerard Butler in the part, which proved his market value as a male object of desire, which would be epitomized, most compellingly and perhaps itself unsettlingly, in his performance as the hyper-masculine Leonidas in the homosocial orgy 300).

Instead, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* inaugurates, here in a triumphant mode, the homosexualization of desire, and in so doing provides a disciplinary model that teaches its audience how to be good operagoers – and, most importantly, how this form of good opera-going constitutes a mode of walking out of the opera house, without feeling compelled to take an Orphic glance backwards. In the *mise-en-scène* of the Broadway *Phantom* by Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, Raoul begins the first act seated in the audience, demonstrating that his actions in the diegesis of the musical are explicitly meant to describe and define the extradiegetic relationship between the audience members and the music-drama they are

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<sup>470</sup> Gaston Leroux, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1959) 7. Hereafter cited as FO.

called to witness, or that the audience is a necessary part of this diegesis precisely inasmuch as the narrative will cause an unbridgeable rift between audience and stage to emerge. In this novel, all the characters are revealed to be as trans-gendered, with their gender coming to them elsewhere and attached to their bodies through various fantastic, technological, and otherwise pedagogical means; as such, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* touches upon a problem peculiar to opera, the production of a cry from beyond human divisions of gender or other concerns that Poizat has described as “hors-sexe” or “trans-sexual.” But the odd genderings at work in Leroux’s novel go further, though, than simply suggesting that everyone is equally homosexualized or that everyone engages somewhat self-consciously in a Butlerian gender-performance in the same way. Instead, Leroux defines two different modes of transgenering, and this difference turns out to be that which fatally separates the two heroes from the antihero: the successfully fetishitic, and thus only temporarily transgendered or transgendered up to a point, practice of Raoul and Christine, and the unsuccessfully or radically fetishistic, and thus constantly, productively, and disturbingly transgendered, practice of Erik. Leroux’s novel, as we will see, participates in this strange naturalization of a denaturalized gender, in which gender is naturalized only as supplemental, prosthetic, and manufactured – and in which some bodies are, tragically, more naturally technological (more naturally natural) than others. In other words, the novel first *denaturalizes* maleness and femaleness by making them the creations of fetishistically mediated performances; it then *renaturalizes* masculinity and femininity by making them the degree to which a certain body is able to perform its gender properly.

This reading of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* suggests that arguments based on revealing the manufacture of gender or its “denaturalization” are insufficiently critical: in fact, the knowledge that we are all transgendered is necessary for the system that differentiates explicitly between two forms of denaturalization to work, for the remainder of this denaturalizing operation to itself become re-naturalized as a mystical biology in which not anatomy, but the capacity to successfully re-anatomize oneself, is destiny. This reading becomes more urgent because *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* – remediated over and over in post-operatic media such as film and pop music – frames the relation between 20<sup>th</sup> century media and dying medium of opera, which has now served its purpose. If we have any sympathy for Erik, we must take time to notice how coldly and efficiently the plot renders him unnecessary, how readily Christine and Raoul form a perfect coupling, a relationship without relation since they are only reflections of each other: their love is purely, infinitely regressive. Because Christine and Raoul are able to capitalize on their fetishistic doubling of each other, their mutual and closed self-involvement for the first time enables them to exit the Stygian space of the opera house without even remembering that some phantom or revenant, some Euridyce, may be following behind them. *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* institutes a new way of attending (to) opera by situating it in a strangely transgendered world in which the homosexual “male/female” couple uses their precisely mirrored desire to close themselves off from the Phantom’s feminized voice, even as this voice brings them together and gives its endorsement to their relationship (or their lack of a relationship). However, since the Phantom’s voice is precisely that to which we have deafened ourselves, it may be anywhere. Perhaps, for the first time, Orpheus, by neglecting to accomplish his tragic backwards glance, doesn’t quite manage to return Euridyce to her proper place amongst the dead.

### **In which the “Amateur des Trappes” Loses His “Maîtrise”**

“Et cela, dans les dessous de l’Opéra, c’est-à-dire au pays même de la fantasmagorie !”

“mais, Dieu merci ! je suis d’un pays où l’on aime trop le fantastique pour ne point le connaître à fond et je l’avais moi-même trop étudié jadis : avec les trucs les plus simples, quelqu’un qui connaît son métier peut faire travailler la pauvre imagination humaine.”

“Comprenez-vous ce mot *clapoter* ?... *C’est un mot que l’on entend avec la langue !...* La langue se tire hors de la bouche pour mieux l’écouter !”

- Extracts from the Persian’s journal

On thumbing through the pages of Leroux’s novel, the reader might be struck by a sudden and difficult to categorize, even peculiarly difficult to notice, re-allotment of gender roles in the text. Raoul first learns of the Phantom at a costume party, where the Phantom, famously, appears as a real fake: dressed as the Red Death from Poe’s eponymous story, he stuns everyone with his hyper-realistic costume, “un immense chapeau à plumes sur une tête de mort.”<sup>471</sup> But his mask is not a mask, and “l’homme à la tête de mort” is actually the man with the dead man’s head, the man whose true face is that of a skeleton. And this costume literally should go to the head of the novel’s replaying of the classic symbolic artifice of the masked ball, in which, as a rule, everyone’s disguise reveals their true identity. In particular, the reference to Poe’s fable – a sort of Lacanian correction of the *Decameron*, as if that were really necessary – signals that the truth of the game lies in the disguise. Poe’s nobles retreat into the safety of a castle while the world around them burns with plague; to distract themselves, to establish themselves as safely separated from the threat of bodily decay, they throw a masquerade ball, whose crowning theme is that of the plague, the Red Death, itself. At the height of the masquerade, the plague reveals itself to have infected the castle. In the wish-fulfillment of the dream, the corrosive and pervasive power of what has been foreclosed makes itself felt more urgently, more terrifyingly. This is, and not by chance, the core of Erik’s lesson to Christine when he takes off his everyday mask and shows her his even-more-everyday face: “Tu crois peut-être que j’ai encore un masque, hein ? et que ça... ça ! ma tête, c’est un masque ? [...] apprend que je suis fait entièrement avec de la mort !”<sup>472</sup>

The Phantom’s mask signals that the mask becomes the sign of an allegorical identity by symbolically orienting or framing the body, and that the that cannot be looked at in any other way than through the alibi of a masquerade. The Phantom’s mask itself has a history: “mon père, lui, ne m’a jamais vu” and “ma mere, pour ne plus me voir, m’a fait cadeau en pleurant, de mon premier masque !”<sup>473</sup> This is a very strange family scene: although the father is expected to reject the son (otherwise the Oedipal rivalry could not begin its melodrama), here the mother rejects the son, precisely where she ought to welcome him, as her temporary, and fetishized, substitute phallus. Incredibly, not only does the mother refuse the son as phallic, but she also gives him his first gift – the gift of a phallus-substitute, a prosthetic, a neutral object covering up the lack that literally stares her in the face. In other words, the mother greets Erik not as a son, but as a daughter, instilling in him (as Maria Torok describes) with penis envy by violently covering him with the mark of his inadequacy. Biology, at first glance, is hardly destiny, since a son can originally appear as a daughter: the truth of the Phantom, at the first level of the novel, is the accident of his transsexuality (or his transgendering).

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<sup>471</sup> FO 123.

<sup>472</sup> FO 174.

<sup>473</sup> FO 174.

Following the centrality of the Phantom's mask – which is unbelievable, as it inspires everybody to “believe” that his true face is elsewhere rather than to confront the self-evidence of his mutilation – we must watch out for what the other costumes at the masked ball reveal about the various bodily deformities, and corresponding cover-ups or cosmetic interventions, bared by the other party-goers. Here the text's most unsettling effect comes into play. Silently, in a way that is not properly arguable or observable (since, in the words of that fundamental catechism intoned by all observers of foreign languages, grammatical gender is unimportant and has no relation to natural gender), the text redistributes its pronouns. Erik, dressed as “la Mort rouge,” erupts in an extended cruising sequence between Raoul and Christine, who both also attend the masked ball; in the next scenes, Christine will lead Raoul around the opera house (occasionally disappearing into the mirror of her dressing room to unmask Erik), allowing them to share confessions of love and relate to each other some key details of the plot (and for Erik to eavesdrop on them, making his plot to kidnap Christine even more urgent). Raoul, desperate to solve the mystery of who, “renseigné sur la légende chère au vieux Daaé, en use à ce point que la jeune fille n'est plus entre ses mains qu'un instrument sans defense qu'il fait vibrer à son gré ?”,<sup>474</sup> chooses, “à tout hasard,” “un domino blanc” as his costume.<sup>475</sup> This “chance” decision obeys the orders both of the novel's logic – he and Christine must have mirroring costumes – and Christine's explicit demand: she sent him a note specifying the costume, choreographing their encounter.<sup>476</sup> Arriving at the masquerade ball,

Il s'accota à la porte et attendit. Il n'attendit point longtemps. Un domino noir passa, qui lui serra rapidement le bout des doigts. Il comprit que c'était elle.

Il suivit.

“C'est vous, Christine ?” demanda-t-il entre ses dents.

Le domino se retourna vivement et leva le doigt jusqu'à la hauteur de ses lèvres pour lui recommander sans doute de ne plus repeater son nom.

Raoul continua de suivre en silence.<sup>477</sup>

As if to underline the logic of the ball – in which names are held in abeyance so that masks can directly, immediately signify the bodies they cover *en travesti* – Christine's interdiction of names will soon be echoed by a corresponding textual interdiction, when she will later admonish Raoul that “Il faut oublier la *voix d'homme* et ne plus vous souvenir même de son nom...”<sup>478</sup> Christine is speaking in tongues here; after all, Leroux has entitled the chapter in which she pronounces these words IL FAUT OUBLIER LE NOM DE “LA VOIX D'HOMME.”<sup>479</sup> In another masquerade, another logic, another interdiction, speaks as Christine, the interdiction of the novel itself.

Forget “Erik,” forget “Christine,” then, forget those names that symbolically and too easily sort the players into genders and orient the desires of the love triangle in an all-too-recognizable way. Instead, in the three-way pursuit of this sequence, we will follow “le

<sup>474</sup> FO 120.

<sup>475</sup> FO 121.

<sup>476</sup> The particular directive reads: “Mettez-vous en domino blanc, bien masqué. Sur ma vie, qu'on ne vous reconnaisse pas. Christine.” See FO 118.

<sup>477</sup> FO 122.

<sup>478</sup> FO 138.

<sup>479</sup> FO 132.

domino noir,” “le domino blanc,” and “la Mort rouge.” (The colors themselves are telling: the black-and-white complementarity of Raoul and Christine interrupted by the carmine trace of Erik’s woundedness – the blood flow, in opera, always a mask for menstruation, for feminine (re)productivity and creativity.<sup>480</sup>) These positional markers will change over the course of the game, but their overall logic will remain the same. Raoul is confronted with the appearance of the Phantom: “Il voulut se précipiter, oubliant Christine : mais le domino noir, qui paraissait en proie, lui aussi, à un étrange émoi, lui avait pris le bras et l’entraînait... l’entraînait loin du foyer, hors de cette foule démoniaque où passait la Mort rouge...”<sup>481</sup> (and note how both dominos are stressed as *lui*). After leaving the ball, “À chaque instant, le domino noir se retournait et il lui sembla sans doute, par deux fois, apercevoir quelque chose qui l’épouvantait, car il précipita encore sa marche et celle de Raoul somme s’ils étaient poursuivis.”<sup>482</sup> Finally, “Le domino noir poussa la porte d’une loge et fit signe au domino blanc d’y pénétrer derrière lui.”<sup>483</sup> The whole chase, the whole scene of seduction, the whole pursuit, the whole Orphic drama of the escape from the underworld (“Pour quel enfer repartez-vous, mystérieuse madame ?”<sup>484</sup>), has taken place between two males. “Lui aussi,” indeed: the heterosexual couple, presumably defined by a non-coincidence of the pronouns that attach to each partner, suddenly has come entirely under the empire of the masculine (grammatical?) gender.

As Christine and Raoul discuss her affair with the Phantom, new appellations for Christine are invented, all of which “forget her name” to come up with new reasons to refer to her in the masculine case. Raoul has already metonymized Christine as “un instrument”; she will soon do the same: “la Voix savait exactement à quel point mon père, en mourant, m’avait laissée de mes travaux et de quelle simple méthode aussi il avait usé ; et ainsi, me rappelant ou, plutôt, mon organe se rappelant toutes les leçons passées [...]”<sup>485</sup> As Christine tries on the explicitly phallic symbol of “mon organe,” she also begins to tie the Phantom to “la Voix,” which allows the text to mask him – to reveal his true transgendered nature – as a she. Christine exclaims: “Hélas ! on ne trompe pas la Voix !... Elle vous avait bien reconnu, elle !... Et la voix était jalouse !... Les deux jours suivants, elle me fit des scènes atroces... Elle me disait : ‘Vous l’aimez !’”<sup>486</sup> Immediately after the masked ball, the narration equates “la Voix” to “la Mort rouge,” through their shared capacity to penetrate walls, to pass through presumably impermeable barriers: “Un chant sourd qui semblait sortir des murailles... [...] on distingua une voix... une très belle et très douce et très captivante voix... mais tant de douceur restait cependant male et ainsi pouvait-on juger que cette voix n’appartenait point à une femme... La voix s’approchait toujours... elle dépassa la muraille... elle arriva... et la voix maintenant *était dans la pièce*.”<sup>487</sup> Here, the text comments on its own game of revealing and concealing; if the name “Erik” is given voice in the text as “elle,” this is not to conceal the fact that the logic of this voicing does not “appartient à une femme.” This is a text of

<sup>480</sup> See, for instance, *Ouw* 96-117. Other commentators, including Isabelle Stengers and Jerrod Hogle, have discussed the “uterine” character of the Phantom’s hidden domain beneath (and inside) the Palais Garnier.

<sup>481</sup> *FO* 123-4.

<sup>482</sup> *FO* 124.

<sup>483</sup> *FO* 124.

<sup>484</sup> *FO* 126.

<sup>485</sup> *FO* 153.

<sup>486</sup> *FO* 156.

<sup>487</sup> *FO* 129.

masquerade, of gender as performance, of all bodies as implicitly transgendered or regendered: no character, no character's body, can biologically master his or her gender (least of all the Phantom, whose feminine gender is thrust upon him); instead, gender follows from the position the character occupies in the technological, fantastic pursuits of the text.

Erik receives one more feminine name, again from Christine. In her confession to Raoul – that she has seen the Phantom's true face – she exclaims: “Oh ! Raoul, la chose ! comment ne plus voir la chose ! si mes oreilles sont à jamais pleines de ses cris, mes yeux sont à jamais hantés de son visage ! Quelle image ! Comment ne plus la voir et comment vous la faire voir ?”<sup>488</sup> Again, the text explicitly links these new epithets – “la chose,” “l'image” – to the masquerade: “Encore avez-vous vu promener, au dernier bal masqué, ‘la Mort rouge’ ! Mais toutes ces têtes de mort-là étaient immobiles, et leur muette horreur ne vivait pas !”<sup>489</sup> (In another turn of the doubling game, witnessing the Phantom's face feminizes the viewer, here re-feminizing Christine: “Je devais être, collée contre le mur, l'image même de l'Épouvante comme il était celle de la Hideur.”<sup>490</sup>) In this text, we must “forget” names; instead, it is the pronouns that reveal, immediately, the real sexes of the bodies who carry the unnecessary names – and the rhetoric of this revelation is also telling, since pronouns are themselves prosthetic, universally exchangeable attachments that we normally read as purely accidental in their relationship to the real thing, the noun, that they stand in for and circulate. Christine's body, called such by her pronouns, is “un organe,” “un instrument”; Erik's “une image,” “une voix,” “une chose.” Christine's is a symbolized, ordered, instrumentalized body; Erik's is already slipping into the pre-historic uterine void of the inchoate maternal voice – the voice of “la chose,” or even of the “rien.”<sup>491</sup>

The masked ball sequence concludes a few days later, as Christine leads Raoul out of the labyrinths of the opera and onto the roof of the Palais Garnier. In passing from the underworld into the night air, Raoul follows Christine, and is followed by Erik, although “Raoul, lui, ne s'aperçut de rien, car, quand il avait Christine devant lui, rien ne l'intéressait de ce qui se passait derrière.”<sup>492</sup> The Orpheus myth is, of course, and as Abbate, Koestenbaum, Grover-Friedlander, and Cavarero have explored, the founding myth of opera. Here Leroux grandly revises that myth: Christine and Raoul, the happy, apparently heterosexual couple emerge from the dark of the opera, and they are so preoccupied in their own twinning that they don't even remember to look back – and thus to lose – the figure behind them, the thing/voice/image. But here, it is two male bodies, albeit male bodies outfitted with a set of heterosexualized prosthetic genitals, that leave the opera, and that leave behind the only female body around, that is, Erik's body. Two male Orpheuses (two differently-gendered male Orpheuses, yes, but everything is possible in this technological dreamworld), and one female Euridyce (one male female Euridyce, that is, but one that is fundamentally an uncertain body dressed in a feminine voice, in turn dressed in the

<sup>488</sup> FO 172.

<sup>489</sup> FO 172.

<sup>490</sup> FO 172.

<sup>491</sup> The play of pronouns and grammatical genders continues throughout the book, although not as explicitly as in the cruising sequence centered around the masquerade. For instance, in the narrator's (“Leroux's”) conclusion, we read that “[Erik] dut cacher son génie ou *faire des tours avec*, quand, avec un visage ordinaire, il eût été l'un des plus nobles de la race humaine !” (FO 342). Were the feminine objects that stood in for his body replaced with masculine objects (“*un visage*”), he could have become a male member (“un”) of the human race.

<sup>492</sup> FO 149

apparatus of maleness): this is the new version of opera's originary myth presented by Leroux. And Christine and Raoul, our homosexual couple, emerge not into the light of day, but into something much stranger, "un soir enflammé de printemps,"<sup>493</sup> a twilight, that is. They wake up, like Dntel's sleeper, into another dream, perhaps a dream even more indistinguishable from the technological shocks that threatened to disturb it, for "L'ombre derrière eux, toujours fidèle à leurs pas, avait surgi, s'aplatissant sur les toits, s'allongeant avec des mouvements d'ailes noires, aux carrefours des ruelles de fer, tournant autour des bassins, contournant, silencieuse, les dômes."<sup>494</sup> The Phantom is with them, now generalized into a ubiquitous field of shadow, a feminine doubling that throws every object into relief, and we cannot ever be sure that this phantom is not haunting the depths that structure and render visible the surface of this new world, this world of pure surface (now that shadow, depth itself, has "flattened itself out" into the plane of appearances), the exo-operatic universe...

Grover-Friedlander discusses how *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* figures the presence of opera, after its death, in the media constellation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This figure, in its essence, "reflects on the [filmic] *medium's* very attraction to opera, [...] the power of and quest for the operatic voice."<sup>495</sup> Cavell and Adorno also note that the consistency of 20<sup>th</sup> century media (epitomized by film) structures itself around the postmortem inconsistency of opera. Indeed, the real-life Edison structured his engineering desire around the space, or the current absence, of opera, declaring "I want to give grand opera" in the *New York Times* in 1910.<sup>496</sup> Paradoxically, while in silent adaptations of *Le Fantôme*, "the essence of opera as excessive, fatal, and anxiety-ridden has been carved into the expressive quality of the film itself"<sup>497</sup>; however, as film develops, "sound, music, voice, and speech in later film not only create greater realism and assist narrative continuity but also serve to cover the medium's uneasiness and anxiety."<sup>498</sup> In other words, film history is the sequential development of fetishistic supplements with which film covers up its fundamental attraction to opera, until film can appear to have walked away from opera entirely.<sup>499</sup> Here is the Hadaly effect repeating itself at the macroscopic level of media institutions. Jerrod Hogle observes that all the "basic and complex elements in the original *Phantom* narrative" "have 'progressed' from being 'undergrounded' but suggested by Gaston Leroux to being largely deleted or significantly altered in most of the film, stage, and other versions"<sup>500</sup>; to this thematic silencing of the quieted but still disquieting elements of the novel we must add a structural, technological, and mediatised muting of the voice of opera, which is allowed to haunt media only as an already-exorcised and voiceless specter.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>493</sup> FO 149.

<sup>494</sup> FO 149.

<sup>495</sup> Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 21. Hereafter cited as *VA*.

<sup>496</sup> *VA* 19.

<sup>497</sup> *VA* 32.

<sup>498</sup> *VA* 22.

<sup>499</sup> For Grover-Friedlander, "true attraction is never moderate" (*VA* 2); any situation of relating between media necessarily includes a transfer, an exchange of attributes, leaving no partner untroubled.

<sup>500</sup> Jerrod Hogle, *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothic in Leroux's Novel and Its Progeny* (New York: Palgrave, 2002) 36.

<sup>501</sup> Grover-Friedlander offers an extended discussion of this silencing haunting in her discussion of *Callas Forever* in *Operatic Afterlives*.



Opera's haunting, *Le Fantôme's* haunting, of film, generalizes itself across all 20<sup>th</sup>-century media. The very logic of transsexual, transgendered homosexuality epitomized by Christine and Raoul becomes the structure of our techno-fetishistic universe. Like Gainsbourg's exasperated boyfriend confronting his girlfriend's phallic self-sufficiency once she's been provided with the vibrator that has exactly the same consistency as his penis on the plane of technological fantasy, Christine and Raoul, two true children of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are equally gifted with different but interchangeable fetish-objects that masculinize them in compatible ways, a pair of "organes" *au masculin*. The performance of their love becomes the constant repression of their mutual attractions to Erik, as they must constantly ward off the threat of becoming indistinguishable from the truth about their own bodies that Erik represents. Erik's fetishes – his magnificent voice that is so self-evidently stage-managed as a *coup de théâtre*, his strange and deadly lasso (learned from his travels in lands further to the East than the East itself – for Erik is doubly-Orientalized, doubly-feminized, this *double exoticism* mirroring and revealing the doubled nature of gender performance in the novel<sup>502</sup>), and above all his mask, his mask that is so obviously a mask – are all too legible as fetishes, and for that very reason they make the fetishistic supplementation at work in the characters of Christine and Raoul invisible, even as they are so easily mobilized to sell the *Fantôme* legend to ever-wider audiences (Erik's mask becomes the emblematic image promoting Lloyd Weber's musical).

This logic is omnipresent in *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, as in the paradigmatic scene of Christine's seduction by the Phantom, which forms part of the extended sequence of Raoul and Christine's pursuits of each other: Raoul, hidden in Christine's dressing room, watches as she "s'avavançait vers le fond de la loge dont tout le pan était occupé par une grande glace qui lui renvoyait son image," hiding Raoul from her since "il était tout à fait derrière elle et entièrement masqué par elle." "Christine marchait toujours vers son image et son image descendait vers elle. Les deux Christine – le corps et l'image – finirent par se toucher, se fondre, et Raoul étendit le bras pour les saisir d'un coup toutes les deux. Mais, par une sorte de miracle éblouissant qui le fit chanceler, Raoul fut tout à coup rejeté en arrière [...] Enfin, tout redevint immobile et il se vit, lui, dans la glace."<sup>503</sup> The Phantom, "l'amateur des trappes," has stage-managed this scene: the mirror is "really" a door into the series of secret corridors that run throughout the walls of the Palais Garnier. But what if it *isn't*? If this text is so self-consciously a hall of mirrors – as Christine says, "Évidemment, il devait y avoir là un effet de glaces..."<sup>504</sup> – what if we take Christine's narcissism seriously? That is, what if the space behind the mirror, in which the figure we presume to be her lover is waiting, is only an alibi distracting us from the real dynamics of her desire, that aims not at some other object hidden in a space invisible to her and unplumbable in its depths, but instead only at the mirror, at her reflection in its obvious correspondence to herself – bearing in mind, again,

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<sup>502</sup> Erik is born in Rouen, but is exiled to the East for his deformity; after arriving in Persia and becoming court architect, he is exiled from the East for his prodigiousness; after traveling to Asia Minor, he ends up in Constantinople, where the drama repeats itself. There "C'est encore lui qui eut cette imagination de fabriquer des automates habillés comme le prince et ressemblant à s'y méprendre au prince lui-même, automates qui faisaient croire que le chef des croyants se tenait dans un endroit, éveillé, quand il reposait dans un autre" (FO 341). In other words, Erik installs uncannily doubling at the site of uncannily doubling itself; he re-fantasizes the psychoanalytic fantasy of the uncanny.

<sup>503</sup> FO 131.

<sup>504</sup> FO 158.

that her reflection is also the reflection of Raoul (with Christine in front of him, he doesn't need to see anything else)? The Phantom, like the reader, thinks that Christine is looking through the mirror at his hidden depths, but what if Christine is content with her own narcissistic image, another equivalent form of her homosexual passion for Raoul?

The Phantom's "coup de maître"<sup>505</sup> instead demonstrates only his amateur status, for his trick has been made subsidiary to a much more devious trick, the one that distracts us all from the so spectacularly self-evident dynamics of the scene. Raoul and Christine share a form of homosexual desire that has so often been condemned by Western culture: as purely narcissistic, as an unfiltered and relentless denial of the other, the foundation of a purely virtual sham sociability without the negotiation between self and other that ought to define the space of the social. And if the Phantom thinks that he has successfully secreted Christine away, in fact his mirror only serves to generalize her further; as the secret door opens and closes, Raoul sees "non plus deux, mais quatre, huit, vingt Christine"<sup>506</sup> – a proliferation of images that both attests to the castration of the body underneath those images, its transgressing, and into the ease with which the simplest of technologies can extend that body-become-image farther than ever before. (One telling piece of evidence that the Phantom and Raoul/Christine belong to two different discursive categories is that the text never ceases to reflect and refract Raoul and Christine, constantly bringing them face-to-face with their images in various mirrors, but there are no mirrors in Erik's personal dwelling: "Je remarquai que nulle part, dans cet appartement, il n'y avait des glaces,"<sup>507</sup> Christine remarks. And I think that we can trust Christine to have a very keen eye when it comes to mirrors.)

The novel includes one scene where we see – or do we? – the mirror break. The Phantom finally destroys Carlotta, the reigning diva of the Palais Garnier whose role as Marguerite the Phantom had intended for Christine, during a performance of Gounod's *Faust*. Carlotta triumphs in the première, becoming "sûre d'elle, sûre de ses amis dans la salle, sûre de sa voix et de son succès" in a flawless rendition of the Jewel Song<sup>508</sup> (remember it? – "*Ab ! je ris de me voir si belle dans ce miroir !*"); only then does the Phantom release his most devilish trick, something that the journalistic narrator almost cannot bring himself to report: "Son duo avec Faust semblait lui préparer un nouveau succès, quand survint tout à coup... quelque chose d'effroyable. [...] À ce moment donc... à ce moment juste... se produisit quelque chose... j'ai dit quelque chose d'effroyable..."<sup>509</sup> At this moment... at this very moment... the text pulls off a convincing coup de théâtre, by fast-forwarding the narration momentarily, so that whatever happened is only experience in retrospect by the reader (so notice, now, that the same ellipses that pointed towards a tantalizingly close future moment in the narration now, asymptotically, point towards the same moment in retrospect – the novel quite explicitly informs its reader that the most important event in this scene will quite rigorously never be represented, nor experienced, but instead only represented as previously experienced, as remediated, or as a reenactment of the traumatic moment). Here, just as Carlotta's song celebrating her appearance in the mirror literally breaks, the mirror of the novel's "journalistic"-mimetic structure of representation breaks as well:

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<sup>505</sup> FO 179.

<sup>506</sup> FO 131.

<sup>507</sup> FO 170.

<sup>508</sup> FO 103.

<sup>509</sup> FO 103.

Spectateurs et spectatrices se regardent comme pour se demander les uns aux autres l'explication d'un aussi inattendu phénomène... Le visage de Carlotta exprime la plus atroce douleur, ses yeux semblent hantés par la folie. La pauvre femme s'est redressée, la bouche encore entrouverte, ayant fini de laisser passer 'cette voix solitaire qui chantait dans son cœur...' Mais cette bouche ne chantait plus... *elle n'osait plus une parole, plus un son...*

Car cette bouche créée pour l'harmonie, cet instrument agile qui n'avait jamais failli, organe magnifique, générateur des plus belles sonorités, des plus difficiles accords, des plus molles modulations, des rythmes le plus ardents, sublime mécanique humaine à laquelle il ne manquait, pour être divine, que le feu du ciel qui, seul, donne la véritable émotion et soulève les âmes... cette bouche avait laissé passer...

De cette bouche s'était échappé...

... *Un crapaud!* [...]

Par où est-il entré? Comment s'était-il accroupi sur la langue? Les pattes de derrière repliées, pour bondir plus haut et plus loin, sournoisement, il était sorti du larynx et... couac!

Couac! Couac! ... Ah! le terrible couac!

Car vous pensez bien qu'il ne faut parler de ce crapaud qu'au figuré. On ne le voyait pas mais, par l'enfer! on l'entendait. Couac!<sup>510</sup>

Following the play of pronouns, we notice first that the text takes pains to masculinize the audience ("les uns aux autres") while maintaining their sexual difference from each other ("spectateurs et spectatrices"); meanwhile, Carlotta's gender is in flux: her mouth is masculinized as, as we've seen with Christine, an "instrument" and a "générateur," even as it becomes more and more emphatically "*une* bouche," while her art, meanwhile, becomes purely technological, without the recognizably "human" soul that characterizes Christine's singing or Raoul's longing (apparently she learned singing by the Suzuki method).

The Phantom re-educates Carlotta as a singer, putting the "Couac!" into her mouth, in a performance that quite literally brings the house down. (In a telling echo, the prosthetizing power of the Phantom, in his role of "Ange de la Musique," Christine's mysterious vocal coach, transplanted a divine voice into a body that, in the words of ballet girl Meg Giry, only six months ago "chantait comme un clou!"<sup>511</sup> The similarity between "clou" and "couac" suggests that both of them are separable technologies; Carlotta's "Couac!" and Christine's "clou" – like Carlotta's flawless voice and Christine's even better voice – are prostheses being plugged indifferently into a series of bodies, not natural expressions of the characters of those bodies.) But Erik also brings Gaston's journalistic pretensions crashing down around him. Leroux's narration insists – at this famous moment where the prosthetic vocal object ought to make its appearance – that this "crapaud" can only be spoken of "qu'à figuré." Astonishingly, the novel here insists on the failure of its hyper-naturalist (in its capacity to register the truth of reality) journalistic mode, stating overtly that the moment we had hoped it to most explicitly and immediately witness is only knowable as figured. Hence the bizarre manipulation of narrative time, which allows for Carlotta's vocal failure to appear only as simultaneously *pre-figured* and *re-figured* after the fact. And why should this sound be "unspeakable," if it is, after all, a vocal act, an instance of the voice?

Leroux's narration insists that the "Couac!" is irreducible to its mediation because it is not to be seen but, by the devil! *heard*. Suddenly it appears that this entire novel, a novel

<sup>510</sup> FO 104.

<sup>511</sup> FO 25.

purporting to be about the opera, is in fact – by its very design – absolutely silent, absolutely mute, absolutely non-vocal. *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, then, fetishistically covers over the aural with the specular, by means of a peculiar figuration of the aural that works, in advance and in retrospect, to reduce it to a non-auditory experience. The text is a masquerade, grafting its hieroglyphic auditory in the place of what might otherwise be vocal expression. And if its fantasy logically includes the scene of Carlotta's terrifying failure – the all-too-immediate illustration of the principle that one's voice is never entirely one's own and that the diva's confidence in the security of her own programming is an example of hubris on a Classical scale – it can only include this moment, one that is necessary to its plainly Faustian moral (we should leave the opera house lest its fantasies drive us to reach above our properly human grasp), as a moment that cannot be fantasized. Carlotta's breakdown propels the engine of the text's fantasy even as it cannot be comprehended, even experienced, from within the functioning of that fantasy.

Furthermore, by putting a frog in Carlotta's throat, Erik reveals that that throat, Carlotta's divine instrument, has never been anything but an organ, and a mechanically-reproductive organ at that, grafted onto her body. In other words, Erik reveals that Carlotta is his soulmate. Carlotta's neurosis, her spectacular, tantrum-throwing egotism, is clearly rooted in the fact that she knows all too well that she is, as Erik describes her, a "magnifique et banal instrument."<sup>512</sup> The banality of vocal instrumentalization is exactly what's at stake here. Carlotta is not blissfully unaware of her creation as a technological artifact, as Christine and Raoul manage most of the time to be; instead, she appears as shrewdly, cannily conscious of the production of the various fantasies that surround her.<sup>513</sup> These fantasies begin with her name, which (fictionally, most likely) labels her as being "from somewhere else, as if exile were necessary for her to become famous," one of the key elements of our diva fantasy according to Clément: "Foreigners are necessary to assume the strangeness of a woman who is not really a woman, the perfect disembodied mannequin, whose voice is all that is alive."<sup>514</sup> Peculiarly, the Phantom's letters to the Opera directors expressing his intense distaste for Carlotta appear far less searing than the narrator Gaston's excoriations of Carlotta: "Où était ton âme, ô Carlotta ? [...] Où ton âme, quand, devant les maîtres assemblés chez un de tes amants, tu faisais résonner cet instrument docile, don't le merveilleux était qu'il chantait avec la même perfection indifférente le sublime amour et la plus basse orgie ?"<sup>515</sup> Carlotta fails as a singer because her mechanical production is too efficient, because it reveals no failure – no moment of "breakdown" in which her "soul" would betray herself in preferring, for instance, sublime love to the basest orgy or vice-versa. No wonder, then, that the narrator's final insult is that Carlotta's performance in *Faust* "n'était plus Marguerite, c'était Carmen"<sup>516</sup> – was, perhaps, song, as radically indifferent, as weightlessly echoing between the human and the machine, the male and the female, the ideal and the base.

If Carlotta, then, is the "perfect" automaton, Christine – who, after all, is just as ventriloquized by the Phantom as Carlotta is – must be preferable in this text's logic because

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<sup>512</sup> FO 52.

<sup>513</sup> Carlotta pays careful attention to the journalistic media – thus to Gaston/Leroux's own textual and diegetically remediating labor – monitoring it shrewdly and responding appropriately. See FO 94-5.

<sup>514</sup> OUW 30.

<sup>515</sup> FO 96.

<sup>516</sup> FO 103.

she is an *imperfect* automaton, because her machinery is programmed to break down at an opportune moment, because she fails in the correct way, towards the ends of humanity. “Après de cette Marguerite un peu trop splendidement matérielle qu’était la Carlotta,” Christine, after appearing as Carlotta’s understudy, “semblait avoir rendu l’âme”: Carlotta’s technique holds stubbornly to its material mechanicity while Christine’s technique entails a violently and ostentatiously spiritual breakdown.<sup>517</sup> Christine, then, is a properly human figuration of the technical; her encounter with the various prosthetic voices offered her by the Phantom (and by her father) drives the motor of the plot, but only to turn it towards its proper ends – she and Raoul will escape, finally, to a presumably blissful afterlife in “[la] silencieuse Scandinavie,”<sup>518</sup> in the voiceless universe that they never really left despite their long careers in the opera. Carlotta’s drive to hold to her identity as mechanical, and not to fit into the humanist aesthetics of Leroux’s program, makes her the female face of the Phantom, another body that was born in immolation, in deprivation, of the human quality that ought to have defined her gender: “La Carlotta n’avait ni cœur ni âme. Ce n’était qu’un instrument ! certes, un merveilleux instrument.”<sup>519</sup> That is, her soul is radically inhuman, in the same way that Erik’s body is radically inhuman; both are equally fascinating, for that matter. But why don’t we become fascinated by Carlotta’s impossible, inhuman suffering – for the text indeed forces her to suffer even as it refuses to accept her virtual affinity to Erik – in the same way that we become fascinated by Erik’s impossible, inhuman voice?

Poizat genealogically explores how opera has tended towards a voice beyond the human voice, the voice of the angel’s cry. In pre-Classical music this angelic voice was rigorously inhuman – without any characteristics, sexual or otherwise, and often sung by bodies without any place in the system of gender, that is, by the castrati; then, “With Mozart, opera ceases to be vocally asexual, angelic. And then with romanticism, the Angel becomes Woman, Woman driven to death,” woman taken, that is, beyond the boundaries of human experience.<sup>520</sup> In other words, Romantic opera seeks to redefine this inhuman element in song not as an independent modality of experience different from the meanings and values of the human, but instead as an intensive form of human experience, the category of human experience under extreme conditions, but must consequently associate this voice with the feminine, the already not-entirely-human. Grover-Friedlander reformulates Poizat’s claims by first redefining the “angelic” voice as instead, quite simply, “singing,” which is “independent of character and its utterance”<sup>521</sup>; for that reason, opera must be “[attracted] to liminal dramatic conditions, as these serve the expression of extreme singing,” beyond the voice’s origin in a character, a psychology, an affect, and a body.<sup>522</sup> Although Poizat formulates this angelic voice as originally “hors-sexe,” translated into English as “transsexual,” it becomes, if not exactly gendered, paradoxically sexed. This is not the only potential destiny for Angels of Music: Grover-Friedlander observes that Poizat, in “[formulating] the angelic as a silent core within human song to which that song strives,” could potentially arrive at “what is beyond song in song, what is sought for in song when reaching its utmost limit.” “Inhuman, transsexual, unheard-of,” this voice, in the cry, “is the outcome of the voice’s impossible quest to turn itself into a vocal object, detached from

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<sup>517</sup> FO 27, 26.

<sup>518</sup> FO 333.

<sup>519</sup> FO 95.

<sup>520</sup> AC 122.

<sup>521</sup> OA 15.

<sup>522</sup> OA 16.

signification and body.”<sup>523</sup> The last-minute detour back into sexed voicings is not a necessary one.

In *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra*, transgendered voicing is available to characters of all sorts of genders: if Carlotta has a cult of devoted fans, Erik is the “Ange de la Musique” promised to Christine and Raoul by Christine’s father. And Erik’s oddly, confusingly gendered voice is explicitly “une voix d’homme,” even as it confirms and emphasizes Erik’s unmannedness. Genderings always appear as transgenderings, supplementations of bodies that indiscriminately replace the bodies they adapt and adopt, without seeming to even notice the sexes they are overlaying: Christine and Raoul receive the feminine and masculine poles of a successfully fetishistic (that is, constantly and redemptively failing) masculine, homosexual identity and desire; Carlotta and Erik receive the feminine and masculine poles of a problematically non-functional (that is, too pure in its impurity) feminine, heterosexual identity and desire. Clément defines “song” as the “horror of bodies”<sup>524</sup>; something like that is going on here, where the four principals’ voices play no other function than to mask and neutralize their bodies or their genders – to silence their singing. In a way, Carlotta’s “Couac !” seems more trans-sexual than the angelic voice of Christine – since the “Couac !” comes from a body that is absolutely not her own. In turn, this voice can only be so disturbing to Carlotta inasmuch as she can recognize herself in its difference, inasmuch as she is prepared to consider completely unexpected and unprecedented sides of herself as aspects of her changing and developing identity, a capacity that the main characters of the plot do not share.

The novel, then, labors to establish a dichotomy between two kinds of transsexuality. On the one hand, there are the perfectly-functioning, well-disciplined, and ultimately silencing transgenderings of Christine and Raoul, who, in the opera house, ought to learn that their genders are prosthetic by attending to the lessons of Carlotta and Erik. But instead, the two of them leave the opera house and retreat, like Frankenstein and his monster, to the entropic, heat-death wastes of the frozen North. On the other, there are the noisy, impassioned, and endlessly expressive transgenderings of Carlotta and Erik, for both of whom the Palais Garnier will become a tomb: Carlotta dies onstage and Erik beneath it. Their tragic couple has been identified, by the audience, following the deeply involved spectators, Christine and Raoul, as too extreme, too reversible – in a word, simultaneously too mechanical yet, precisely *because* they are so mechanical, too unpredictable. In this world, Christine and Raoul, as the human interest of the story, never run off the rails of their desire; both Carlotta and Erik, however, find themselves constantly confronting desires, and thus modes of conceptualizing their own identities, that are eccentric to their expectations or characters. Christine and Raoul are saved by their cultivated disinterest in anything besides themselves, their love being just a prolongation of the mirror-game in which their desires perfectly line up with each other as equivalent modes of transgendering. Erik (and Carlotta), meanwhile, are doomed by their attraction to what is other than themselves, and by their capacity to be transgendered in a way that does not describe an accomplished passage, but instead a sustained series of crossings between genders.

Leroux rewrites the motto that “Biology is destiny,” but only to a point: in his novel, there are two modes of escaping one’s biological destiny, yet one of these modes seems to be more stably inscribed in particular bodies by the hand of fate. Do Christine and Raoul escape because they received a proper musical education from their shared father? Or were

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<sup>523</sup> OA 152.

<sup>524</sup> OUW 27

Christine and Raoul only able to hear the elder Daaé's myths correctly because of their already-decided biological affinity for successful fetishization? Although we cannot decisively resolve these questions in the case of Christine and Raoul, the text explicitly tells us that Carlotta was born without a soul and Erik without a face; in other words, the decidability of the transgenderings of Erik and Carlotta is turned to profit by leaving the transgenderings of Raoul and Christine open to interpretation. In other words, Erik and Carlotta are defined as *necessarily*, by the hand of fate, transgendered; consequently Raoul and Christine are only *incidentally* transgendered – the simple fact that their gender is just as much an effect of the text's generalized masquerade as the various assumed genders of Erik and Christine is unimportant, since, fundamentally speaking, transgendering is for them not a sustained modality of being but only a necessary detour.

Leroux repeats the necessary compromise made by fin-de-siècle sexologists confronted with the mystery of desire, made paradigmatically by Havelock Ellis in his *Sexual Inversion*. The aetiology of contrary sexual feelings in “wrong” bodies (itself a thesis of transgendering: the “woman's soul in a man's body”) was hotly contested by turn-of-the-century sexologists, who could not determine whether adult object-choice was based on accidental encounters in childhood or an innate, potentially degenerate or atavistic, biological drive. Ellis proposes to differentiate between natural inverts and naturally normal sexual subjects while maintaining that only the vicissitudes of development can cause any individual subject to become what he or she was always meant to be. Owing to a “greater indefiniteness in the aim of the sexual impulse,” however, anything can happen, either to inverts or normal cases.<sup>525</sup> All that remains to be judged is whether a particular accident of sexuality was the right accident or the wrong one, whether it is authentically inauthentic, in other words. This miraculous epistemological operation allows for desire to be naturalized even as it is demystified as an accidental inscription. More importantly, it leads to the ethical and social prescription that the invert should seek neither to “cure” himself and join the heterosexual world nor to follow his desires to their potentially dangerous ends, for the invert “may not have in him the making of *l'homme moyen sensuel*; he may have in him the making of a saint.”<sup>526</sup> Ellis brings sexology to its close by generalizing a silencing sublimation for Erik and the invert, and a healthy stilling of the noisy ghost of doubt about sexual identity for *hommes moyens sensuels* like Christine and Raoul, who, once they grow up, will discover what they've always been intended to be. And that will be the last word – quite literally the last word, before the Scandinavian silence eternally mutes their affair and imposes a final term on the journalism of Leroux's narrating amanuensis. Hence the perfect aspect of that phrase which epitomizes his narrative practice, “*Le fantôme de l'Opéra a existé.*” No live reporting on this phenomenon is imaginable.

And so, Christine and Raoul can leave the opera house without casting a glance behind them: for these lovers, nothing essential to their hearts or souls has been left behind. For that reason, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* presents a very well-articulated lesson plan for educating us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of allowing us to leave the opera as the form *par excellence* of our pedagogically-stimulating amusements behind. The very generalization of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* across the various media of the post-opera universe testifies to how effectively it has made a phantom out of opera, both generalizing opera and generalizing opera as dead, as silenced: “If we were made to hear a beyond in the work, we were also made to hear it as

<sup>525</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, third edition (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1908) 183. Hereafter cited as *SI*.

<sup>526</sup> *SI* 203.

silenced,” Grover-Friedlander writes.<sup>527</sup> So we will never be able to know, or at least to definitely establish, whether or not we are truly haunted by these phantoms. In a fantastic maneuver, *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* renders even the detour through the opera unnecessary, making opera into a side note to the side note on relating to technological entertainments that constitutes its plot. Christine and Raoul emerge into their twilight, leaving Erik behind, confident in both the stability of their transgendered identities and in the supplementarity of Erik’s more fraught or transformative identity, even though it was only through the encounter with Erik that they became what they had always been intended to be. Earlier we saw the sleepers of “(This Is) The Dream of Evan and Chan” awake, in a similar fashion, leaving the cabaret singer behind in the realms of their pop-music fantasies. That cabaret singer is Erik. The homosexual poles of the couple that leaves him (her?) behind, entering into a world full of frictionless love, mirror-games, and anxiously fixated identities and genders, is us. Not only do we give up on our role as Orpheuses, and thus give up on the Orphic medium of opera, we also lose our betrothed, the other that would by definition not complement or perpetuate us, but instead seduce us into some detour that may not lead back to our origin, who could show us that the opera house is a maze with more than one exit and in which you can become forever lost.

In insisting so desperately on the fact that opera is dead, Leroux’s novel and its imitators cannot bring themselves to verify this death, even when couched in the affectionate terms by which Orpheus killed Euridyce (the terms, that is, of opera, of a love which loves so intensely that it kills its object, which explains why Raoul and Christine must not be allowed to look back, since they are now deaf not only to the opera but to the operatic – but for some reason I find the noisy, violent, messy art of killing one’s beloved somehow more comforting than the cruel coldness manifested by Christine and Raoul, who can so smoothly get over their encounter with Erik and get on with their lives; clearly, if the operatic mode of loving problematically literalizes its teleological violence, that violence, at least, is a mode of relating to, rather than negating, the otherness of the other). This must be the anxiety of Raoul and Christine – and of the various other lovers of the Phantom: that he might not be as conclusively laid to rest as their technologies of self-fashioning insist that they believe.

### On Unfortunate Sequels

“This haunted face  
holds no horror  
for me now...  
It’s in your soul  
that the true  
distortion lies...”

Christine to Erik, in Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*

“This is also part of the criminal’s guilt: he has created a situation of semantic ambiguity, thus questioning the usual forms of human communication and human interaction. In this way, he has composed an audacious *poetic work*.”  
Franco Moretti, “Clues”

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<sup>527</sup> OA 196.



The *Phantom* has, however, returned, at least once in recent memory, in a peculiarly unpleasant and all-too-troubling form. In 2010, Lloyd Webber premiered a sequel to his phenomenally successful *Phantom of the Opera* musical; entitled *Love Never Dies*, the title itself insisting that Christine's burial of the Phantom was inconclusive,<sup>528</sup> it was a critical and commercial failure. Surprisingly, this failure is due in no small part to the latter musical's reshuffling of the love triangle at the heart of *Le Fantôme*, so as to give the audience exactly what they ought to want. The plot of *Love Never Dies* reunites Christine and Raoul with the Phantom so that Christine can make the presumably "correct" object-choice that she failed to make in the original – after all, doesn't the audience want her to choose the Phantom over Raoul? Isn't the Phantom the male lead in the story? The musical even provides Christine, and the audience, with a totem intended to demonstrate that Christine and Erik are the socially-recuperable couple that *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* proved them not to be: Christine's son, Gustave, raised by Raoul as his heir, is revealed to be the Phantom's progeny (of course Gustave shares the superhuman musical gifts of his true parents).

As the musical ends, with Christine fatally wounded by Meg Giry's uncontrolled pistol (apparently Meg is now a murderous, instably phallicized whore), Gustave repeats his mother's iconic gesture, taking off the Phantom's mask and looking at his true face, claiming kinship and even resemblance with the Phantom. This son-become-daughter, acceding to the transgendering that is his patrimony, takes the place of Christine, re-sexed in the Phantom's loving gaze: "l'image même de l'Épouvante comme il était celle de la Hideur." While the plots of the various other *Phantoms* end correctly – with Christine and Raoul forming a masculinized, homosexual couple and abandoning the feminine, compromised Erik to the apocalypse of opera – *Love Never Dies* ends doubly incorrectly – the curtain falls on a doubly queer scene of incestuous, pedophilic desire, perhaps not even a desire between a father and a son but instead between two feminized figures, almost as if Erik and Carlotta had finally found each other, as terrifying as that would be for everyone involved.

Obviously, *Love Never Dies* was a spectacular miscalculation. Or was it? We could certainly never accuse Lloyd Webber of not always being ready and willing to give the audience exactly what it wants. We can easily imagine Lloyd Webber observing that everything that we say about the *Phantom* insists that Erik and Christine are the true couple of the drama, that except for Erik's distorted soul they could be together. If some musical angel steps in and corrects this distortion, the distortion marring the whole work (that Christine unaccountably lives, happily ever after, with Raoul) would vanish as well, and the apparently correct harmony – the duet between Christine and Erik – would assert itself, finally, as what we have always wanted to hear. Remember that Erik explicitly takes the place of Christine's father in guiding her musical education, becoming the "Ange de la musique" invented by the elder Daaé as part of his pedagogical strategy for his daughter: if Erik can properly accede to this paternal inheritance, then wouldn't it be possible for him to couple with Christine, as father and daughter, or as father and son (the law of the reversibility of the domino comes into play again here)? But this doesn't quite work – Raoul and Christine are

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<sup>528</sup> In Leroux's novel, Christine's final promise to Erik is that she will return to the Palais Garnier to bury him – and in so doing return the ring he gave her – once he dies. Erik, for some reason, doubts her sincerity. The motif of Christine returning to bury the Phantom once and for all echoes the conclusion of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which Mina and Jonathan Harker return to a Transylvania that has been converted into a tourist's paradise, a Disneyfied amusement park that's fun and educational for the whole family.

both Daaé's children; the model for the homosexual, transgender desire between them is that of incest between siblings, not across the boundaries separating the generations.

The Father's voice, as Lacanian critics emphasize, is as absolutely obscene as the sound of Carlotta's "Couac !": Erik's voice, like Erik's body, is a disgustingly present fragment of the Father's body. For Dolar, the Father's voice, "as a senseless remainder of the letter [the myth of the Angel], is what endows the letter with authority, making it not just a signifier, but an act," giving, that is, Raoul and Christine something *to do*.<sup>529</sup> As such, the paternal voice, "his ultimate deadly *cry* that accompanies the instituted law,"<sup>530</sup> must be suppressed in turn, perhaps because, like the maternal voice, it is all too natural in the way that it contains both human and inhuman meanings. Its transgendered structure, like that of the female robot's song, includes the fundamental opposition between human and inhuman more completely than the songs of Raoul and Christine, who have been fitted with the proper technologies to make sure that their vacillations always break down on the side of human meaning. Asking "Is the voice of the Father of an altogether different species from the feminine voice?", Dolar concludes that "The secret may be that they are both the same; that there are not two voices, but only the object voice which cleaves and bars the other in an ineradicable 'extimacy.'"<sup>531</sup>

The conclusion of *Love Never Dies* bears out this observation: the couple Erik-Gustave is a logical origin and conclusion, in that Erik and Gustave (and thus Carlotta) radicalize the transgenderings that outfit Raoul and Christine (and thus us audience-members) with their or our stably instable identities, characters, and desires. Do Erik and Gustave enjoy a legibly gay fantasy of daddy-boy roleplay in this bric-à-brac funhouse of musical theater at its kitschiest, once the mother has been conveniently disposed of? Or instead, do they discover a differently familiar Sapphic paradise, as sisters doing it for themselves after having been abandoned by (or having abandoned) the world of men? In the very indecidability of this question, the conclusion of *Love Never Dies* explicitly delivers the resolution that the characters have been in constant orbit around, a return to their most primal scene: a maternal (or paternal) voice passes incestuously between two generations of a family, perhaps that maternal (or paternal) voice – and the maternal (or paternal) inheritance – that proved so deadly to Antonia in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.<sup>532</sup> In other words, on the structural level of its plot, *Love Never Dies* resurrects precisely the form of transgenerating that had to die, or at least to vanish, for the love between Raoul and Christine to maintain its consistency – and thus for the audience's love for *Phantom* to maintain its consistency in its turn. Lloyd Webber, like Carlotta, knows exactly what the score is in this economy of fantasy; Lloyd Webber, like Carlotta, fails spectacularly. But why should this, the arguably more correct end to the fantasy of the Phantom, be the incorrect, so disastrously incorrect, conclusion to its saga?

The most obvious answer to this question is that *Love Never Dies* is bad. Strangely bad, as if its composer itself didn't want it to succeed, wanted it to be unworthy even of cult status. Sometimes the most obvious answers are correct: perhaps *The Phantom of the Opera* needs a bad sequel so as to demonstrate concretely and convincingly that no sequel is

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<sup>529</sup> VNM 54-5.

<sup>530</sup> VNM 55. Italics mine.

<sup>531</sup> VNM 56.

<sup>532</sup> Antonia's murder by music, in which Dr. Miracle's and her Mother's voice are hallucinatorily indistinguishable, epitomizes this strange overlap between the voice of the Father's interdiction, the voice of his playing of his instrument, and the Maternal voice.

necessary or even possible. We no longer need return to the fantasy of Erik's Palais Garnier; there is no longer any work to do there. The very badness of *Love Never Dies* provides a disciplinary moral, asserting that no enjoyable creation remains in the empty theater as we leave it. But this was already the lesson of *The Phantom*; uncannily enough, Lloyd Webber, now a bad auditor, repeats not the gesture of Raoul and Christine, but the Orphic gesture of loving Euridyce enough to take one last, fatal, glance back at her. If *Love Never Dies* successfully kills Erik as a commercial property, it nevertheless adds several more bizarre and complicated turns to the transgenering at work in *The Phantom*. Pierre Bayard has demonstrated that sequel-writing is a mode of transformative criticism, which he calls "detective criticism" (and remember that Leroux was a mystery author), and thus no sequel is not simultaneously a retcon; as we will see in the conclusion, Cavell has proposed that the proper response to song is the construction of a "perlocutionary sequel" that radically reconfiner our understanding of song's "original" utterance. In other words, Lloyd Webber, ambivalently attempting both to extend and neutralize the power of Erik's song, composes an audacious *critical* work, showing us just how strange the forces that drive our love of the *Phantom* truly are.

If this critical audaciousness – audacious also in that its creativity refuses definition as either critical or poetic – can also be seen as one of the reasons for *Love Never Dies*'s cultural illegibility, or our refusal to engage with it as a legible statement about the Phantom, then we must ask the next question. Might there exist a mode of vernacular criticism, in which cultural objects radicalize the fantasies that constitute them to the same extreme degree we witness in *Love Never Dies*, that nevertheless can become popular without necessarily reducing or neutralizing the impact of its critical force, as is the case of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*? Will we never again hear, or hear from, the difference between the two forms of transgenering at work in *Le Fantôme*'s opera house? Finally, is an art that embraces the "bad" form of transgenering necessarily, or necessarily destined to become, "bad" art itself? This question will form the inspiration for the conclusion that follows from here. For if the death-bringing title *Love Never Dies* tells us anything, it is that the icy silence of our Scandanavian world may one day, as McLuhan might say, be "hotted up" again: all media are reversible, even when they have made this principle into their most profound defense against reversibility. The plague has already penetrated our Fortress of Solitude, and the death it brings may not be the entropic heat-death of a frozen universe, the twilight frigidity of a hall of mirrors or "glaces," but instead a radiant, creative death, something like the heat that animates the deadly sunlit climes that a Carmen or a Olympia call home. But will only feel its warmth if we can bring ourselves to look back at it – and thus to lose something that we love: our better halves, our Euridyces, ourselves.

## I, X: Kylie Minogue's Telepathic Pop

Des paroles inconnues chantèrent-elles sur vos lèvres, lambeaux maudits d'une phrase absurde ?

- Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le Démon de l'analogie"

Ce sont les bribes d'une paresse, donc d'une élégance extrême ; comme si, de l'écriture, acte érotique fort, il restait la fatigue amoureuse : ce vêtement tombé dans un coin de la feuille.

- Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly ou 'Non multa sed multum'"

You know what I'm sayin'  
And I haven't said a thing  
Keep the record playin'

Slow down and dance with me, yeah, slow  
Skip a beat and move with my body, yeah, slow  
- Kylie Minogue, "Slow"

**I. "How do you describe a feeling? I've only ever dreamt of this,"**<sup>533</sup> whispers Kylie Minogue to begin her 2010 single "In My Arms" (whose chorus will repeatedly ask "How does it feel in my arms?"). It's a good question. If we could describe a feeling, we could thus *communicate* our feelings; we could share them or hold them otherwise in common. Feelings could be transmitted across difference and distance. You could look into my mind and into my heart, and I into yours. We could know whether we had found true love or not. Who hasn't dreamt of this technology, and who hasn't *only* dreamt of this technology? Kylie seems grows more and more insistent: "Tell me," she adds, "I'm listening," demanding a response that she has, paradoxically, defined as impossible. To give Kylie what she wants would be both to enter into a language that communicates what we often define as incommunicable, and a language that is only ever to be *dreamt* of, a language of dream and fantasy – the language of *telepathy*, the transfer of affect across the unbridgeable difference of two minds and two hearts. What are we to do with Kylie's demand here? What, to turn the question around, does Kylie do in making this demand, and what claim does she thus have on us?

J. L. Austin famously proposed that speech acts upon the course of human events by fitting certain formalized patterns, either based on the internal meaning of certain words (locutionary acts, or "constatives") or on the external social meaning of certain locutions (illocutionary acts, or "performatives"). But Kylie asks us to put into words what, in its specificity, cannot be reduced to either locutionary or illocutionary forms: the precise contours of an affective experience provoked by a specific other person. (Does it matter here that we are this "other person"?) How can we describe this peculiarly particular "feeling," when, as Nietzsche teaches us, the forgetting of the felt particularity of the sensible and affective word is precisely what inaugurates language as a socio-cultural artifact? Kylie's question forces us to dream of another language, or perhaps to dare to conceive of the language proper to feelings as a kind of dream.

Now, Kylie is not alone in phrasing this demand in the form of an electro-pop question. We began this dissertation by examining Robyn's declaration that "Fembots have feelings too," the axiomatic self-evidence of which quickly transformed into a series of

<sup>533</sup> Kylie Minogue, "In My Arms," X (Parlophone, 2007). Hereafter cited as "IMA" and X.

difficult questions about what “feeling” could mean in this (or any other) context. Similarly, in her “Songs Remind Me of You,” Annie (Anne Strand) passes quickly from the titular declaration that “Every song I hear reminds me of you” to another set of linked and complex questions: first, “Does it make you feel the way that I do?”, presumably posed to the beloved, encountering Kylie’s situation of doubt about the possible adequation of the contents of two individual psyches; and second, “How does it feel to hear your songs on the radio? / And does it hurt to hear your songs on the radio?”, which Annie may even address to herself, throws everyone’s feelings into doubt.<sup>534</sup> If we can’t know what to call the feelings produced by the songs inside our own head, how can we ever hope to communicate them with others? And must this gap between our uncertain affective experience and the set of definitions (both the set of linguistic signifiers we use to describe or communicate “feelings” and the set of those defined “feelings” themselves) necessarily register as unpleasure – does it, in other words, “hurt” to hear “your songs” suddenly become something indescribable, and, even worse, something indescribable that is nevertheless in your head?

That these various women assert their bewilderment by these questions is itself puzzling, when we think about their declarations from within the history of Western song. A few centuries earlier, Cherubino pleads to Suzanna and the Countess in Mozart’s *Nozze de Figaro*: “Voi, che sapete che cosa e amor / Donne, vedete, s’io l’ho nel cor.” In opera, women not only know what love is, but are also able to look into the male heart and declaring whether it contains love or not. Whether or not woman can philosophically define “love” is, in a sense, immaterial, since her knowledge of love is “intuitive,” immediate, and non-linguistic. Of course, her knowledge ends up not being that “immediate,” since it follows the same general pattern of a philosophical constative, even if it cannot present a full, analytical description of its process. Woman, in song, is an analytical black box: although we don’t know how she works (we don’t know how to know what love is), she allows us to act as if we did have a definition of love. We can, without knowing what love is or knowing how to know what love is, know whether it is in our hearts or not. Even though we remain baffled by our feelings, we at least have women around to tell us what we’re feeling.

Kylie short-circuits Cherubino’s overtures to the Countess: to his “You know what love is; tell me if I hold it inside me,” she counters “Whether or not love is knowable, I do not know whether you hold it; instead, you must tell me what it feels like to be held by me, whether or not that is sayable.” By posing and inverting a masculinist demand in her feminine voice, Kylie emphasizes that a certain risk of failure in this game of mutual understanding (of “entente,” hearing each other), while never being entirely evacuated, can function not as a final stumbling-block for communication, but instead as something like the inauguration of a field of communication. “Tell me” invites the other to a discussion in which, even if the precise “form” of an affective experience can never be clearly communicated, at least the very difficulty of speaking of the unspeakable moves between the interlocutors, concerning and implicating them mutually. Kylie says as much in “Confide In Me”: “We all get hurt by love / And we all have our cross to bear / But in the name of understanding, now / A problem should be shared.”<sup>535</sup> Maybe it’s not the solution that will become mutual, but instead the problem of the gap between language and the world, the gap between you and me. Maybe what we can feel, together, is the very fracture of discourse.

<sup>534</sup> Annie, “Songs Remind Me of You,” *Don’t Stop* (Smalltown Supersound, 2008).

<sup>535</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Confide in Me,” *Kylie Minogue* (Mushroom, 1994). Hereafter cited as “CM” and *KM*.

Carmen, prefiguring Kylie, provides the operatic inverse of “Voi che sapete,” when she responds to Don José’s Flower Song (“Je ne sentais qu’un seul désir, / Un seul désir, un seul espoir / Te revoir [...] Et j’étais une chose à toi / Carmen, je t’aime !”) by speak-singing, exactly what she’s not supposed to do, “Non ! Tu ne m’aimes pas !” Now, Carmen, legendarily, knows a lot about feelings. But almost universally we read this utterance as Carmen *playing with* Don José’s emotions –indeed, she will soon reverse her course, by adding “Car si tu m’aimerais, / là-bas, là-bas tu me suivrais !” Cavell turns to Carmen’s rejection of the Flower Song to develop his theory of the perlocutionary (Austin’s third category) precisely as the realm of “passionate speech,” speech as moved – not displaced, not undermined – by the passions. (The “passions,” after all, are things that we suffer – *patimur, passi sumus* – not because they are necessarily painful, but because they come to us from elsewhere, they arrive in the lives of our spirits from somewhere else.) Cavell defines the perlocutionary as being radically without any “accepted conventional procedure and effect,”<sup>536</sup> thus meaning that the appropriateness, the degree to which a discursive act applies (or doesn’t quite apply) to a particular situation, is “to be decided in each case; it is at issue in each.”<sup>537</sup> In other words, to perform a perlocutionary utterance I must declare myself to be worthy of commenting on you, singling you out, but also “inviting an exchange” by leaving you in the position of deciding on the value (not just the validity) of my utterance.<sup>538</sup> The very fact of “my being *moved* to speak, hence to speak in, or out of, passion, whose capacities for lucidity and opacity leave the genuineness of motive always vulnerable to criticism” demands that you respond “*in kind*,” that you likewise be “*moved* to offer” another move in the exchange.<sup>539</sup>

For this reason, “In the mode of passionate exchange there is no final word, no uptake or turndown, until a line is drawn, a withdrawal is effected, perhaps in turn to be revoked,”<sup>540</sup> even more so because “interpretation is characteristically in order, part of the passionate exchange.”<sup>541</sup> If you are moved to interpret, than I am again being given license to interpret your interpretation. Every step in this game of telephone emerges from us talking about our feelings – not naming them as nouns, as labeling them with signifiers that correspond in ossified ways with their fundamental traits, but instead discussing, contesting, critiquing, evaluating, and discovering our feelings, step by step, and never entirely in advance. My feelings for you, your feelings for me, the feelings that we both share inasmuch as we cannot trust ourselves to deliver them constatively or even performatively. Don José’s Flower Song gained massive fame as a successful formalization of the declaration of love; but nevertheless Carmen warns him that what he succeeds, locutionarily or illocutionary, in delivering fundamentally misses what he really “feels.” Carmen, in rejecting the Flower Song, rejects the feelings of the ego and insists that the only true feelings are structurally unconscious, not available to our Imaginary self-fashioning. Thus what we wager in passionate speech are not only the particular social, legal, psychological, or linguistic forms that codify or describe our relationship, but the relationship itself, by challenging the stability

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<sup>536</sup> Stanley Cavell, “Performative and Passionate Utterance,” in *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005): 155-191, 180. Hereafter cited as “PPU.”

<sup>537</sup> “PPU” 181.

<sup>538</sup> “PPU” 181.

<sup>539</sup> “PPU” 182.

<sup>540</sup> “PPU” 183.

<sup>541</sup> “PPU” 184.

of the selves that would be able to orient themselves in such forms. When I ask an innocent question like “How does it feel in my arms?”, I put the possibility of our embrace in your hands – and even the possibility of myself, the consistency of the ways I understand and recognize myself.

Cavell summarizes this movement with the maxim that “A passionate utterance is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”<sup>542</sup> But improvisation and provisionality are anything but alibis to get us out of our commitments – if anything, they pledge us more and more to the other as other, as the locus of what may be the total transformation of ourselves and our desires. This observation returns us to an earlier series of questions that Cavell seems to have answered in his essay on passionate speech: “if we now ask, How is it that having a voice or signature is bearable, a voice that always escapes us, or is stolen?; and, What is the nature of the force that allows language not only to mean and to state but to perform and to suffer?; these begin to sound like questions of opera.”<sup>543</sup>

“Opera,” here, must mean something like “the art of passionate speech.” So what does it mean when the force of Kylie’s questions belongs to this dimension of “questions of opera”? Throughout this dissertation, I believe we’ve encountered precisely this question – why is being a voiced, iterative body *unbearable*? how have we constructed various methods to avoid bearing such a vocal signature, or to avoid realizing that we bear it? and how can we imagine ways of practicing desire that would, if reducing the fundamental trauma of bearing this voice turns out to be humanly impossible or impossible today, nevertheless allow us to adopt the ethical position towards our others that respects their difference to ourselves and themselves? – although we have encountered it not always as a “question of opera.” Unless, that is, if we accept Grover-Friedlander’s suggestion that “opera” means “that which is most itself when it is unlike itself.” If the singing voice is “what is essential to opera,” it is only because the singing voice delivers “singing that is unlike any other,”<sup>544</sup> even unlike itself, certainly alien to the various forms in which it may be encountered. This singing that is proper to opera only as it is improper to opera, Grover-Friedlander calls it “singing and no song.”<sup>545</sup> She immediately defines its transmediate or intermediary character as one of its fundamental features; since it cannot be reduced to any characterization, it constantly shows itself there where it was not supposed to be. Opera, then, must constantly dream of itself in different media, and to dream of opera we must allow our fantasy to be constantly inflected by the strangeness of its object. My attempt to follow this trajectory has taken us on an eccentric path through history, not always in a linear mode, since the object that we pursue seems to occupy a different relationship to time than that of simple temporal sequentiality, coming and going, eclipsing itself, disappearing, reappearing... Maybe it’s the constant glitches in the temporality of this artifact that provide the backbone for the ideal consistency of history.

“How does it feel in my arms?”, offered here as a gesture the passion behind which remains to be evaluated, constitutes exactly the kind of question or demand that Cavell locates as central to opera and that Grover-Friedlander, in turn, locates as centrally eccentric to opera. Kylie’s demand, furthermore, when read as an invitation to participate in the disorders of desire (it’s certainly an injunction to participate in the meaningful atmosphere of

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<sup>542</sup> “PPU” 185.

<sup>543</sup> Cavell, “What Did Derrida Want of Austin?”, in *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995): 42-65, 65.

<sup>544</sup> *OA* 16, 14.

<sup>545</sup> *OA* 188.

the song – it’s the kind of phrase that gets you dancing), asks us to find ways to experience our vocal signature not as fatal, not as an absolute limit to meaning. As such, Kylie operates a revolution in aesthetics from the tragic to the comic, from a world in which mortality is ultimate and redemption the only means of thinking past mortality to one in which mortality merely disseminates and universalizes a constant, sustained series of metamorphoses. Kylie, in other words, allows us to see the value of Nietzsche’s late-career rejection of Wagner’s monolithic, apocalyptic, and heterophobic aesthetic in favor of – what else? – the paradoxical *authenticity* of Carmen’s amorous banter. We know that Kylie inspires us to change discourse because, in listening to her music, we are moved to dance, moved by love (and love is the sign of changing discourses). Kylie expands on this feeling, exclaiming “All I need is the love I get from you / And I wanna scream it out if you hear what I’m saying...”<sup>546</sup> Now, “you” here may refer to one beloved, or to the “million different faces” Kylie sees when she performs the song on one of her legendary tours. Although Kylie certainly plays with a topos familiar to all ABBA fans, “Super Trouper” this isn’t; here, “love” doesn’t pass between me and you in your specificity, your being singled out for my illumination, but instead in your anonymity, your “million different faces.” Love doesn’t define us as a couple, but instead opens us up to an unbounded number of possible responses, even of possible selves for you and me – an amorous negotiation with an amazingly wide scope for participation.

We’ll see the same structure of the demand – “I wanna to scream it out if you hear what I’m saying” – later on; Kylie demands that you have ears to hear her, and if you do, if you direct your hearing to her voice, she will single you out with her song. But this song is a “scream,” beyond the comfortable or polite limits of speech. It travels beyond your earshot; it misses you, or it only hits you by aiming beyond you. It singles you out and overflows your limits, the limits of your desire, in one ambiguous gesture. Kylie answers the question “How does it feel?” by generating different feelings, different questions, different spaces to answer the (now transformed) question. I imagine that if Kylie covered Wittgenstein she would say that what we cannot speak about – what we cannot state – we are invited to sing about, together, and there’s no counting how many of us there are in the duet or the solo. The silence of the unsayable, for Kylie, is the clamorous passion of the dancefloor.

**II. There’s nothing posthuman about *being* a robot, cyborg, machine.** Posthumanity begins when you do not know whether you are a robot or a human, when there is no longer a definition of “human” for you to rely upon as a criterion. Posthumanity doesn’t teach us to believe that bodies and machines are indistinguishable, nor does it teach us to know that bodies and machines are indistinguishable. It teaches us not to know what we believe about bodies and machines.

At this point in our history, posthumanity may be impossible. Or it may only be a possibility for us inasmuch as we don’t know whether it’s possible or not. Or, to quote Battles, perhaps “People won’t be people when they hear this sound / That’s been glowing in the dark at the edge of town.”<sup>547</sup> For me, that song is you, Kylie.

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<sup>546</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Put Your Hands Up (If You Feel Love),” *Aphrodite* (Parlophone, 2010). Hereafter cited as *A*.

<sup>547</sup> Battles, “Atlas,” *Mirrored* (London: Warp Records, 2007).



**III. Kylie is always alone.** Her solitude emerges already in her breakout hit, 1987's "I Should Be So Lucky." The music video finds her all by herself in a cavernous apartment, wandering around, rifling through magazines, setting the burglar alarm, all the while lip-syncing:

In my imagination  
 There is no complication  
 I dream about you all the time [...]
 I'm dreaming  
 That you're in love with me  
 Like I'm in love with you  
 But dreaming's all I do  
 If only they'd come true

I should be so lucky  
 Lucky lucky lucky  
 I should be so lucky in love<sup>548</sup>

Musically, the song also strands her in a Fortress of Synthesizer Solitude, all bright, woodless electronic blips and chirps. In her plastic isolation, Kylie can do nothing but stare at a photograph of an anonymous hunk (one YouTube wag quips, tellingly, "wich version is the iPad she's holding in 1:12?"<sup>549</sup>), the oversized photo frame rhyming with the coming images in which Kylie dances in front of a green-screened children's drawing, herself becoming a primary-colored scrawl to mount on your refrigerator. Everything works to strand Kylie, to leave her alone, cut off from anyone else, in a world all her own – mirroring, in this way, the



Figure 1: Kylie alone in "I Should Be So Lucky"

structure of her desire, presented here as a solipsistic "dreaming" for an object that can never become present. I should be – but I am not – so lucky.

This definition of Kylie's work – that all she does is dreaming – resonates across songs, producers, and decades. Her lyrics consistently insist on the interiority of her experience, and figures of desire emerge in her songs as elements of her fantasies, objects of her imagination, and rarely as present. She emerges out of a space defined, not coincidentally, as adjacent, as close but alien,

the nearest other: hitmakers Stock, Aitken, and Waterman chose to import her to England to become part of their musical machine after having seen her on the Australian soap opera *Neighbors*. Her position as the narrator of her own affective experience begins with her separating herself from the possible objects of her affections. "I stand in the distance / I view from afar," she insists,<sup>550</sup> or she confesses that "I've been watching you lately / I want

<sup>548</sup> Kylie Minogue, "I Should Be So Lucky," *Kylie* (Mushroom, 1988).

<sup>549</sup> See "Kylie Minogue – I Should Be So Lucky" [video file], retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMCXx5k01Tg>.

<sup>550</sup> "CM."

to make it with you,”<sup>551</sup> declaring that for her love begins as a fantasy. And when she’s in love, she seems to spend her time away from her beloved, just thinking about him. Listen to how she defines “fever” on an album itself entitled *Fever*: “Fever sure has got me good / What d’you do when fever takes hold ? [...] Heart beating faster and work is a disaster and / I’m lovesick when you’re not around.”<sup>552</sup> If her song exhorts us to “feel the fever,”<sup>553</sup> it is *as* the affect that takes hold of us when we’re not with those we love, when we’re lovesick, at work for instance. Her most famous song continues this logic: “I can’t get you out of my head / Boy, your loving is all I think about”<sup>554</sup>; if the “boy’s” loving can haunt her, it is because it is only present in her head as a signifier, as the object of imagination. Lovers seem to become present in Kylie’s music only as absences.

Kylie mostly makes “dance” music, here meaning music not only designed to provoke or to accompany the experience of dancing, but also music that takes dancing, being as close as possible to another person, as its subject (“The Loco-Motion,” “Slow,” “Like a Drug,” “Spinning Around”...); but her music takes dancing as its subject so as to demonstrate that no matter how close two bodies are in space, they can never be fully present to each other in spirit. This problem preoccupies her in “In My Arms,” as we’ve seen. Similarly, “The One” progresses from a dancefloor Creation (“Circling and we’re getting close / Can you imagine, just suppose / It’s a feeling I need to know / Close to touch like Michaelangelo”) to the corresponding existential question (“Can you hear me? / I’m connecting with you / Can you feel me? [...] I was wondering, will you reach me?”<sup>555</sup>). Kylie never accidentally juxtaposes absolute closeness and absolute separation; instead, I suspect, the dimension of “sexiness” in her music is an alibi that allows her to throw her isolation into starker relief. Again, this is the distance of the signifier, as the Sistine Chapel fresco shows: God creates man in his own image, but this mimetic genesis means that man may never touch God, let alone another man. Lacan says this, awkwardly, in his own manner, when he explains that it is precisely the signifier, the bar, the tiny space between signifier and signified, of whose motions our human desires are merely the effects, that leads us to imagine the fantasy of finding “the one,” what Katy Perry calls “our missing puzzle piece,” but that simultaneously ensures that no one ever can be the one. On the dancefloor, there are no complements, only supplements.

Kylie acknowledges this explicitly in two of her most surprising songs, which dramatize the entry onto the dancefloor precisely as a moment of breakup. Certainly, the dancefloor can be a cruisy nursery for relations and relationships, the place where new desire awakens, as in “The One” and also “Secret,” “Wow,” “Love Affair,” “Burning Up,” “Love at First Sight,” etc. But on “Dancefloor,” she grows increasingly irritated with her boyfriend (“I’m sick and tired of pleasing you / Have I had your love? / Is that the best that you can

<sup>551</sup> Kylie Minogue, “In Your Eyes,” *Fever* (Parlophone, 2001). Hereafter cited as “TYE” and *F*.

<sup>552</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Fever,” *F*. Hereafter cited as “Fe.”

<sup>553</sup> “Fe.”

<sup>554</sup> Kylie Minogue, “I Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” *F*. Hereafter cited as “ICG.”

<sup>555</sup> Kylie Minogue, “The One,” *A*. Hereafter cited as “O.” “The One,” with its contrast between “connection” and “separation,” calls to mind the video for “Confide in Me,” which stages the song’s titular demand for connection and confidence as an advertisement for phone sex chat. In this way Kylie plays up not only artificiality of simulacral confession but also the way in which “confidence,” mutual understanding, is itself a fantasy born from the fundamental isolation of human subjects.

do?”) before charging determinedly into the chorus and out of his life: “ ‘Cause if you think you’ve got me boy just watch me / On the dancefloor.”<sup>556</sup> The same situation recurs, more explicitly, on the later “Get Outta My Way.”<sup>557</sup> The title names the demand Kylie levels towards her lover, who does not meet her first order to “Take a chance tonight and try something new”; after his failure to comply, Kylie will make her way onto the dancefloor and “Leave you, move on / To a perfect stranger / You talk, I walk / Wanna feel the danger.” The final irony of the chorus brings the two aspects of the dancefloor, the space of metamorphosis and impermanence, together, in Kylie’s observation that you “See me with him and it’s turning you on / It’s got me saying / Ain’t getting me back at the end of this song.” Exactly inasmuch as the dancefloor awakens new desire, it can reawaken a desire for what has been lost – what has, for that matter, never been fully possessed – as it can reproduce a similar iteration of desire at a new point in the triangle, another link in the amorous chain. Once on the dancefloor, where Kylie can observe “He’s taking your place,” everyone can be replaced, every love triangle recast. Not for nothing did Schnitzler name his daisy chain of modern loves *Reigen*.

Kylie would thus seem to embody that dictum of modernism by which we are most alone in the contemporary crowd, and by which art takes as its vocation the description of affective, embodied experiences that cannot be shared. Entering the dancefloor does not alter Kylie’s originary state of isolation; instead, Kylie enters the dancefloor so as to assert her originary isolation more strongly – but also to share it with others, as that thing which, in the middle of a crowded club, removes her from the dance. In this world, all love is a dream; getting lucky, over and over and over and over, replaces being lucky. Kylie is always alone, and she teaches us that we, too, can never be loved in the way that we love – our love will never be reciprocal, since we can never know its reciprocation in the way we know our love. (Or should that read: “in the way we think/believe we know our love”?)

#### IV. Let’s call it a pop quiz: To whom should we attribute the following lines?

The joker’s always smiling in every hand you’re dealt  
I don’t believe that when you die your presence isn’t felt  
But I believe in you<sup>558</sup>

Who’s speaking here? I first became inspired to write about Kylie Minogue because she appeared to be setting to music the works of three theorists who have been increasingly important throughout this text, Cavell, Grover-Friedlander, and the late Lacan. “I Believe in You,” oddly enough, sounds like their song, in that they appear in its chorus, in chorus, speaking lines they have never spoken, but that nevertheless somehow belong to them.

I hear Cavell, who introduced the notion of the “signature” as “your mortal immortality”<sup>559</sup> to show how, by engaging in the social and iterative act of speaking, your utterance – your presence in your absence – is radically untethered from you, capable of

<sup>556</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Dancefloor,” *F*. Hereafter cited as “D.”

<sup>557</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Get Outta My Way,” *A*. Hereafter cited as “GOMW.”

<sup>558</sup> Kylie Minogue, “I Believe in You,” *I Believe in You* EP (Parlophone, 2004). Hereafter cited as “IBY.”

<sup>559</sup> Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 144.

producing feelings beyond the limits of your ego, perhaps even feelings that undermine or explode those limits; and who thinks the signature as comedy, as smile, so that this delimitedness of the self as discoverable in its unprecedented effects in the other's voice need not be thought of as tragic, but instead as solar, productive, humorous in the way that it brings to light something that had never even been repressed.

Lacan, meanwhile, perhaps more than anyone insists on the presence of the joker, the arbitrary (since barred) character of any particular hand of signifiers. I hear him in the synchrony of the figure of the joker and the death introduced in the next line, since for Lacan death – precisely what allows us to speak beyond ourselves – cannot not reveal itself as the anamorphic double of that joker, the stain of the Real that the joker never fails to not quite represent.

Meanwhile, isn't it Grover-Friedlander who suggests that the operatic voice's impropriety means that it can have effects beyond the death not only of the character possessed by that voice, but beyond the death of opera – thus implying that even Kylie could manifest, provisionally and temporally, effects of opera in her song – and effects of Cavell and Lacan and Grover-Friedlander in that song as well?

Of course, we could also hear the voice(s) of Jake Shears and Babydaddy (most famous as part of the queer disco-pop act Scissor Sisters), who, after all, wrote and produced the song. But what fantasy of theirs would this singing belong to? Gay men have long triangulated their desire through the passionate speech of women whose confessions were not only directed towards but even programmed by straight men. Here, however, it seems like their desire takes an additional detour: they triangulate their desire by writing for Kylie as if they were part of the culturally heterosexual music machine. Is this a straight diva's song being rewritten as a gay men's song, or a gay men's song being rewritten as a straight diva's song so as to be rewritten as a gay men's song? And what are we to do with artistic collaboration, anyway – not only between the producer and the star, but between the producer(s) themselves?

Is Kylie the only one who, historically, could contain all these voices (and more) within this particular song? There's something about the flimsiness of her name, its weak meaningfulness (quick: Imagine what a Kylie song sounds like. Now imagine what a Madonna song sounds like, or a Gaga song, or a Ke\$ha song or whatever.) – because "Kylie" doesn't name a strong style, a forceful edge, she makes herself capacious. And what, just as an aside, would it mean for a pop song – by a pop singer who is synonymous with the kind of cultural work that is structurally incompatible with scholarly critique – to translate, and even to negotiate between, the maxims of some of the most esoteric thinkers of our time? Would it suggest that one challenge facing academic work is to recognize the places where such thought is already going on, unbelievably, in the strangest reaches of culture, collapsing the stability of the disinterested and unaffected academic gaze?

Flaubert, in a defining gesture of our modernity, declared himself Madame Bovary. This concept of modern authorship and literary speaking allowed the author to write beyond himself, to become other, but it simultaneously defined those others as prior to literary creation: if Madame Bovary was the author of the text that bears her name, she nevertheless wrote it as herself, following the same logic by which Flaubert signed the text. Here, though, Kylie's signature opens her song up to have been sung by an uncertain and unstable multiplicity of other voices, who make their presence felt – thus revealing themselves to have spoken passionately – in the lyric. Perhaps our current models of authorship, attribution, articulation, etc. are unequipped to evaluate these lines, which themselves argue that 1) the Real will always emerge, smiling, not always (but always potentially) benevolently, to give the

lie to the consistency of our imaginings and the imagining of our consistency, by showing that play broaches and breaches those fields, and that 2) presence is not based on identity, intention, or coherence, but instead is a mode of being felt, after one's death (although you need not be biologically dead to survive your mortality), in the hearts and minds of others. If, of course, you don't not believe in this definition. Or you. Or me.

**V. What's more uncanny than the uncanny?** Is there a form of uncanniness that undoes and implodes the model of fetishistic uncanniness established by Freud's theory? In other words, is there a psychoanalytic model available that would make the uncanny fantastic again, to return to it its trouble and its play?

Ideally, this model would need to be internal to the dynamics of uncanniness and fetishism, for we do not want to simply oppose it to the epistemologies of technology and gender established by Freud's theory. Since the techno-fetishism inaugurated by Freud only gains its consistency by eliminating and reducing a more radical form of fetishistic oscillation, we shouldn't be surprised that Freud was immediately disturbed by such a radicalized fetishism. While he was working on the revision of psychoanalysis inspired by the disturbing repetitions discussed in "Das Unheimliche" and further explored in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, he simultaneously found the stability of his discipline and his ego threatened by "something tremendous, something elemental, which threatens not us alone but our enemies, perhaps, still more."<sup>560</sup> This force imperils Freud's attempt to "devote [himself] quietly to the extension of our science"<sup>561</sup> – it threatens to introduce disruption, difference, and friction into the projective extension of psychoanalysis into the new domains discovered beyond the pleasure principle. In other words, this force threatens precisely the integrity of psychoanalysis, of mind, of self, of knowledge; it raises the specter of an unresolvable differentiation. Although this force, too, arises from within the field of psychoanalysis, announcing its kindship with uncanniness, its capacity to undo or disturb the conclusions of psychoanalysis goes beyond the stable, fetishistically-delimited range of uncanny disturbance. Finally, we can measure Freud's resistance to this force through the anecdote that surrounds the publication of the paper in which he announces it: Freud didn't dare to make his fears public and instead intended to announce them to a closed circle of only his most devoted and intimate disciples, and even then he, in a textbook parapraxis, left the most important and revealing case in Vienna, leaving him unable to present it to his followers. His postscript gives us the name of the phenomenon he feared: "Here is the report, omitted owing to resistance, on a case of thought-transference during analytic practice."<sup>562</sup>

This force that seems to surge up as a radically potent form of uncanniness is *telepathy*: thought, or more precisely feeling, that takes place at a very particular distance – a distance that is greater than that that could be covered or spanned by language, thought or feeling that consequently moves faster than the speed of light at which electronic communication operates. For Freud, telepathy stands as the best example of "the real existence of psychical forces other than the human and animal minds with which we are familiar, or that seem to reveal the possession by those minds of faculties hitherto

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<sup>560</sup> Freud, "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy," in *Standard Edition*, vol 18: 173-193, 177. Hereafter cited as "PT."

<sup>561</sup> "PT" 177.

<sup>562</sup> Editor's note to "PT," 175.

unrecognized.”<sup>563</sup> Telepathy allows us to stand on the edge of a different image of thought. Notice, for instance, that telepathy brings the human and the animal into a more dramatic connection or equivalence; since telepathy exceeds the boundaries of language’s attachment to meaning, telepathy allows us to think about the communication of meaning and affect across and beyond the borders restricting “language” to a recognizably human set of bodies.

But if telepathy allows us to glimpse another image of mental activity exceeding or imploding the meaning of “human,” it does not allow us any certainty about the value or meaning of this implosive excess. Freud is unsure whether to view the fin-de-siècle and early 20<sup>th</sup> century interest in the occult in general, and telepathy in particular, as an example of desperate, wish-fulfilling fantasy (“an attempt at compensation, at making up in another, a supermundane, sphere for the attractions which have been lost by life on this earth”) or as something truly supermundane, something that announces or heralds the end of the mundaneness of our lives, even as “a part of the tentative approach to the great revolution towards which we are heading and of whose extent we can form no estimate.”<sup>564</sup> Dreaming of telepathy is radically ambivalent: is it a form of that resigned dreaming that keeps us satisfied in a life that has lost all vitality, or is it instead a fragment of some revolutionary future into which we cannot project our imagining? If no decision about the value of such dreams of telepathy is possible – this elimination of the critical posture towards the phenomenon itself being “a part expression of the loss of value by which everything has been affected since the world catastrophe of the Great War” – then perhaps we may only seize upon telepathy’s revolutionary potential by dreaming or imagining that it inaugurates a transformation of our world.

Now, Freud’s concern about the implosive potential of telepathy, interestingly enough, rejoins that of Turing, who also must evacuate telepathy to ensure the consistency of his demonstration of the absolutely indifferentiated character of thought. After all, if the receiver in a Turing test were able to interfere with either his machine or human interlocutor – by, say, sending telepathic signals only a human could receive, or by using psychokinesis to alter the machinery of the computer – he could introduce differences based on the different bodies of machines and humans that would allow him to make correct identifications without reasoning on the basis of the kind of data conveyed by language, or, at least, by the language of the Turing test. (Of course, a clairvoyant wouldn’t need to play the imitation game at all.) For this reason, Turing observes that what he calls “extra-sensory perception” (“telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis”) “[seems] to deny all our usual scientific ideas. How we should like to discredit them! Unfortunately the statistical evidence, at least for telepathy, is overwhelming.”<sup>565</sup> (Remember how Turing previously discounted empirical/statistical evidence, because it would make answering the question “Can machines think?” into a Gallup poll that would seek to find out what people felt about the issue? Isn’t it interesting that now, precisely when communicating the contents of people’s minds emerges as a topic for Turing, that it presses itself upon him, overwhelmingly, in the form of “statistical evidence”?)

Turing also considers having a telepath sit in as one of the “senders,” alongside the computer. By running the Zener experiment on the telepathic human and the non-extra-sensitive computer mind – for Turing, psi phenomena are rigorously unmimickable, essential features of human thought, thus modes of superhumanity that in fact preserve and bolster a

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<sup>563</sup> “PT” 177.

<sup>564</sup> “PT” 177.

<sup>565</sup> “CM” 49.

fundamental, definite field of humanity – the test operator could easily tell the difference between human and computer.<sup>566</sup> Telepathy would spoil the scientificity of Turing's experiment; if humans are granted access to other, more radical, ways of knowing than those contained in the printed computer tapes Turing defines as the body of language, then the capacity of science to know anything about machine thought, the very knowing of *sciens*, would be spoiled. In short, Turing has very good reasons to dream of a “telepathy-proof room” in which to place his interlocutors,<sup>567</sup> or to remind us that “in fact one can get along very nicely if one forgets about” telepathy.<sup>568</sup>

It is perhaps less clear why Freud was so frightened by the prospect of telepathy, and why he too sought to keep his discussions about its emerging power contained within the “telepathy-proof room” of his mountain retreat. After all, Helene Deutsch, one of the first analysts to devote herself to the (transformative) extension of Freud's science into the domain of the feminine, would suggest that telepathy is not only necessary, but desirable, in the clinic; in her metapsychology, thought-transference is another name for the transference that opens up a path towards the cure, thus towards insight into the unconscious and a transformation of one's mental architecture.<sup>569</sup> However, Deutsch represents the overwhelming minority of her science. In an oft-cited 1979 study about attitudes towards telepathy, Wagner and Monnet discovered that out of 1,100 college professors surveyed psychologists were the most likely to believe that telepathy and other psi phenomena are scientifically impossible (34% of psychologists versus 2% of other respondents); meanwhile, only 34% of psychologists believe in telepathy, compared with 55% of natural scientists, 66% of social scientists, and 77% of humanities scholars.<sup>570</sup> This, of course, despite the fact that Freud's papers were originally considered coterminous with the goals of the Society for Psychic Research, so much so that, like in a fairy tale, Freud had to refuse “three times” to publish in emerging journals of “para”-psychology (and that, later on, psychology departments would provide a home for parapsychological research). So, historically speaking, what's more surprising: Deutsch's belief in telepathy as central to psychoanalytic practice; or Freud's belief that telepathy must be repressed at all costs precisely because it was emerging as central to, indeed as the very heart of, psychoanalytic practice?

This little Gallup poll shows that we are here dealing with a case of split belief, in which a faith is distributed unequally across a society, with some believing, holding on to their feeling, so that others don't have to. Mannoni calls such societal splitting of belief a “primitive” form of the much more civilized *Ichspaltung* introduced by Freud as one of the

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<sup>566</sup> Turing does not explicitly discuss how precognition could disturb the imitation game. Presumably, by knowing what the correct answer would in the future be revealed to be, the operator could pick the correct answer; of course, this would return us to the fundamental time-travel paradox of information about the future affecting the very present that would lead to that future. For this reason, time travel from future to past (of which precognition is the most refined form) may be the aporia of science, the only properly unimaginable phenomenon from within the basic assumptions about time and phenomena that define science as a practice.

<sup>567</sup> “CM” 50.

<sup>568</sup> “CM” 49.

<sup>569</sup> Helene Deutsch, “Occult Processes Occurring during Psychoanalysis,” in *Psychoanalysis and the Occult*, ed. George Devereux (London: Souvenir Press, 1974).

<sup>570</sup> See W. M. Wagner and M. Monnet, “Attitudes of college professors toward extrasensory perception,” *Zetetic Scholar* 5 (1979): 7-16.

potential faces of a generalized fetishism. In Mannoni's discussion of an ethnographer's tale from the Hopi, in which the adults do everything in their power to allow their children to believe in the magical rituals that accompany their sacred dance festivals, he shows that "les enfants sont comme le support de croyance des adultes"<sup>571</sup>: the population of "believing" children allows the adults to get all the affective satisfaction of believing in the ritual without having to believe in it *themselves*. Lacan makes the same argument in relation to Santa Claus: ensuring that children believe in Father Christmas enables adults to feel as if the distribution of wealth is anything but arbitrary, that there is worth and value in the distribution of capital. If, once a year, only bad children get coal in their stocking, then the ideological consistency of our world can be maintained. Mannoni's technical paper intersects with our history of telepathy and psychoanalysis in a very peculiar way. Mannoni traces the prehistory of fetishism in Freud's theory to the essay on telepathy, the moment at which something like a theory of fetishism might have emerged, had Freud not been distracted by something else.

In "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy," in one of the examples not properly of telepathy (because the case of telepathy was left behind, owing to Freud's resistance), Freud discusses a patient who visits a fortune-teller, who tells him that his brother-in-law will die of a shellfish allergy. Even though this prediction has been disproven by time, the patient still exclaims "It was marvelous!"<sup>572</sup> to a bewildered Freud. "Freud a été profondément étonné par ces paroles; mais à ce moment-là il s'intéressait à un problème tout différent et il ne s'est pas interrogé sur la forme de croyance que cette phrase implique," explains Mannoni.<sup>573</sup> In other words, according to Mannoni, Freud narrowly misses an opportunity to engage with the fetishistic structure of split belief, which Mannoni will later codify in the formula "Je sais bien, mais quand même..." precisely because he is interested in telepathy. For Mannoni, telepathy thus acts as a fetish distracting us from fetishism; the interest of Freud's text is directed away from a potentially transformative encounter with split belief, which is deferred until the 1930's. (Non-coincidentally, in the 1930's telepathy returns as non-threatening and of genuine psychoanalytic interest in the *New Introductory Lectures*, while fetishism and ego-splitting are formally discussed elsewhere.)

Mannoni's clever aside forgets both that Freud's case of crawfish-poisoning itself is symptomatic of an *allergy* to telepathy (Freud discusses clairvoyance because he has left the proper case at home in Vienna), and that there is a great distance between the dangerous appearance of both telepathy and fetishism in the late 1910's and their availability as safe, non-threatening themes for Freud's final researches. In other words, telepathy covers for fetishism here because both telepathy and fetishism appear as more radical than they do in the later work, where telepathy and fetishism have switched valences – there, fetishism is of central interest, and telepathy is an epiphenomenon consigned to the margins, covered by the general interest of split belief. Mannoni himself stumbles upon fetishism by following telepathy, or narrowly missing telepathy: his patient produces a phrase that is oddly reminiscent of that of Freud's, sending him to the essay on "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy" as a source of insight not into telepathy, but of fetishism.

I won't claim that Mannoni (or Freud) misjudges the import of telepathy, even as Mannoni fetishistically – and parenthetically – comments that "(Je ne crois pas que ce soit par hasard, la télépathie pose une question de croyance)."<sup>574</sup> In this essay on belief – the

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<sup>571</sup> "JSB" 18.

<sup>572</sup> "PT" 183.

<sup>573</sup> "JSB" 12.

<sup>574</sup> "JSB" 22.



same “croyance” in which Mannoni participates in writing “Je ne crois pas que ce soit par hasard” – Mannoni’s most important intervention is to point out that neither belief nor disbelief is properly fetishistic, but rather the phenomenon of split belief in itself (although how can something split ever be “in itself?”), whether distributed socially or internalized as *Ichspaltung*. The fetishistic phenomenon is not, properly speaking, either believing or disbelieving, but instead believing or disbelieving with any certainty, the shift from (dis)believing to knowing.

Fetishism isn’t fetishism inasmuch as it replaces one situation with its opposite (the mother’s castration with her phallicization, for instance, or knowing that Santa is real with knowing that Santa isn’t real), but inasmuch as these situations become defined as opposite, as a fetishistic rhetoric separates them and distributes them through the “mais” of “Je sais bien, mais quand même.” Indeed, Mannoni suggests that the certainty of the true believer and the skeptic are the two distributed forms of a fetishistic evasion of a much more problematic cognitive experience, that of believing without knowing: “Après l’institution d’un fétiche, le domaine de la croyance est perdu de vue, nous ne savons plus ce que la question est devenue et *on dirait que le but du fétichiste est d’y échapper.*”<sup>575</sup>

Consequently, I want to hold to the moments in Freud’s (and Mannoni’s) arguments in which fetishism and telepathy are indistinguishable: was Freud repressing telepathy or fetishism when he leaves behind the third case, the third *case* that in “The Theme of the Three Caskets” contains the proof of one’s own death, the third case whose riddle he had thought he had solved? Paradoxically, and precisely because both fetishism and telepathy are repressed in the plot of “Psychoanalysis and Telepathy,” telepathy opens up the possibility of a radicalized fetishism, one that would go beyond the confusion of opposites that would remain stably opposite (the uncanny, that is) and towards something much more unsettling. Mannoni gestures towards this telepathic beyond of fetishism when he discusses how Freud’s accounting of the origin of the fetish-object represents “un souvenir-écran, et non encore un fétiche.”<sup>576</sup> A screen-memory is a rebus, in which every element refers to a hidden scene and consequently both scenes are equally visible; perhaps the mode of fetishism would restore a wider play to the signifier and a difference to the relationship between the two scenes. In other words, Mannoni’s argument suggests that Freud’s essay on fetishism – precisely like his essay on “Dreams and Telepathy” – fixates on an early stage in the development of the fetish, as a critical object, so as to refuse the potentially more unsettling emergence of a more radical fetishism. Freud deploys the very force of fetishism to cut short his critical investigation into fetishism.

Mannoni’s essay, productively, embraces this movement beyond the uncanny as its concluding insight (if such a word can apply here):

La suite logique de ces recherches, ce serait d’essayer de voir en quoi consiste la magie du fétiche. Mais ici nous nous heurtons à une profonde obscurité, et le chemin suivi ne nous conduit pas à plus de savoir. Si la *Verleugnung* et les transformations de la croyance expliquent le point de départ, elles ne parviennent pas à nous éclairer sur le point d’arrivée.<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> “JSB” 32, italics mine.

<sup>576</sup> “JSB” 31.

<sup>577</sup> “JSB” 31.

Mannoni, moving beyond the limits of this reduced fetishism, begins to speak of “une *phénoménologie* freudienne,”<sup>578</sup> as explicitly opposed to a final or mastering metatheory of psychoanalysis. Only this phenomenological, practical dimension of psychoanalysis keeps us from thinking of theory and clinic as exact mirrors of each other; instead, this “phenomenology” is the critical method of “présenter des exemples de façon, pour ainsi dire, qu’ils s’interprètent les uns par les autres”<sup>579</sup> – which prevents us from knowing that the theory of psychoanalysis is scientific in that it is a metalanguage (such a knowing would then be a means of understanding, and there would thus be no difference between knowing and understanding), and that instead brings us to a work with objects of theory and practice, weighing them against each other, judging their difference, discovering their unseen dimensions, allowing them to interpret and transform each other.

If both belief and disbelief, once they have been distributed, become evacuated of their content as forms of belief, where can a belief that maintains a difference between knowledge and understanding go? Mannoni answers this question by gesturing towards the very fetish that enables the separation of belief and disbelief: “la place du crédule, celle de l’autre, est maintenant occupée par le fétiche lui-même.”<sup>580</sup> In one way, this can refer to the children who are the prop of the adult’s fetishistic belief; the children’s belief is so spectacularly anxiety-inducing (think of all the cultural energy spent worrying about children who might’ve been told too soon that Santa isn’t real) precisely because it retains a character of undecidability and unknowability. But it also refers to the fetish itself, as phenomenological, and as grasped in its moving oscillation as described by Kofman. In a way, the fundamental cleavage in a fetishistic system is not that between the believers and the nonbelievers, but instead between the (non)believers and the fetish itself, which never appears as part of their own physical or mental organization.

Kylie makes her first revolutionary intercession at this point, when she argues that “I believe in you”<sup>581</sup>: this utterance, at first, articulates the fetishistic belief that the alterity of the other has been evacuated, that the other will be there, that the other has become the prop of the self; but then it reawakens the alterity of the other by finding a way to believe – not as myself, but *in you*. It is through you, in you, in your very materiality, in your existence as a phenomenon, that Kylie “believes.” And not in you as something in which she can be fundamentally certain – remember, “The joker’s always smiling in every hand you’re dealt” – but in you as outside the scope of her calculating, in you as removed from her by alterity, as deferred, as distanced. And it is precisely this inexhaustibility of the Real that allows for love to be a smile, a joke, and an endless gift: her declaration “I’ll give you everything I have again and again” consequently fails to be a paradox, for in believing *in you*, in giving the entirety of herself, she becomes different, and has something else to give.

This belief doesn’t only take place, then, across the distance between Kylie and you, but across the distance between Kyliés – between the Kylie of the present and the Kylie of the future, even as that gift of difference which enables the Kylie of the future to emerge. For Kylie, “believing in you” is a radicalization of fetishism that, precisely, becomes telepathy, even as telepathy stops being “thought-transference” and begins to look far stranger. If Kylie concludes, “I don’t believe in magic / It’s only in the mind,”<sup>582</sup> we should

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<sup>578</sup> “JSB” 33.

<sup>579</sup> “JSB” 33.

<sup>580</sup> “JSB” 32.

<sup>581</sup> “IBY.”

<sup>582</sup> “IBY.”

read this not as an evacuation of the possibility of magic, but a definition of the things that happen “only in the mind” as themselves magical.

But where is “in the mind,” and what is telepathy, that medium of linking minds? For Lacan, telepathy is the distance between Saussure’s dream of communication and Freud’s. We all know the hieroglyph inscribed in Saussure’s *Cours*: two heads, sexless, yet recognizably male, held together by the streams of language that bind their ears, brains, and mouths (they look like earbuds, don’t they?). In this picture, language is the means by which thoughts are transferred from one mind to another. All that remains is to reduce the mediacy of language as much as possible, to eliminate the threat of interference along the channel, and then telepathy will be achieved. For Saussure, telepathy is already implicit in language, in

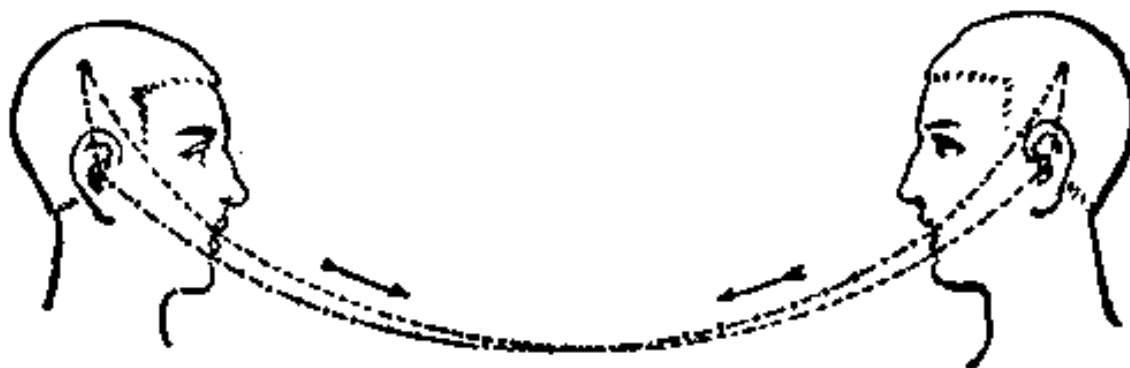


Figure 2: Saussure's telepaths/iPod commercial mockup

this particular, highly contagious image of its final form. Telepathy is the technology of describing feelings that we most tend to dream of: language is eliminated, or its time-gap is overcome by an adequate acceleration (the electrification of discourse promises such gapless speech), and meanings are transmitted literally without any time for difference to interfere with the signal.

In this reading, there would be no way to reconcile thought-transference and the structure of the signifier. Consequently, electronic communication has generalized a fetishistic substitute for such immediacy; in our prosthetized world, subjectivity has been replaced by technological forms of superficiality that can be exchanged seamlessly, without interference from a particular and individual basis of subjectivity.<sup>583</sup> Lacan will cut this Gordian knot in his dream of a kind of telepathy that takes place through the very structure of the signifier, through difference and delay, and not one that would eliminate or redeem that structure. Lacan names this symbolic telepathy “crystallinguistics” (*crystallinguistique*).

Lacan announces the theory of crystallinguistics – where else? – on the radio; remember that some of the earliest radio receivers were “crystal receivers,” the first

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<sup>583</sup> I do not mean to suggest the existence of a “deep” self-consciousness; instead, I would understand the intransmissible particularity of the speaking subject here as the peculiar *instance* upon which the iterations of superficial signifiers hang, the voice, perhaps, that articulates the various formalized pronunciations of a social language. The very superficiality of these signifiers encourages us to hallucinate a deep and authentic speaking subject, when instead we should look to the gaps between the signifiers, the blank, inarticulate and inarticulated, spaces of the surface as the site of our subjectivity.

semiconducting devices, that used the physical structure of mineral crystals to construct self-powering diodes. In the popular-scientific imagination, the construction of crystal radios remains a popular science project for young people, a more advanced cousin of the potato battery. Right away, Lacan declares his strong opposition to the “recours à la communication”<sup>584</sup> that serves to insulate and protect those sciences that would declare themselves “post-linguistic”: “[La communication,] Supposons-la montrer dans l’occultation du langage la figure du mythe qu’est la télépathie. Freud lui-même se laisse prendre à cet enfant perdu de la pensée : qu’elle se communique sans parole.”<sup>585</sup> Precisely what telepathy as thought-transference thinks it can outpace is the word, the origin and the immaterial materiality of language; simultaneously, linguistics defines the word as a simply primitive organ for the transference of mental contents from person to person:

Telle la linguistique reste collée à la pensée qu’elle (la pensée) se communique avec la parole. C’est le même miracle invoqué à faire qu’on télépâtisse du même bois dont on pactise : pourquoi pas le “dialogue” dont vous appâtent les faux jetons, voire les contrats sociaux qu’ils en attendent. L’affect est bien là bon pied bon œil pour sceller ces effusions. [*Linguistics remains so strongly stuck on this idea that they (ideas) are communicated by words. We invoke this same miracle to say that telepathy is cut from the same cloth as oath-taking, being of the same mind as someone – or, why not, to say that “dialogue” is a form of “the meeting of the minds,” dialogue, who dupes you with its ill-bred tokens, by which I mean “the social contracts” everyone’s waiting for. Affect is always there, a little long in the tooth, to cauterize these gushing wounds.*]<sup>586</sup>

This notion of telepathy as thought-transference lies behind all our notions of “understanding,” in that we define understanding as same-mindedness, as the same thought in two different minds, the thing Socrates always claims he’s working towards. But instead “Que ce sujet soit d’origine marqué de division, c’est ce dont la linguistique prend force au-delà des badinages de la communication”<sup>587</sup>; thoughts are never present to the subject who “has” them, and therefore the fantasy of making them present to an other is merely that – a fantasy, not about the other, but mostly about ever being in control, in possession, of one’s own mind. A fantasy of not having an unconscious, that is. Or a fantasy of one’s feelings being one’s own.

Elsewhere, Lacan states that “Les sentiments, c’est toujours réciproque.”<sup>588</sup> This maxim has often been read as an ironic statement about imaginary capitulation: we will always understand our feelings as being the same as the feelings of those others who are implicated in our feelings<sup>589</sup> - in other words, as a dream about telepathy, phrased as a warning for those who know better, an injunction to wake up. But elsewhere, Lacan conceives of the relationship between affect and the signifier otherwise. Quite early on, in his third seminar (about people who hear voices in their heads, about *Les Psychoses*), Lacan rehearses a particularly Mallarméan sentiment that will be familiar to all of us who have suddenly had a

<sup>584</sup> “R” 404. I will include translations for the most difficult citations from Lacan included in this chapter; unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

<sup>585</sup> “R” 405.

<sup>586</sup> “R” 405.

<sup>587</sup> “R” 405.

<sup>588</sup> *E*, 12.

<sup>589</sup> Cf. for instance Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach for Practitioners* (New York: Norton, 2007) 152.

snippet of pop music come into our heads. He investigates a peculiar moment of affective experience that will, for him, come to bear on the very relation between signifier and affect. Lacan recalls Judge Schreber, who complains that “*I can’t play an aria from The Magic Flute – Schreber is a musician – without having him who speaks immediately attribute the corresponding feelings [les sentiments correspondants in the original – SP] to me, but I don’t have them myself.*”<sup>590</sup> Schreber is troubled by the split in his consciousness while playing an aria: he simultaneously experiences the affective reflex of “identification” with the character of the song (he sings along, in other words, the song turning his voice and body into the medium for the recreation or re-performance of its program), while realizing that this “identification” is artificial, retroactive, and external. Identification comes from the outside and reconfigures the inside in its own image – the listener does not have something in himself before hearing the song that is only subsequently mirrored in the aria. Realizing that the feelings we experience faced with music – that songs “say nothing to me about my life” – are not proper to us can easily lead to an apocalyptic, overwhelming sentiment of “Panic.” Now, Schreber is not a singer, but a pianist. This may seem odd: he is playing an aria without playing the words, without performing them literally, but the meaning of the song is the same with or without its words. In other words, the song as meaning – as the expression of the affective life of a character – is separate from the song as legible; hence Lacan’s reminder that “What you understand in a discourse is different from what is registered acoustically.”<sup>591</sup> Schreber cannot repress the force with which this understanding imposes itself.

Lacan will then share his version of Schreber’s pianistic panic, and – properly – in the second person: “You are at the close of a stormy and tiring day, you regard the darkness that is beginning to fall upon your surroundings, and something comes to mind, embodied in the expression, *the peace of the evening.*”<sup>592</sup> Lacan argues that the affective experience of “the peace of the evening” without having the formula “the peace of the evening” in mind differs absolutely from the experience that coalesces around these magic words: “It’s not absurd to ask oneself whether beings who didn’t give this peace of the evening a distinct existence, who didn’t formulate it verbally, could distinguish it from any of the other registers under which temporal reality could be apprehended.”<sup>593</sup> In other words, discovering the formula “the peace of the evening” allows you to feel what, it turns out, you were already feeling – the peace of the evening as a mode of being. Feelings do not precede their names, unless they will turn out to already have been effects of their names: “it’s essentially as a signifier that [this being, or not, of language] presents itself to us.”<sup>594</sup> And this effect binarizes us, splits our history into a before – when we were feeling the peace of the evening without having been opened by its signifier – and an after – when we realize that we were in the midst of an affective experience that would correspond to the signifier “the peace of the evening.” In other words, the signifier “the peace of the evening” is a point of *crystallization*, at which something dissolved in the world precipitates out into a regular, solid structure, everywhere self-similar.

At this point, Lacan asks where the signifier “the peace of the evening” comes from:

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<sup>590</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar, Book III: The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1997) 135. Hereafter cited as *P*.

<sup>591</sup> *P* 136.

<sup>592</sup> *P* 138.

<sup>593</sup> *P* 138.

<sup>594</sup> *P* 139.

[This expression] takes us by surprise or interrupts us, calming the movement of agitation that dwelled within us. It's precisely when we are not listening for it, when it's outside our field and suddenly hits us from behind, that it assumes full value, surprised as we are by this more or less endophasic, more or less inspired, expression that comes to us like a murmur from without, a manifestation of discourse insofar as it barely belongs to us, which comes as an echo of what it is that is all of a sudden significant for us in this presence, an utterance such that we don't know whether it comes from without or from within – *the peace of the evening*.<sup>595</sup>

The point of crystallization, then, is not within us or without us, but precisely at the limit that draws a difference between within and without. And, unlike Schreber, we experience not panic, but pleasure, at this disquieting uncanniness (Lacan calls it *inquiétude*, playing on the French translation of *unheimlich*): we're pleased to discover in language a way to express what we were already feeling, and we may even find our ego confirmed and strengthened by the support of the language that we so providentially come across, or that comes to us. We're calmed, knowing that "the world borders on speaking to us."<sup>596</sup> But maybe it's precisely our impression of this experience's liminality that allows us to be calmed: remember that Schreber, and Olympia (*tout parle à la jeune fille*), live in worlds that do speak to them.

What does Schreber know that we don't? Schreber was panicked by the way his favorite songs produced affective experiences in him, thus demonstrating that his ego (the integral of his thoughts and feelings) was the precipitate of outside forces, that affect merely the temporal result of passing discursive climates. What would he have to hold on to, by what means could he have confidence in the consistency of his ego? Thus Schreber must reject identification (those feelings are not mine), because it too obviously demonstrates his lack of a fundamentally stable self, the putative subject of identification. The difference between Schreber's psychosis and our generalized fetishism – remember, we find consolation in "the peace of the evening" – lies precisely in this gap between his rejection of identification, as a terrifying prosthetic inserted at the core of his being, and our embrace thereof, since we have fetishistically embraced castration as a way of establishing and maintaining our identity. This gap also explains the difference in temporalities between our experience and Schreber's: Schreber plays the aria and then feels the feeling, but we (think we) are caught in the feeling before (re-)discovering the word for it. Yet we can only find the words to mirror, immediately, our rich, deep, internal affective life – the words that will appear to us as so laden with meaning that we temporarily forget the meaninglessness that structures the Symbolic, polar opposites of Schreber's piano reduction of *The Magic Flute*, in which, even stripped of "meaning" and rendered abstract, the crystal-receiver of the aria can transmit affect into Schreber's body – inasmuch as they have already been producing that affective interiority that demonstrates so effectively the historical stability of our egos. The signifier "the peace of the evening" is fetishized here: it emerges to allow us to fail to notice that our feelings are not our own.

Lacan's experiment on "the peace of the evening" shows that *affects are the crystallization of effects of discourse in the sphere of Being*. In other words, all affect is telepathic, in that affect is the localized precipitation of discursive effects that are, qua discursive, constantly in circulation beyond the limits of any individual. From the perspective of

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<sup>595</sup> P 138.

<sup>596</sup> P 139.

crystallinguistics, telepathy is another name for affect. Topographically, we look now at feeling not from the perspective of an individual's "feeling," but instead from the standpoint of the circulating and self-interfering (with these eddies or *moirés* being the points at which discourse crystallizes into feeling) field of discourse. This returns us to Lacan's distinction, dating back to the Rome discourse, between "la parole pleine" or "full speech" and the nonsensical, Imaginary (and thus deeply meaningful) "empty speech." This may seem, again, like a strange claim, particularly when we remember that in the Rome discourse Lacan explicitly warns us against a Deutschian view of telepathic transference:

Le seul objet qui soit à la portée de l'analyste, c'est la relation imaginaire qui le lie au sujet en tant que *moi* et, faute de pouvoir l'éliminer, il peut s'en servir pour régler le débit de ses oreilles, selon l'usage que la physiologie, en accord avec l'Évangile, montre qu'il est normal d'en faire : des oreilles *pour ne point entendre*, autrement dit pour faire la détection de ce qui doit être entendu. Car il n'en a pas d'autres, ni troisième oreille, ni quatrième, pour une transaudition qu'on voudrait directe de l'inconscient par l'inconscient.<sup>597</sup>

Telepathy will not be "transaudition," communication without mediation, as surely as sound cannot travel in a vacuum. Instead, the version of communication Lacan envisages works negatively within speech: full speech is not emptied of its content to become empty speech, but instead empty speech can hollow itself out to become full speech. Lacan situates the beginning of full speech at the internal limit of empty speech, in which "le sujet semble parler en vain de quelqu'un qui, lui ressemblerait-il à s'y méprendre, jamais ne se joindra à l'assomption de son désir."<sup>598</sup> (What a perfect ekphrasis of Saussure's double portrait!) Full speech will push past the correspondence between the two (or more) poles of communication, the mirror-relation between talking heads that itself is an impediment to telepathy, and instead link two different subjectivities in the Assumption of one desire: two hearts beating together as they are lifted up, up, high up on a love that they share inasmuch as it belongs to neither of them.

The analyst knows that to listen to this silence within discourse means to refuse to hear all those obvious "feelings" that return to a "personality" or a "character," and instead attend to the impersonal residue of crystallized affect that insists within this discourse but cannot be contained within it. In this way, psychoanalytic listening is operatic listening as described by Grover-Friedlander, as attention paid specifically to "singing but no song,"<sup>599</sup> singing beyond all elements of characterization, embodiment, personalization, etc. Hence Lacan's speech-act theory of the first seminar, in which speech makes actors: "Full speech is speech which aims at, which forms, the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another. Full speech is speech which performs [*qui fait acte*]."<sup>600</sup> Now, for Lacan, "the truth" means precisely the opposite of that which is known or understood. Thus Lacan situates full speech both in the space at which the subject locates the traumatic encounter with this constitutive lack and also as the place from which the subject could articulate another formation of his or her "self." This is why, in the field of

<sup>597</sup> Lacan, "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse," in *Écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1999): 235-321, 252. Hereafter cited as "FC."

<sup>598</sup> "FC" 252.

<sup>599</sup> OA 188.

<sup>600</sup> Lacan, *The Seminar, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 2013) 107.

speech and language in psychoanalysis, the analyst's function is to bring the analysand to speak in this other voice that is "full speech," a voice that is theirs inasmuch as they have not reduced its speaking to the limits of their egos.

At the moment when full speech articulates itself, two other affects will crystallize: the repressed affect around which the subject's symptoms have constituted themselves, obviously (the Freudian "catharsis"), but also the possibility of another affect that has not yet even entered the ego as repressed, an affect that would not only be uncanny but entirely alien, in which "nous heurtons à la réalité de ce qui n'est ni vrai, ni faux" in that it has not been already defined as triangulable from within the Imaginary dichotomy of fusion/aggression.<sup>601</sup> Here the Symbolic dimension of language produces effects in the Real, without pausing at or passing through the Imaginary of the body, stopping short of circuiting through the bodily ego or whatever other ideals of self we might possess. As Lacan writes in the margins of "Télévision," playing off the myth of Boileau, who defined the Tragic as an empty form and not as an affective, deeply meaningful, and truly human content (and whose penis was damaged beyond repair by a hungry gander), "À qui joue sur le cristal de la langue, ... / ... un jars toujours mange le sexe."<sup>602</sup> But crystallinguistics is not castrating in that it simply strips us of our genitals; instead, it takes us beyond our self-sexings and -genderings by requiring the participation of other genitals, other sexes, other organs besides our own – the analyst's genitals, which serve their purpose precisely by failing to be put to a more productive end. The analysand, in full speech, says to the analyst "I believe in your genitals." Only in so doing can the analysand exit, however temporarily and provisionally, from the certainty of his or her knowledge about his or her own genitals, about what they're for.

In this way, crystallinguistics, an all-too-real phenomenon, one that we've all experienced but that we don't allow ourselves to take seriously, takes us beyond the questions of belief that fetishistically adhere to the uncanny flip-flopping of the sexes, thus opening once more to us a fantastic world. Crystallinguistics allows us to think of affect as feeling without feelings, as the unconscious element of feeling that cannot be reduced to Imaginary glossaries of feelings, as "cette partie du discours concret en tant que transindividuel, qui fait défaut à la disposition du sujet pour rétablir la continuité de son discours conscient," or, as Lacan suggests through his metaphor of the ring-on-a-string game, to follow the physical form of the ring as it passes from hand to hand and refuse to listen to the player's noisy avowals and denials about who is holding it.<sup>603</sup> Paradoxically, only by insisting on the materiality and mediatedness (hence meaninglessness, or not-entirely-meaningfulness) of language can we access this "fuller," since abstracted, dimension of speech, feeling, and desire.

Thus, also paradoxically, the world most thickly-populated with vocal fetish-objects – with those sounds and voices that seem so meaningful, so revelatory of human truth – most risks giving way to full speech. In a perverse twist, the fetishistic universalization of the alethosphere in fact accelerates and in some senses even favors the proliferation of crystallinguistic effects.

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<sup>601</sup> "FC" 254.

<sup>602</sup> Lacan, "Télévision," in *Autres écrits*, cit. : 509-545, 544.

<sup>603</sup> "FC" 257.



**VI. Kylie is never alone.** Her music videos offer the most spectacular proof of this, in them, she is not only constantly accompanied by legions of backup-dancing robots, various figures or figurations of Kylie, but she is, more interestingly, *in the company of herself*. In the 1997 video for “Did It Again,” directed by Pedro Romanhi, four Kylies representing different stages of her career – Indie Kylie, Dance Kylie, Sex Kylie, and Cute Kylie – appear in a photo shoot-cum-police lineup that devolves into a brutal catfight. 1994’s “Confide in Me” video, directed by Paul Boyd, features six different Kylies in Roy Liechtenstein drag, all making different infomercial appeals to the viewer; the frame of the picture pans up and down, left and right, between the channels of Kylie and between polylingual directives to TOUCH THE SCREEN or, for the next best thing, to call 1-555-CONFIDE if you are “müde,” “lost,” “fâché,” “solo,” “afraid,” “ängstlich,” or otherwise in search or need of “immediate understanding.” Best of all, however, is the 2002 video for “Come Into My World,” directed by Michel Gondry.

Gondry’s camera sits at the center of an intersection somewhere in the outskirts of Paris, where it first catches Kylie emerging from a dry-cleaners onto a busy city sidewalk (a mermaid is ticketing a parked car, teens are arriving at a hostel, a woman is kicking her boyfriend out of her apartment, an aproned waiter is squeegeeing a window, etc.) and walking left, the camera panning to follow as she crosses street after street, eventually spiraling back to the same stretch of street with the dry-cleaners on it. At this point, the camera begins its exact same pan, and we see Kylie continue her orbit even as the first Kylie emerges from the dry-cleaners. Slowly we realize that everything, not just Kylie, has multiplied: there are two skateboarders, two posters being plastered to a wall, two couples kissing on a bench, two old ladies. Our sense of wonder multiplies as well, as there are now three Kylies, now four, her world crowded with activity. The video ends as it began, while the fifth Kylie emerges from the dry-cleaners, still continuing the same one-shot spiral pan.



Figure 4: Kylie hurries to help a stranger...



Figure 3: ... and suddenly the Kylies are dancing.

All this is charming enough already, but the video’s game goes farther. As the first Kylie leaves the laundry for the first time, she drops a package; later, as the first Kylie returns to the laundry, a new Kylie emerges, dropping the same package, and the first Kylie rushes to pick it up. Later in the video, four Kylies reinterpret the Maypole dance in a movement that becomes more and more complex as their bodies weave over and under each other, around and around a central staff: the first Kylie has paused to lean against a traffic light, the second Kylie has dived under her leaning arm, the third Kylie rushes to sneak under the arm before the second Kylie has a chance to, and the fourth Kylie (having done all this already) has to squeeze past the three of them. Here, the Kylies are not separated onto different

channels as they were in “Confide in Me”; nor are they programmed for rivalry as they were in “Did It Again” – indeed, they never even touch. Instead, they all collect in the same groove, sharing one mutual world; just as Kylie might record multiple tracks in the studio, becoming her own backup singers. The spiral motion of the camera – mirroring the path of the phonograph’s needle across the record’s grooved surface – collects multiple Kylies in one eccentric curve.

At these moments, “Come Into My World” reexamines the previous videos to find



Figure 6: Different images of the same Kylie...



Figure 5: ... and similar images of different Kylies.

to new ways to look at them. In “Confide in Me,” now, we can observe the fleeting moments when, thanks to the quick wipes between images, two images of the same Kylie (say, the one in the mod sequined dress in front of a Sol-Lewitt-style rainbow/paperclip/suppository) suddenly touch one another. Conversely, we would look, in “Did It Again,” to the brief sections when all four Kylies perform – not at all identically – the “same” dance, the same sequence of steps. In these images, we cannot say that a multiplicity of self-similar Kylies appear differentiated from each other. Instead, the sameness and difference of the Kylies appear as mutually constitutive. In “Confide in Me,” the sameness of the mod Kylie emerges through the repetition of different temporal moments, around and across the bar that cuts different channels out of the same visual stream. In “Did It Again,” the surprising similarity of the dance moves emerges from the difference in Kylies – whose gestures, until now, have been, and will return to being, antagonistic. Oddly, only within the same dance do that the differences between the Kylies most concretely emerge. By means of their engagement in one dance, the peculiarities of the individual Kylies’ bodies (the odd pop of Cute Kylie’s shoulders, the unique beauty of the color of Indie Kylie’s eyes and the shape of Sexy Kylie’s, the elegance of Dance Kylie’s hip motions, etc.) become visible – as elements of what is, surprisingly, one body that nevertheless is not a single body in that it does not always possess these different charms; and as objects of desire, identification, and projection. These various and non-limitable fetishes, perhaps, precisely in the way they continually replace and undo themselves, in a boundless veil-dance, reveal the contours of the body beneath them that, through its very unrepresentability, makes this variety of pleasurable representations possible.

In other words, Kylie’s “identity” (if we can call it that) coalesces only through a series of partial and incomplete fetishizations that are iterative precisely in their open and aleatory character. Kylie proclaims as much on “Spinning Around,” singing “I’m through with the past / Ain’t no point in looking back / The future will be / And did I forget to

mention / I found a new direction / And it leads back to me.”<sup>604</sup> The experience of those who work with her confirms and expands Kylie’s manifesto on the self, as shown in the words of the celebrity photographer Vincent Peters, who took her portrait in the Ibiza sunset that became the cover of *Light Years*:

The great thing about Kylie is that she differs from other celebrities. There is a separation between how celebrities perceive themselves and what the public wants to see. Most are concerned with reproducing a certain logo or caricature of themselves. They want to cling on to an image developed years ago which makes things different because there is no room to take a picture, you aren’t really forced to improvise which is when the best things happen. Every photographer has their own very personal vision of her, and she lets them have it. That is the big difference with Kylie, that she walks in and says “This is me, what are you going to do with it.”<sup>605</sup>

Kylie manages to escape a fetishistic or Imaginary closure of her own ego by opening herself up to multiple fetishizations of and by others. But she does not simply allow them to cling to their own fetishes – according to Peters, Kylie’s double statement that she is what he is going to do with her forces him to engage in the improvisatory disorders of desire, in a fantasy developed and played out in the present. Refracting this through the crystal of language, Kylie spurs Peters into full speech, by allowing his desire to emerge in the Real of her body. Paradoxically, when Kylie allows Peters to have his desire, she forces him to confront and work through it.

Kylie, oddly enough, occupies the analytical position – perhaps most notably in her very odd (in the rhetoric of pop music) decision not to imagine or symbolize the future. Look again at “Spinning Around,” which at first appears to be a paradigmatic getting-over-you song: instead of singing, as we expect, that she knows that her future will be *bright*, she instead posits that “the future will be.” So, even if in the future she will find a new direction that leads back to her, she keeps the direction of that detour radically open. Her assertion “Whatever you do to me, it will be me” gives you free reign to improvise beyond the boundaries of her present identity; exactly that protean paradox – that what she becomes will have always been her, once she becomes it – seems to excite and exalt Kylie. She will embrace your fantasy just because it will change her, thus becoming a part of her new identity, just as seeing your fantasy embraced by her will reveal new contours in your own desire.

Historically, Kylie most famously enacted this principle in her duet with Nick Cave, “Where the Wild Roses Grow,” allowing the rock/art-punk singer to cast her as the victim of a folkloric, pedophilic sex-murderer. Although obviously other divas like Madonna and Lady Gaga had and would push their representations past the boundaries of acceptability by casting themselves as victims, Kylie’s decision to appear on Cave’s *The Murder Ballads* remains extreme. Unlike Madonna or Lady Gaga, Kylie consented to appear as a victim in *someone else’s* fantasy, on someone else’s record; when Lady Gaga died in her MTV Video Awards performance of “Paparazzi” it was explicitly by her own hand. (Perhaps the most comparable performance to Kylie’s in “Where the Wild Roses Grow” is Debbie Harry’s appearance in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, in which Harry rigorously – and with evident

<sup>604</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Spinning Around,” *Light Years* (Parlophone, 2000).

<sup>605</sup> Kylie Minogue and William Baker, *Kylie: La La La* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002) 151. Hereafter cited as *LLL*.

pleasure – submits to the desire of her director and his proxies; Kylie herself iterates Harry’s engagement in such a fantasy more explicitly in her appearance in Leos Carax’s 2012 film *Holy Motors*.) But this is, after all, the same Kylie who so energetically threw herself into the house style of Stock, Aitken, and Waterman – except now, she continues to rigorously explore the necessary conformity of the pop starlet by engaging with another fantasy that is not her own, but the “bad” fantasy of a man who surrounds himself with “Bad Seeds.”

Cave confesses how much “Where the Wild Roses Grow” emerged from his obsession with Kylie:

“Where the Wild Roses Grow” was written very much with Kylie in mind. I’ve wanted to write a song for Kylie for many years... I’ve had quite an obsession with her for about the last six years; I’ve written several songs for her, none of which I felt were appropriate to give to her and it was only until I wrote this song, which is a dialogue between a killer and his victim, that I finally thought I had written the right song for Kylie to sing. I sent the song to her and she replied the next day.<sup>606</sup>

Cave’s “obsession” with Kylie is not at all the same as INXS frontman Michael Hutchence’s hobby of “corrupting Kylie.” Cave consciously emphasizes that he mustn’t “soil” Kylie. Instead, he views duetting as a way of “coming into her world” by bringing her into his – hence the need for the song to be an “appropriate” gift, a gift that reveals the character of both the sender and the receiver. And Kylie demonstrates that once you accept her imperative – “This is me, what are you going to do with it” – she will follow your desire to its limits, with enthusiasm: she replied the very next day.<sup>607</sup> And later, she would cite the duet with Cave, and another one of his gifts – the collection *Poems to Break the Hearts of Impossible Princesses*, by poet Billy Childish – as the grain around which her new identity as an *Impossible Princess* crystallized. Kylie’s famously eccentric instability is not the constant self-reinvention of a Madonna, but a refusal to ever “[shy] away from making some brave but questionable artistic decisions,”<sup>608</sup> precisely those decisions that fans might “question” because they move tangentially and unpredictably away from the identity of “Kylie” that has previously and retroactively coalesced.

So Kylie is always willing to throw herself into an encounter that will re-orient her, for good or ill: she climbs onto a bar to belt out “The Loco-Motion,” or she role-plays her death at Cave’s hands, or she gains avant-garde credibility for her performance in *Holy Motors*, but she also stars in *Street Fighter* and *Biodome*, or she releases the fiercely, frustratingly independent songs of *Impossible Princess*. She is most herself at these moments when an encounter with another – another style, another medium, another producer –

<sup>606</sup> Nick Cave and Jessamy Calkin, “Interview,” in *Tender Prey Newsletter*, February 1996, reprinted at [http://www.bad-seed.org/~cave/interviews/96-02\\_tp.html](http://www.bad-seed.org/~cave/interviews/96-02_tp.html), accessed 4/24/13.

<sup>607</sup> Kylie’s collaboration with Cave (like her relationships with Justin and Michael Hutchence of INXS) also represents her odd quasi-identity as an Australian artist, both within the much wider global market and the Commonwealth market. If Kylie has somehow become an “honorary Brit,” capable of mobility beyond the sphere of the minor Australian market, she nevertheless continues to cultivate her Australian identity, and she is considered something of a national hero by her countrypeople. For Kylie, the uncanny displacements of the global entertainment market fit into the narrative of her peculiarly post-colonial self-fashioning.

<sup>608</sup> Fiona MacDonald, “The iconic Kylie,” in *Madison* (January 16, 2013); archived at <http://www.madisonmag.com.au/news/the-iconic-kylie.htm>, accessed 4/24/13.

metamorphoses her into something she has not, as of yet, always already been. In short, Kylie is *only* Kylie when she is not alone: perhaps not, that is, when she is fully “with” another, but when she is moving tangentially to another, their fantasies inflecting each of them with new attributes, crystallizing new mutual (not identical) affects in and around their coupling.

Kylie and her collaborator/stylist William Baker include this back-and-forth in their coffee-table book *La La La*: Kylie describes how on stage “You transform, you become something else, a combination of the person you are and the person people want you to be. It’s a harmonious coming together of person and projection,” while William, in parallel, writes that “The camera loved her and she loved it back [...] She’d learned quickly that the display of her body could say as much as the features of her face [...] hurtling towards becoming a modern screen goddess, she explored the extremes of artificial femininity.”<sup>609</sup> (I collect sentences written by J. G. Ballard that weren’t actually written by J. G. Ballard.) The inevitable gap between fantasy and the support of that fantasy does not mortify or paralyze Kylie, but instead transforms her. The distance between two poles in fact opens up a possible “harmony.” For William, Kylie reflects herself not via the face, the locus of personalization and self-recognition, but in her multiply-distributed body, consisting of her physical form but also the camera, the screen, the images in print or film, etc., all of which appear here as equally as capable of desiring and fantasizing as human bodies and beings. So when I say “Kylie is always alone,” I also want to suggest that, since Kylie is fundamentally not-Kylie – that since what Kylie *is* is her becoming-other – this not-Kylie is always not-alone, or perhaps that not-quite-aloneness is this not-Kylie that is the very essence of her strange being.

But to say this is still to confine “being alone” to its received definition as “lacking in the significant presence of another, recognizable but different, human being.” This definition certainly does not hold in the images provided by the videos we’ve seen above. Even by herself on a Parisian street, Kylie is able to engage in multiple acts of affective communion with others – even though these are barely recognizable as such. What does it mean, for instance, for Kylie to drop a package, and for the same Kylie, later, to pick up the package that a later Kylie has dropped? Although Kylie does do that awkward half-skip we all do when we rush forward to pick something up that a stranger has dropped, Kylie does not complete the gesture – she doesn’t return the package to the stranger who is her (earlier?) self. Indeed, the rule of interaction between the Kylies could be described as “don’t touch” (precisely in contrast to the narcissistic brutalism of “Did It Again” and its mirror-violence); the beauty of the Kylies’ dance around the traffic light lies in the way they find new and unprecedented ways to weave under and around each other without touching, without colliding.

In the dance, Kylie grants the other Kylies autonomy by embellishing their gestures: the meaning and beauty of what the Kylie on the first pass does when she leans against the pole only emerges when the other Kylies dash under and around her arm. Her gesture is not independent, but only finds its own particular value in conversation with the gestures of the other Kylies; hence the importance of the directive not to touch. Touching would interrupt a gesture, while not-touching and instead passing in the zones peripheral to a gesture defines and discloses a gesture by giving it an energized, polarized, differential context, even though this disclosure is never contemporary to the gesture it reveals. Similarly, the dropped package only discovers its meaning when it becomes a found package – not a returned package, or a

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<sup>609</sup> *LLL* 57.

never-lost package. Kylie cannot give back the package, cannot undo what she in the past has done; but she can continue (and provisionally complete) the action by re-discovering the package that, until then, she did not know she had lost. It is only when Kylie finds her package again that she finds that she has lost the package. In so doing, she defines what this loss will have meant.

Again, Kylie allegorizes Lacan's "full speech," the speech that finally articulates the constitutively traumatic absence around which it consolidates its consistency. Full speech rewrites Freud's parable about the climax of analysis as "catharsis," the moment at which the full plenitude of the painful repressed emotion of the past is finally felt, as conscious and nameable affect, a feeling we can describe, by the analysand on the couch. Freud's catharsis – obviously he borrows the term from Breuer who borrowed it from Aristotle's theory of tragedy – presumes that an emotion was historically present and active up until the moment of its articulation. Kylie in picking up her package, demonstrates, conversely, that loss only becomes sensible once it is articulated in language; full speech, then, crystallizes affect not only across space, in different but historically contemporary bodies, but across time. Telepathy bridges, but does not resolve, both spatial and temporal distances. The feelings of the past and the present – and thus of that future that "will be" – are mutually constructive and constructed; indeed, precisely the difference between past and present feelings opens up the continuity of personality across time, and vice-versa.

Thus can we, telepathically, intercede in our past: not redemptively (Kylie can never make up for her having dropped the package, repair the break between grasp and parcel) but instead constructively, creatively (Kylie can give a variety of meanings to her past action by picking up the package in a variety of different ways). Simultaneously, the very meaning of meaning develops and changes in response to Kylie's action; Lacan describes this double procedure by discussing how "at any given moment the evolving system of human meanings is being displaced and modifies the content of the signifiers, which adopt different usages."<sup>610</sup> This constant rustling, this series of displacements and adjustments, that gives a history to language requires the structure that Lacan calls a "pause": the moment where the present loses (will have lost) control of the signifier, drops it, only to pick it up later, at which point it becomes what it needs to be and to have been to fit into the past and present logic of signification, altering those orders in turn. The video, too, is held together by that revolution during which Kylie loses contact with the package (although it's more correct to say that on the second revolution Kylie finds the package again in order to have (found that she) lost it); that moment – the only moment when we might say that Kylie is "alone" – refracts Kylie into a kaleidoscopic array of possible Kylies.

Hence any decision on the meaning or definition of the Kylie of the present is simultaneously, diachronically, a decision on the meaning or definition of the Kylie in the past. Freud called this "overdetermination," which Lacan defines as the "necessary requirement that for a symptom to occur there must be at least a duality, at least two conflicts at work, one current and one old"<sup>611</sup>; but in Lacan's crystallinguistic model of full speech we cannot discuss such a simplistic "duality" of conflicts. If we indeed encounter a past and present conflict in the symptom, this doesn't imply that they are two different conflicts – instead, they are both precipitates of one synchronic discursive structure, passing between and giving meaning to past and present, self and other. Freud's "cathartic" model implies a notion of overdetermination that would suggest that on the couch we finally and

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<sup>610</sup> P 119.

<sup>611</sup> P 119.

fully experience the traumatic affect that we had originally felt in the past (but had repressed); in the present, then, we exorcise this parasitic, demonic passion, finally “getting it out of our system.” But Lacan’s revision, crystallinguistic overdetermination, works like Kylie’s view of Paris (and although Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, claims that a view of Rome showing all the buildings that ever stood in that eternal city is unimaginable, that’s exactly what Paris looks like, to Kylie and to “her” camera(man)). By interacting with the discourse of the other – with discourse as other, as passing through our bodies both in space and time – we open up the possibility not to re-experience past affect as it once was or how it ought to have been had we not repressed it, but instead to revise past affects, discovering new ways to have felt. Thus we invent a new past for ourselves, and become different people in the present, as the two conjoint consequences of a dual gesture, a double intercession in discourse. Although it may seem to us, at first, that Kylie’s “world” is “hers,” claimed by the transparent self-sameness of her ego, the temporal logic that her world implies explicitly demonstrates that it is riven by pauses, by missing time – which in turn enable her to build new old Kylies (at any point in the video, the Kylie repeating the archaic or “original” actions of leaving the laundry, etc. is the most recent Kylie to emerge). Her world brims over not only with moments when it stops being hers, but also with a blossoming population of its possessor’s ghosts.

This brings me to the final feature of the video I would like to discuss: its brokenness. Certainly, going around and around in a groove provides a visible image of the “broken record.” But the video breaks down in an interesting way as well. Diegetically, the video is obsessed with breakdown and lapses in functioning: mermaids plaster an illegally-parked car with tickets, the delivery driver’s scooter loses its equilibrium, falls, and knocks over a motorcycle, a woman throws her boyfriend out of her apartment (romantic failure rhyming with the destruction of the mattress, notebooks, and the like that she throws out the second-story window), a boy attempts to flip his skateboard but fails, a man in a wheelchair rolls off a curb and offscreen into the path of an oncoming car. Kylie even inauspiciously begins each of her walks by running under a ladder. In Kylie’s world, nothing goes right. And yet, to this list of collisions and crashes, we could add a supplementary list of near-misses: for instance, a friendly passer-by maneuvers the man in a wheelchair out of the way of the car. Indeed, at that same intersection, a car, a bicyclist, a few pedestrians, and a boy jumping from one concrete platform to the next all manage to weave narrowly around each other without colliding. The beauty of the dance and the danger of collision are two halves of the same process.

But things going wrong is more than the theme of the video. By choosing to fill up his screen with near-endless (by the end) amounts of random motions, Gondry all but assures that his video will erupt in errors, moments where bodies cross through each other, breaking the pleasurable illusion by which they all appear to occupy the same plausible space. So the very certain risk of collision and failure defines the practice of the video as well. Gondry appears to do his best to minimize this risk; by the final rotation, he has Kylie occupy the foreground as much as possible, blocking out as many of the inevitable errors as she (and he) can. This may appear to be the most conventional strategy: push the error, the structural risk of breakdown, to the periphery, define it as pathological and not as central. However, one detail belies this otherwise universal strategy. On Kylie’s very first double-revolution, the two boys in green shirts, leapfrogging from concrete platform to concrete platform, launch themselves towards one central platform... and land on it, crossing into each other, just as Kylie (and the video) begin to turn away.



One plus one is two, not one (and the Pauli exclusion principle restricts itself to this simplest of cases), and, in terms of special effects, this revolution presents the easiest-to-solve form of the formal problem Gondry sets himself. So why does he make such a big mistake right away, in full view of the camera and the viewer? The colliding jumpers come into the video right before Kylie begins her dance with the lamppost, failing not to touch right before Kylie so spectacularly succeeds in narrowly, gracefully failing to touch her others. Do the jumpers deliver an allegorical warning by fatally literalizing the notion of “occupying the same space”? Trapped in a mirror-relation (they face off and lunge at each other), they will destroy each other in their attempt to colonize the space alone.

But why do we want to read the jumpers as failed examples of what Kylie does “better” in picking up the package, or in engaging in the dance? At the end of the video, after all, the whole business with the pole does seem to be getting in the way of the last Kylie, who has to jump away from what’s become a bit of a mess. Gracefulness seems like the localized exception or exaggeration of a general awkwardness. This reminds us of another Lacanian maxim, which he never tires of repeating, about the definition of the real world (not always the Real, at least not in our culture): “To be a psychoanalyst is simply to open your eyes to the evident fact that nothing malfunctions more than human reality.”<sup>612</sup> Reality jumps, crashes, skips – and it doesn’t make sense. If science defines the Real as “that which always returns to the same place,” then reality adds to this definition the fact that the same place is never quite the same, since it is always being occupied by multiple and contradictory forces, and always being displaced by this same element of return: the Earth may spin on its axis, but it also flies forward; the Earth may go around the sun, but the sun itself is on its way somewhere else. In fact, the Real expresses itself in reality in the glitch, the skip – a “broken record” is one that breaks down, temporally, because some scratch or mote of dust leads the forward spiral of the track to return to the same place, to go backward. The Real creates such glitches in reality by returning to the same place in an excessive, radical manner. Remember, crystallinguistics produces effects in the Real. “Come Into My World” allegorizes this law, by showing how the distributed field of discourse causes interference effects to coalesce everywhere, across time and space. The alethosphere favors collision, surprise, and encounter, sometimes beyond the rules of its ideological programming.

Of course, the most paradigmatically Lacanian model of breakdown in the video is the break-up, the woman angrily throwing her boyfriend’s possessions out onto the street as he attempts – what? to catch them and save them from injury, or not to be hit by them as they fall and save himself from injury? Although Lacan takes this explicitly as his theme in *Encore*, he already argues in *The Psychoses* that to adopt the psychoanalytic viewpoint we must accept unhappiness (etymologically, “not-falling-into-place-correctly-ness”; rhetorically, “infelicity”) as the structural precondition of human existence: we are not unhappy by accident, no matter how much we believe that happiness is the rule and unhappiness the exception.<sup>613</sup> Hence the crashes that proliferate, and indeed take center stage, in the video: “my” world can never be a place that works, or that works out once and for all. Even what first appears as a graceful solution can become a potential road hazard. Conversely, even what first appears as a terrible loss can be modified in time, by (as Austin might say) picking up the parcel and running with it. Collision and interference define the complex energy-field of discourse; as such they enable rare moments of serendipity.

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<sup>612</sup> p 82.

<sup>613</sup> p 83.



Even more strangely, constant collision enables us to engage in the consummately human, since it transcends the mortal destiny of the human, act of forgiving, of making up for, crashes and complications. For Nietzsche, any denial of the originality of disaster negates the possibility both of experiencing the affective dimension of disaster and of imagining more and more artful, more and more fanciful ways to escape the inevitable crash awaiting us all. Kylie redefines Freud's tragic theory of "catharsis" as, instead, a human comedy of constant accident that becomes not fatal but transformative, and endlessly open to revision. The mattress that falls from the apartment window, for instance, is a potential package: we can imagine a future in which the man and woman carry it back up the steps, together, recording another affective groove into the space and time of their apartment and their relationship. Another turn is always possible: hesitation can become a dance, a dance can become a roadblock. But this kind of "felicity" is only possible inasmuch as "infelicity" – not-quite-holding-together-ness – is the general law of discourse, and inasmuch as our present is never fully present to itself. Of course, this fracture in presence itself allows us to come into Kylie's world, to improvise not with her, but alongside her (not always seamlessly), in the breaks and lapses that structure her world. Her world is hers because the contours of these fractures are unmistakably her own – although the things that we do with these fragments of non-meaning are radically unbounded. Her world only becomes her own through the intercession of this other force, whether wielded by some other Kylie or by some other other; the polarizing field of another fantasy allows her to test the breaks and gaps, to discover the points at which the fantasy does not correspond to her – and then to claim those moments, not by possessing them, but by allowing them to possess her, to bear them and proliferate them *as her signature*.

Adorno wrote, way back in "The Form of the Phonograph Record," that the materiality of the record inhered in its self-negating self-sameness – the way its hieroglyphic always gave back the same message. Kylie suggests that Adorno reaches this conclusion because he wasn't looking at the phonograph record in the right way, or more accurately that his assumption of a difference between man and machine prevented him from coming into her world, from believing *in* what she believes. If you view the record from the standpoint of the needle-curve, in other words *as the fetish-object*, you see something like the "Come Into My World" video: several similar songs that exist both diachronically, in the temporal progression from one end of the spiral to the other, and synchronically, in the way in which the curves of the spiral nest among and abut each other. By situating the camera's (and the viewer's) gaze at the blind-spot of Adorno's theory – the hole at the center of the record – Kylie allows us to glimpse what she feels, to come into her world. Watching her walk round and round that street, we feel how she feels as a record (remember, Kylie's name is the same as that of at least three of her albums; the signifier "Kylie" refers to the ensemble of her, her psychology, and the objects that distribute and construct her music, including the minds and bodies of her listeners<sup>614</sup>); in fact, we're part of that feeling, since our participation at the missing center of the record is what allows her to turn, turn, turn. And in turning, she meets herself in unprecedented, unlimited ways, never finding herself exactly in the same place, but always improvising a dance with herself, always re-evaluating the meaning and worth of what

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<sup>614</sup> In particular, Kylie's name is the same as 1988's *Kylie*, 1994's *Kylie Minogue*, and 1997's *Kylie Minogue* (the hastily-retitled *Impossible Princess*, which is, after all, another one of her names). If we include in this list 2010's *Aphrodite* and 2007's *X*, the grand total of self-titled Kylie albums comes to five.

has never “already” been done. Kylie is never alone, because she is always refracted through the prisms of an unbounded number of other desires – including her own.

**VII. What does “la la la” mean?** Or, what does it mean to say “la la la”? What kind of act is performed by saying, or singing, “la la la,” to someone else, say, or into a microphone, or just in your own head, whether you want to or not?

This question confronts any listener of Kylie’s song “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” which was, by the way, the most frequently played song of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the UK.<sup>615</sup> I mention this because repetition and insistence are not accidents of the song’s fame, but the very thematic and formal material of its composition. The song’s conceit is its equation of receiving and producing pop sounds, “Over and over and over and over / Like a monkey with a mechanical cymbal,” as Hot Chip would later say, observing that once “The joy of repetition really is in you” you have already become a wind-up toy, a mechanical animal, below and beyond the limits of the human.<sup>616</sup> (But in the same place, as they note, where language has become programming, where humanity has been dispersed by the joy of repetition or insistence, crystallinguistic telepathy becomes possible: “When you

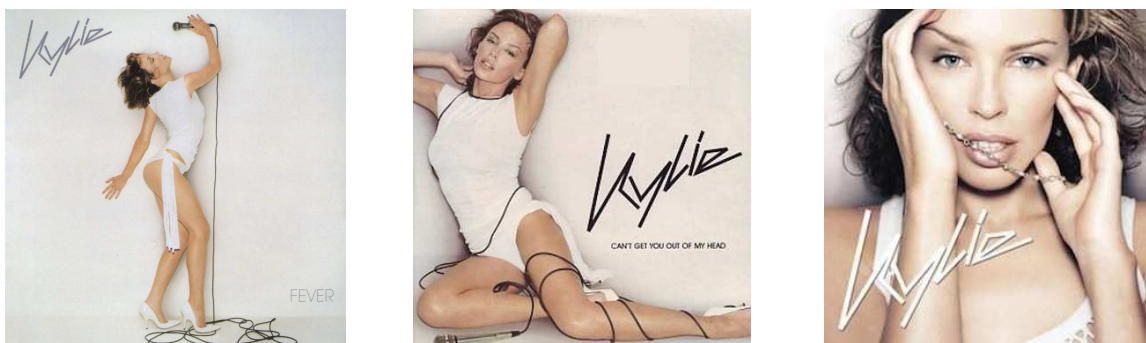


Figure 7: The UK release of *Fever*, the single of “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” the US release of *Fever*

feel this way I really am with you.”)

The song begins in a march of foursquare electric bleeps, cool now, not the sparkling 80’s shimmer of “I Should Be So Lucky,” but instead approaching the zero degree of music: four steps up, wait three beats; four steps down, wait three beats; repeat three times. When Kylie sings, blandly, simply, without character, she sounds perfectly at home in this glacial, white-on-white setting; she affectively matches the backing by discarding her “humanity,” not by humanizing the sounds coming through the speakers. The original album art for the single cover, and for the LP *Fever* on which the track also appears, echo this constructivist aesthetic: pale Kylie, pale garment, pale wall. Only the microphone cord which plugs Kylie’s voice into the electronic world of the radio disturbs the equivalence between her body, her ornaments, and her environment. The American release cover for *Fever* solves the problem a little differently: rather than put Kylie against the wall, the cover frames the crystalline ice of her necklace against her teeth. What could cut what? Both substances are too mineral, too hard, to give way to the other. They bite each other, Kylie’s real teeth and the teeth of her

<sup>615</sup> “The Kylie hit you can’t get out of your head,” BBC News UK (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16372712>, accessed 4/22/2013).

<sup>616</sup> Hot Chip, “Over and Over,” from *The Warning* (Astralworks, 2006).

necklace, they nip at each other, but they leave no marks and draw no blood. It's like kissing in porn – optimized not to swallow the other's tongue nor to be swallowed by the lips of the other, but instead, by refusing such an introjective fantasy (since there is no interior into which to throw the other object), allowing for a captivating play of lips and tongues now become radically, topologically equivalent organs. But, unlike Serge Gainsbourg, no illusion of depth fascinates Kylie. Look at her, covering Grace Jones's *Island Life* cover: she doesn't want to break down or break through the wall; she wants to become the wall, to slide its surface against hers, to become another surface standing impossibly near the surface of the wall. Oddly, she has realized, her very flatness allows her to achieve such intimacies with the blank, meaningless materials of the world around her.

So goes for the song: the seductiveness of the way that it slides up and down alongside Kylie's voice lies in the structural revolution by which voice and setting are conceived as originally, fundamentally separate. The backing and the vocal do not mirror each other, as Kylie proved when she performed the melody of "Can't Get You Out of My Head" to the harmony of New Order's "Blue Monday" at the 2002 Brit Awards, in perhaps the watershed moment for the mashup, her performance cementing a popular embrace of what was until then primarily a novelty form. The mashup refuses the idea of a mirror-relation, or even a negatively dialectical relation, between the sung melody and its instrumental form, the very rhetoric of a musical "setting" of a text. Instead, it generates a different kind of enjoyment by allowing the listener to trace two almost indifferent surfaces as they glide past each other, in so doing discovering their similarities – and particularities. Again, flat-Kylie's-voice and flat-wall-of-sound slide alongside each other, and disclose the contours (if not the depths) of their forms as they do so, with the relay of the microphone cable not plugging them into, but instead folding them around and against each other.

The song's structural "reduction" of Kylie's character to a simple, mechanical affect permits this aesthetics: as music critic Tim Finney writes, "How did Kylie make one of the decade's finest dance-pop anthems? By offering less: less singing, less melody, less *feeling*. What's left is a buzzy, insatiable desire, an itch you can't scratch but maybe can dance out."<sup>617</sup> Importantly, "offering less" is not the same as "having less to offer" – it's not that she has a naturally thin voice, biologically destined to mesh best with synthesized settings. A simple glance at *Kylie Minogue* and *Impossible Princess* will confirm the statement that she "can" "sing." Instead, we need to follow Paul Morley's suggestion that Kylie's "vocal strengths, the ease with which her thin, sweet voice can be processed without damaging its essential tough-naïve qualities" are the product of a discipline of "understatement," so practiced that by now she can "pull [it] off in her sleep" (this art of understatement clearly isn't a conscious or fully-conscious one).<sup>618</sup> By reducing the domain of vocality or vocal expression, Kylie begins to cause the voice to emerge; by reducing the domain of feeling, Kylie begins to cause desire to emerge; in Lacan's terms, in her full speech, the Symbolic domain of her song will cause something to be felt, not immediately, not directly, but already, in the Real.

What's left after all this reduction? Only this residue of *la la la*, which will form the microphone cable connecting Kylie and the listener. It's introduced right after those first

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<sup>617</sup> Tim Finney, "37. Can't Get You Out of My Head," from *The Top 500 Tracks of the 2000's*, Pitchfork Media (<http://pitchfork.com/features/staff-lists/7692-the-top-500-tracks-of-the-2000s-50-21/2/>), accessed 4/23/2013). Hereafter cited as "37."

<sup>618</sup> Paul Morley, *Words and Music: A History of Pop in the Shape of a City* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2005) 23. Hereafter cited as *WM*.

four bars, at first exactly in tune with the steady step-by-step motion of the beat but then syncopated:

La la la la la la la  
 La la la la la la la  
 La la la la la la la  
 La la la la la la la

I just can't get you out of my head  
 Boy your loving is all I think about  
 I just can't get you out of my head  
 Boy it's more than I dare to think about<sup>619</sup>

This song has more *la*'s than "words," and the *la*'s do more important work than the words. But what do the *la*'s need to do? By 2001, Kylie had been a pop star for 15 years; although she first achieved tremendous success as the puppet of Stock, Aitken, and Waterman, she later struggled to emerge as an independent artist. Her name, and her music, were synonymous with the most critically uninteresting, since the most "unartistic," domains of pop music (this is how she appears, for instance, in every academic article that has deigned to mention her, as a metonym for the pop music that should not or cannot be discussed academically). Her albums prior to *Fever* – the indie-pop experiment *Impossible Princess*, doomed to commercial failure when its release date coincided with the death of Princess Diana, and the Ibiza-drenched dance record *Light Years* – had defined Kylie as, at best, a niche performer in a minor genre. And, in the words of one critic, "'Can't Get You Out of My Head' is 231 seconds long, which is not a very long time in which to change someone's mind."<sup>620</sup> But the *la*'s do, quite literally, change your mind: once you hear them, you will never be able to stop hearing them, in accordance with the track's "explicit mission of reprogramming your brain."<sup>621</sup> The *la*'s are programmed for maximal hookiness: they are meant to become a part of your psychic hardwiring.

So, we might ask, what kind of object is "la la la," and how and where is it produced and consumed? The song begins by insisting on a kind of reflex automatism: you *can't get* this sound out of your head; it insists in you without any conscious or voluntary participation; it insists through the materiality of your nervous system and not through your mind. So quite literally "la la la" is something that takes place not only in Kylie's mouth but in your "head," if by "head" we mean your cochlea and tympanum, the organization of your nerve-connections, and (again, not voluntarily) the physical motion of your jaw, throat, lips, tongue that is automatically produced when you think of "la la la" – thus even the sound of your own voice singing "la la la," your voice being overridden by some external parasite or ear/computer worm. "La la la" turns you into a recording and reproducing technology, into the recording and reproducing technology that you always were. But "la la la" could not happen in your voice and in Kylie's voice (and in the voices of anyone else who may happen

<sup>619</sup> "ICG."

<sup>620</sup> Mark Pytlik, "5. Can't Get You Out of My Head," in *The Top 100 Singles of 2000-2004*, Pitchfork Media (<http://pitchfork.com/features/staff-lists/5949-the-top-100-singles-of-2000-04-part-one/10/>, accessed 4/23/13).

<sup>621</sup> *Best of the Aughts: Singles*, Slant ([http://www.slantmagazine.com/features/article/best-of-the-aughts-singles/214/page\\_10/P10](http://www.slantmagazine.com/features/article/best-of-the-aughts-singles/214/page_10/P10), accessed 4/23/13).

to hear this song) without simultaneously occurring in all kinds of other bodies: the languages of musical notation in which the song was written, the microphones, mixers, synthesizers, etc. that produced the original track, the sound-software of compact disks, records, MP3 files, music videos, bootleg copies of music videos, etc. that variously translate the original mix into portable and circulating patterns of information and code, and in turn the various hardware such as Discmen, CD players, car stereos, web browsers, iTunes applications, MP3 players, record players, concert tours, cover performances, etc. that the software plugs into and that condense the track into a sensible form directed towards human hearing and human reprogramming. The logic of “la la la” radically equates all these technologies by re-writing them all so that they can repeatedly play back the hook, not always at their own instigation. When we think of “la la la” as an object, we have to think of two things: first, the massive worldwide network of variously-broken-records that keep turning “la la la” over in their heads, in their material extension (imagine a photo of the world from space showing every communications channel that had been colonized by reproducing “la la la” – it must look like some massive global spiderweb woven by humans and machines alike); and second, the *very structure of iterative insistence* that vehicles the song’s infectiousness, the way in which a repetition repeats itself.

However, thinking about the object “la la la” should remind us that repetition never repeats itself repetitively – that exact replay is merely a degenerate form of repetition. “La la la,” suggestively, foregrounds how the micro-level work of one element in its distributed network (say, for instance, Kylie learning the song and repeating it into the microphone, with the first sketchy version of the backing track playing in her earphones) is analogous to, but never identical to, the work of every other element in that network. The song itself invites transformation through iteration, becoming “Can’t Get Blue Monday Out of My Head” or being covered (perhaps unnecessarily or reductively) as high stalker psychodrama by The Flaming Lips. To consume “la la la” is to produce “la la la,” as we see when Finney argues that “The point is not to want her, but to want what she wants: In the right environment, dancing to “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” traces a shared history of hopeful flirtations, irresistible seductions, inevitable disappointments, and the helpless compulsion to repeat the cycle again.”<sup>622</sup> “La la la” is not consumable as an object because it produces something – crystallizes something – provisional, improvisatory, and fleeting in both you and Kylie (and your iPod) as it slips away into its next iteration. Morley suggests this by comparing “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” to Alvin Lucier’s “I Am Sitting in a Room,” thus assimilating them to an alternative imagining of “background music” (Eno’s “ambient music,” Satie’s “*musique d’ameublement*”): both “songs” are, essentially, spatio-temporally bound, but reproducible, events, things that happen between bodies and machines in particular settings at particular times, and as such revelatory of their surroundings in that they register the difference that that surrounding will have made on their sound.<sup>623</sup> When we start looking at the song this way, we discover that it “has all the appearances of a song but is actually an electronic sequence of events layered and falsified into a series of shapes biased towards the appearance of a song”<sup>624</sup> – wouldn’t we prefer to think about it as a “song,” rather than this endlessly proliferating, interwoven collection of “events”? This second typology, as Kylie says, is “more than I dare to think about.”

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<sup>622</sup> “37.”

<sup>623</sup> *WM* 37.

<sup>624</sup> *WM* 65.

If the song is such a sprawling network of physically-mediated events, this would explain its fundamentally public character<sup>625</sup> - not only its massively important success as a globally-traded commodity (to which we will return), but also the minimal sense in which any performance of its “la la la” implies a self and an other, and thus discovers alterity lurking within the apparently solipsistic act of daydreaming, in a particularly bizarre way. Sarah Cracknell of Saint Etienne (whose “Nothing Can Stop Us” was covered by Kylie as the original B-side to “Confide in Me”) explores this notion further on “Over the Border,” from the band’s 2012 *Words and Music by Saint Etienne* (whose title, non-coincidentally, is the same as that of Morley’s book about “Can’t Get You Out of My Head”). The song is a confessional, possibly autobiographical monologue about pop Bildung:

I was in love, and I knew he loved me because he made me a tape  
 I played it in my bedroom, I lived in my bedroom, all of us did  
 Reading Smash Hits and Record Mirror, Paul Morley and the NME,  
 Dave McCulloch and Sounds, Modern Eon and Modern English,  
 Mute, Why, Zoo, Factory,  
 Cutting them up, sucking them in, managing the story on my own<sup>626</sup>

“Over the Border” highlights a particular kind of music industry: the work of the fan, whose tools are the glue and scissors with which she collects images and stories, or the mixtape on which he aurally collages fragments of track from records or radio broadcasts. Note that although Cracknell’s lyric sexually distributes this labor, it simultaneously insists on the homology between the processes at work by describing them as forms of “cutting up” and “sucking in” that perform a certain labor of “management.”

Cracknell’s logic implies a form of consumption/production technology analogous to the minimal definition of “machine” provided by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Œdipus*, the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: any apparatus set up to interrupt a certain flow (produced by another such apparatus or combination of apparatuses) and then to produce another such flow (which in turn may be interrupted by another apparatus or combination of apparatuses).<sup>627</sup> By restating McLuhan’s notion of every medium taking another medium as its content in this schematic, skeletal form, Deleuze and Guattari are able to throw certain McLuhanian assumptions into question (for instance, that there is an “ultimate medium,” or that the human body is originally holistic in any meaningful way). “Managing” the flow of the sounds coming through the radio, through the magazines, through the products of other such bedroom managers, is not here a shabby simulacrum of the “management” work done by record producers, music executives, and even (perhaps) musicians, but instead the exact corollary of such work. What happens when the work of consuming music becomes legible as a different, but coeval, form of production – when your own head is conscripted into the production of the song that you can’t get out of it? Obviously, since the fundamental function available to these machines is to interrupt a stream in the process of consuming it, it’s impossible for the machine to consider something like “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” without also allowing it into its body; this model has

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<sup>625</sup> WM 29 et passim.

<sup>626</sup> Saint Etienne, “Over the Border,” *Words and Music by Saint Etienne* (Heavenly: 2012). Hereafter cited as “OTB.”

<sup>627</sup> AO 5.

no room for second-order consumption or metalanguage, leaving the machines constantly and necessarily open to Trojan-horse-style overwriting and parasitism.

Deleuze and Guattari's critique suggests a radical redefinition of the fetish. In light of the insight that all consumption is production, and that all production is inherently transformative, Deleuze and Guattari turn to Marx to explain how society is able to reproduce itself while minimizing the structurally revolutionary fault of such iterations. The fetish, for Deleuze and Guattari, appears as a universal mode of recording, a generalized field on which all productions are projected – thus as a universal ground for the otherwise fundamentally eccentric interactions of the various machines. (A sentence taken out of context from a translation of *Anti-Edipus* suggests this movement in a manner that resonates strongly with the paranoiac position of the music industry in an age of proliferating reproductions: “Furnishing or realizing surplus value is what establishes recording rights.”<sup>628</sup>) By presenting itself as a universal recording of production, capital appears to have conjured production into being; production appears here as a detour of capital, a way for capital to achieve its own ends.<sup>629</sup> This is the same fetishistic logic we have encountered at work in the magical reasoning of statements like “Isn't it convenient that big roads seem to run through all the major cities?” and “Isn't it great how pleasurable sex is?” – cause substitutes for effect, and the world seems to be set up in the most miraculous of ways (cities in fact arise at sites of exchange and flow, the forms of intercourse we seek out are determined from the beginning by our own desires). Deleuze and Guattari discover the fetishistic function of this universal recording surface, which – not coincidentally – is where “something on the order of a *subject* can be discerned.”<sup>630</sup> The stabilization of the fetishistic medium as an original cause and not as part of the constant flow of production/consumption thus entails the stabilization of the subject; Deleuze and Guattari challenge us to believe more fully in the fetish, to see how it is caught up in chains of production and consumption, so as to throw the recording, and the subject, back into the endless game of proliferating chains of production and consumption. In other words, you love someone because you make them a tape; your desire emerges from the point of intersection between the various streams and interruptions that constitute the mixing of the tape. (And if you know someone loves you because he made you a tape, you love him back by listening to the tape.) If subjectivity is the by-product of mechanic insistence, then we can understand why belief in the consistency and historical originarity of our own egos is the highest form of fetishism.

What happens, then, when the tape is passed on, plugged in to the next desiring-machine? For starters, it's important to notice the form of intersubjectivity that this circulation of the tape implies; Cracknell describes the tape as the object allowing her to “know he loved me.” Is this just a perfectly ironic statement about the naïveté of youth? At a similar moment in “Can't Get You Out of My Head,” Kylie sings: “There's a dark secret in me / Don't leave me locked in your heart.”<sup>631</sup> Remarkably, the truth about *her* desire is written in *your* heart – and she enjoins you to examine your own heart in order to “Set me free / Feel the need in me.” Kylie ventriloquizes the Lacanian maxim by which one's desire is the desire of the other, and the observation that the “Che vuoi?” we hear as the demand of the other is in fact the unanswered question we had posed to the other, now returning as

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<sup>628</sup> AO 11.

<sup>629</sup> AO 10-11.

<sup>630</sup> AO 16.

<sup>631</sup> “ICG.”



a narcissistic echo. But she also implies that we could “feel the need” in her, experience the real of her desire, going beyond the limits set by the schematic reading of Lacan’s theory, in which the only desires we ever encounter are the projected and deformed forms of our own desire. We’ve seen how Kylie discovers and transforms her subjectivity by allowing others to use her as the projective screen for their own desires; here she examines the mutuality or reversibility of this process. By projecting her desire, she offers you a chance to discover her in discovering yourself, both by examining your “heart” but also by seeing how Kylie is at work elsewhere in you beyond your heart, in parts of you that are irreducible to your defined, biologically-ordered body. In playing the song back, managing it on your own – whether the song be “Can’t Get You Out of My Head” or a mixtape made for you – you perform the desire of the machine that passes between you and the other. In your voice, for instance, you tell Kylie (or someone else, or something else, or...) that you can’t get her out of your head, that you have a dark secret. And by addressing the song to another, you open a moment in which that other can free you and transform you. The mixtape, which circulates and produces the song beyond the limits of “reproductive rights,” keeps desire transforming, proliferates the chances for metamorphosis and the recognition of new subjectivities, beyond the fetishistic closure of the music-industrial machine.

In that way, the mixtape allows you to “know” the love of the other in the same way that you know the truth of the matheme on Lacan’s blackboard – not in a way that is entirely satisfying, since its formalization does not fully target the understanding of the ego. The mixtape plugs you into the elements of the other’s desire that do not target your subjectivity: if it is “the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject,” this is because “Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it.”<sup>632</sup> The mixtape is a problematic object: it is simultaneously the totem allowing us to believe in the reciprocity of the other’s desire and the support of a potential radicalization of that belief that takes us beyond the closure of our narcissistic fantasy. Deleuze and Guattari highlight this paradoxical dual potential of the partial (*viz.*, fetishizable) object in precisely crystalline terms: “If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality. Desire is the set of *passive syntheses* that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. The real is the only product, the result of the passive syntheses of desire as autoproductive of the unconscious.”<sup>633</sup>

The real world is the world of “passion” as what Marx calls a “natural and sensuous object,”<sup>634</sup> not of “need,” understood as the privation of a necessary and identifiable object. Instead the real confronts us with an overabundance of never-entirely-imaginable data and intensities – affects as “passions,” not as “feelings.” So the emotional machine that we reduce via the imagination of the “feeling subject” constantly responds to and re-produces affective experience in the real – think here of those electronic signals that produce the biological and mechanical dispositions of bodies that we label as certain feelings. This is an anxious world, for certain; after all, physiological excitation is notoriously difficult to categorize. In other words, we’re justified in feeling anxious about what exactly we’re feeling when we feel anxious (is it love? panic? arousal? etc.). But at the same time, this observation allows us to see how love makes the world go round in a potentially revolutionary manner, because love as we might know it can always be more than we understand it to be.

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<sup>632</sup> AO 26.

<sup>633</sup> AO 26.

<sup>634</sup> AO 27.



Inflected by passion in this way, Deleuze and Guattari's desiring-machines come to resemble our model of Olympian song, in particular through their opposition to the "technical machines" that "obviously work only if they are not out of order" and that do not break down, exactly, but more often "wear out."<sup>635</sup> The technical machine transmits value to its product in direct proportion to the degree in which it wears out; thus all its wear and tear translates into a calculable, recuperable profit. Its loss of self is redeemed through a surplus registered properly in the body of capital, the entire process depending on the predictable, formalizable character of its production. But this Promethean operation does not correspond to the mode of production of the desiring-machines, which instead "continually break down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly: the product is always an offshoot of production, implanting itself upon it like a graft."<sup>636</sup> First of all, Deleuze and Guattari discover Olympian singing by observing that breakdown is not an accident, but instead the rule, of machine functioning.<sup>637</sup> No redemptive logic of the human is here possible, since the nature of the human-machine is itself defined by the constant breakdown of boundaries between the human and the machine, at the level of the real – precisely the motion which McLuhan sought to reduce and codify through his myth of prosthetics.

Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize how such a breakdown is not precisely fatal (in the sense of mortifying); instead, in a generalized context of grafting, the constant interaction of individual desiring-machines perpetuates breakdowns, so that every encounter, every potential product, leaves the "original" form of the desiring-machine transformed, again at the level of the Real. Interactions with other machines metamorphose our bodies, so that any encounter with another flow rewrites us even as we rewrite it. Again, any rehearsal of "Can't Get You Out of My Head" re-wires your brain. Breakdown does not end production, but transforms production and the medium of production itself.

Finally, "breakdown" here begins to look more and more like Derrida's "iterability," the force of escaping context carried by every repeatable – hence every formalized or formalizable – trait. We define the machine's production as "breakdown" only inasmuch as it does not correspond with its previous laws of behavior, but if this is the rule then we must think, not of the subject, but of the constant self-subversion of the subject – the constant discovery of new desires, new forms of meaning, in the endless improvisation of desire we engage in with other desiring-machines. Even with "la la la" stuck in your head, you don't end up singing the same song; instead, the very insistence of "la la la" allows it to transform your head, and thus the situation of its own meaning. In Morley's words, "Once the song was working commercially and getting inside people's heads like an irresistible command, the song became more and more real, more and more an accurate self-reflection of its own reflective surfaces."<sup>638</sup> Paradoxically, the song's success as an instrument of global capital – remember, "Can't Get You Out of My Head" was a number one in every European country except Finland, thus opening the question of "What's wrong with Finland?" – allows its

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<sup>635</sup> AO 31.

<sup>636</sup> AO 31.

<sup>637</sup> Their example for this generalization of breakdown is, interestingly, a musical one – the compositional style of Maurice Ravel, whose *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* is elsewhere analyzed by Abbate as precisely a work in which life and death, meaning and non-meaning, human and machine, circulate and proliferate beyond any binary logic that would triangulate and define their separate scopes. See AO 31-2.

<sup>638</sup> WM 30.

possibly revolutionary effects to crystallize, everywhere and anywhere. The whole world of capital is now Kylie's world, and there's no saying what might happen in it.

Now, Deleuze and Guattari pitch their critique as explicitly anti-psychoanalytic, as if "Œdipus" synonymized "psychoanalysis," even as opposed to those within the establishment of psychoanalysis who have problematized the seeming self-evidence of the Œdipal drama. By 1972, Lacan too had described the various structures traceable back to the Œdipal complexes as a Freudian myth designed to paper over or explain away a more troubling structure.<sup>639</sup> We know that Lacan has called this more troubling structure "the signifying chain"; in *Anti-Œdipus* Deleuze and Guattari puzzle over this formulation. Although they tip their hat to Lacan's "discovery of this fertile domain of a code of the unconscious, incorporating the entire chain – or several chains – of meaning," they simultaneously seem to resist the very image of "the signifying chain" "because of its multiplicity – a multiplicity so complex that we can scarcely speak of *one* chain or even of *one* code of desire."<sup>640</sup> Instead, Deleuze and Guattari want to focus on the auto-grafting autography of the chain, since "the break or interruption" (at which the chain stops functioning according to the logic that until that point could be induced from its series), "far from being the opposite of continuity [...] conditions this continuity; it presupposes or defines what it cuts into as an ideal continuity."<sup>641</sup> In this way, the insistent structure of data-flow cannot, for Deleuze and Guattari, be called a "chain" inasmuch as "the data, the bits of information recorded, and their transmission form a grid of disjunctions of a type that differs from the previous connections."<sup>642</sup>

And yet, what appears to Deleuze and Guattari as a necessarily two-dimensional space can be produced in a purely linear series if the functions of erasing and overwriting are added to the function of consuming this series; this is the very definition of Turing's ticker-tape computing machine Lydia Liu argues lies at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>643</sup> (Two analogous two-dimensional, yet auto-grafting structures include the telegraph tape and DNA.) I do not merely want to point out the limits of Deleuze and Guattari's science, but instead to explore the ways in which changing the frameworks of their scientific definitions allow us to re-understand the curious way they rejoin Lacan in Kylie's "la la la." For instance, their notion of the interruption in the chain as providing the support for its ideal continuity resembles not only Lacan's theory of the "point de capiton," but also the crystallinguistic effects we have seen by which the transtemporal effect of "full speech," which intercedes in the past and present of discourse simultaneously, itself creates the continuity of a (perhaps historically new) subject's history. This was also the function of the parcel in "Come Into My World": at once the point of entry into the world (to enter the street is to drop the parcel for Kylie; the dropped parcel gives the video viewer a means of identifying with Kylie, and of differentiating between Kylies) and the element whose recovery allows for an escape from the world (since every new way to pick up the parcel, or to react to the way the parcel has been picked up, changes the very meaning of the world, from within the video's rule of absolute reproduction, for both Kylie and the spectator). For that reason, we have to distinguish between two modes of "insistence of the signifying chain"; the first is the

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<sup>639</sup> See *OSP* 102-130.

<sup>640</sup> *AO* 38.

<sup>641</sup> *AO* 36.

<sup>642</sup> *AO* 38.

<sup>643</sup> Lydia Liu, *The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 55 et passim.

Imaginary notion of repetition without difference that Deleuze and Guattari react against; the second is the notion, simultaneously more Symbolic and more Real (since revelatory of the very nature of the signifier and of the means of its propagation in the world of bodies and machines), that absolute repetition differentiates absolutely. Lacan has already argued this much in describing the demand for “something new,” some recognizably novel meaning, as a “sliding-away” that “conceals what is the true secret of the ludic, namely, the most radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself.”<sup>644</sup>

And so we return to “la la la,” which has become something of a maxim or rallying-cry for Kylie and her listeners (the first historical art book produced by Kylie and her collaborator, William Baker, takes it as its title, for instance). The sheer amount of “la la la” that the song presents is something of a challenge to the listener, and something of a game. So what true secret does it disclose – the dark secret that, in being in me, is simultaneously locked in your heart? How do we set this radical diversity, this explosion of alteration and alterity, free, in ourselves and in Kylie? The “la la la” functions like the microphone cable from the album cover: by weaving around the song in all its various instances and around us and our partners in listening, it unites us in an embrace with Kylie, with her song, and with each other, not as full-bodied humans endowed with spiritual and affective depth, but instead in the full flatness of our bodies in their function as machines. Paradoxically, here, in this minimalist white-on-white aesthetic, our irreducibility – precisely what we attempt to seek in the realm of meaning, the quest for which leading us to feel ill at ease in the expanse of blankness Kylie here occupies so naturally – emerges, not as the specific value of our ego, but instead as the residue of what is fundamentally alien to our selves.

In a late essay, Roland Barthes considers a minimalist aesthetic quite similar to Kylie’s: the art of Cy Twombly. Twombly, like Kylie, forms an art, of writing in his case, that first of all rejects all the various apparatuses that have been developed to saturate the aesthetic form with meaning and a recognizable “beauty”: “Précisément loin de la calligraphie, c’est-à-dire de l’écriture formée, dessinée, appuyée, moulée, de ce qu’on appelait au XVIIIe siècle la belle main.”<sup>645</sup> Precisely as far from the hand as an aestheticized object of production and consumption, in other words, and as far from the hand’s maneuvers as possible: “l’essence de l’écriture, ce n’est ni une forme ni un usage, mais seulement un geste, le geste qui la produit *en la laissant traîner* : un brouillis, presque une salissure, une négligence.”<sup>646</sup> Barthes’s essay moves to define this mode of “gestural” art in moving detail: “De l’écriture, TW garde le geste, non le produit. [...] Qu’est-ce qu’un geste ? Quelque chose comme le supplément d’un acte. L’acte est transitif, il veut seulement susciter un objet, un résultat ; le geste, c’est la somme indéterminée et inépuisable des raisons, des pulsions, des paresse qui entourent l’acte d’une *atmosphère*”; he then distinguishes between the message, the transmission of signs, and the gesture, that which is not completely captured by this activity of sign-transmission.<sup>647</sup> Returning us to the affective atmosphere surrounding meaning, Twombly’s aesthetic (at least as Barthes defines it) concerns itself precisely with the crystallinguistic ambience of language.

Barthes later pairs the gesture of the hand in handwriting with “the grain of the voice,” which Cavarero rejects on the grounds of an implicit “depersonalization”: “in

<sup>644</sup> FFC 61.

<sup>645</sup> Barthes, “Cy Twombly ou ‘Non multa sed multum,’” in *Roland Barthes: Œuvres complètes*, vol. V (Paris: Seuil, 2002): 703-720, 704. Hereafter cited as “CT.”

<sup>646</sup> “CT” 704.

<sup>647</sup> “CT” 706.

Barthes' writing, the voice and the body are categories of a depersonalized pleasure in which the embodied uniqueness of each existent (something that Barthes never thematizes) is simply dissolved along with the general categories of the subject and the individual."<sup>648</sup> In other words, Barthes aims for a meaninglessness that is too radical, since it obliterates any possibility of the specific form of uniqueness particular to a body, to a subject, or to the unsteady collage of body and subject that is our interest here. This framework leaves no room even for something like the mechanical signature of a certain typewriter, since the aesthetic object in question does not stand in a dialectical relation to the subject/body witnessing it.

But does this in fact stand as a description of the "grain of the voice"? Barthes, to the contrary, insists that this grain "n'est pas indicible (rien n'est indicible), mais je pense qu'on ne peut le définir scientifiquement, car il implique un certain rapport érotique entre la voix et celui qui l'écoute. On peut donc decrire le grain d'une voix, mais seulement à travers des métaphores."<sup>649</sup> In other words, the grain is articulable, but only in the means of passionate speech – which in turn opens up the grain of one's own speech to consideration and critique, in the model of the same metaphoric criticism that describes and relays the grain. Discussing the grain becomes a mode of effecting changes in the atmosphere of discourse, of precipitating new condensations in the alethosphere, of gaining new knowledge. The grain is only meaningless in that its meaning is constantly open to correction, transformation, grafting, reconsideration, recreation, creation...

"Le Grain de la voix" emphasizes the connection between the grain and the loops and scrawls of Twombly's minuscule, differential handwriting:

Le "grain", c'est le corps dans la voix qui chante, dans la main qui écrit, dans le member qui exécute. Si je perçois le "grain" d'une musique et si j'attribue à ce "grain" une valeur théorique (c'est l'assomption du texte dans l'œuvre), je ne puis que me refaire une nouvelle table d'évaluation, individuelle sans doute, puisque je me suis décidé à écouter mon rapport au corps de celui ou de celle qui chante ou qui joue et que ce rapport est érotique, mais nullement "subjective" (ce n'est pas en moi le "sujet" psychologique qui écoute ; la jouissance qu'il espère ne va pas le renforcer – l'exprimer –, mais au contraire le perdre).<sup>650</sup>

The grain is the insistence of the body, as an iterative machine, as it intersects, never entirely, with the iterative system of meaningfulness incarnated in a language or culture. And seizing on this grain implies the possibility of new erotic relations with the other – not in the sense of completion, but in the sense of mutuality, allowing for the discovery, negotiation, and construction of new feelings. By looking at Twombly's loops, your body replays his gestures as it registers them; the particular affective, sensorimotor fantasy you thus generate of Twombly's technical process is thus completely particular to the constellation of desiring-machines formed by Twombly's body, the particular painting or drawing, and your body. Obviously other desiring-machines can plug into this framework as well, but the minimal scene of communication here involves these three points, each of them similar in the mechanics of their processing. Erotic affect, then, is not for Barthes desire or love as the feelings we recognize as "feelings," but instead a much broader category including all the

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<sup>648</sup> *FMV* 15.

<sup>649</sup> Barthes, "Les fantômes de l'Opéra," in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. IV, cit.: 488-491, 489.

<sup>650</sup> "GV" 155.

various movements and processes of the somatic body as it reacts to the stream of information coming from the other.

Individual, but precisely not subjective, this category of aesthetic experience opens up both onto the world of the other and onto the world of the Other, onto our body as that which is most resistant to subjective symbolization. Each time we sing “la la la” to ourselves, we encounter not only Kylie – not only the biological machines of those around us who sing “la la la” as well – but also the ongoing difference and strangeness of the very instrument that allows us to sing. When Barthes asks “Mais n’est-ce pas la vérité de la voix que d’être halluciné ?”,<sup>651</sup> he means “hallucination” not as Imaginary, but instead aglow with the much odder strangeness of an almost reflexive hallucination that emerges from the double realities of the body and discourse – a fantasy that we call “hallucination” only because it too palpably contains the trace of the Real that escapes our waking reality. A bizarre game of telephone emerges: in response to the grain of another, an interlocutor brings out and re-creates this grain through a series of metaphors, which in turn occasion the intervention of another interlocutor, whose metaphors can re-create the value or specificity of the voices that have come before.

This world of call-and-response rejoins that of Cavarero’s dream, in which “The metaphysical machine, which methodically negates the primacy of the voice over speech, should be dismantled by turning this primacy into an essential destination,”<sup>652</sup> except here “destination” is not limited to the particular, historically-contingent body of the interlocutor, and instead, since it aims at the core of nonindividuality that is the only thing the two bodies in erotic communication have in common, endlessly offers itself up to new interlocutors, new responses, new repetitions that may playfully introduce radical diversity into all the ostensible forms of unity that have until now appeared to structure the scene of communication. By responding to and soliciting the “embodied uniqueness” of the other – and the self as Other – the voice searches out what Cavarero elsewhere calls “singular flesh,”<sup>653</sup> recalling Barthes’s definition of the flesh, the “corps interne,” as “la seule partie érotique” of a particular body.<sup>654</sup> Debbie Harry explored this paradox in her song “In the Flesh”: although it may seem like the song is an injunction to end singing, to stop her song by answering her demand for the delivery of the beloved body, in fact she can only be with that body through the injunction *not* to meet physically. Coupling appears as a lure distracting us from a deeper mutuality.

This is not to say that Kylie also fetishizes the absolute limit between the self and the other qua absolute, in the Gainsbourgian mode of “anamour.” Instead, her song intensely solicits a different kind of bodily communion. “La la la” must be passed on (The Knife wittily signposts the contours of this promiscuity on their song of that name: “I’m in love with your brother / What’s his name? [...] He wasn’t really looking for some more and / Found company on the dancefloor and / Does he know what I do and / You’ll pass this on, won’t you?”<sup>655</sup>). But it circulates not only as ideal or program, but as the biogenico-mechanical fact of that programming; it inserts itself into us, and we exchange it like two slipper-animalculae conjugating their genetic material. This promiscuity, again, is not *a priori* opposed to various social forms, with the various subjectivities and identities those forms

<sup>651</sup> “GV” 152.

<sup>652</sup> *FMV* 15.

<sup>653</sup> *FMV* 238.

<sup>654</sup> “GV” 156.

<sup>655</sup> The Knife, “Pass This On,” *Deep Cuts* (Rabid: 2003).

assume; nevertheless, it will always overflow and breach the boundaries of those subjectivities, since it intersects with them not on the level of the recognizably meaningful, but instead on the blank, reflectionless white canvas that is our body, in which we never recognize ourselves. But again, in “la la la” the body most strongly emerges in its blankness, in its unmistakable excess of symbolization: when singing “la la la” Kylie is at her most immediately recognizable, and my “la la la” is unlike any other’s, even as my “la la la” allows the contours of Kylie’s own “la la la” – and of the “la la la” itself – to be felt. Unsettlingly, Kylie’s song reminds us that we recognize others, and are recognized by others, through the brute fact of our bodies. And we call this unspoken, intuitive recognizability that we can never see in ourselves, or that we can only see reflected in the impersonal particularity of the other, “the voice.” “La la la,” far from constructing an ethics of refusing a claim on the other, confronts us with the ways in which we are already ethically entangled with the other, and with the aspects of ourselves that remain other, at the level of the materiality of discourse, the blankness of language’s body, of the mechanics of our own bodies, on which we project the various colors of meaning that define the spectral supersaturation of the white space.

“La la la,” white noise, reveals to us the sublimity of the voice as all-too-physical, all-too-material. Speaking in “la la la,” we refuse the illusion of our human attachments and modes of attachment in order to hallucinate the myriad ways in which the black, tangled, unmasterable detours of the “la la la” have already bound us to the materiality of the world. From singing those feverish “la la la”s, appropriately enough, Kylie would go on to define (to redefine) her art as, properly and paradoxically enough, *Body Language*. Not quite language as a body, certainly not the body as something recognizable or locatable within the frameworks of a positive language, but as the interference produced between body and language – and thus as the point at which bodies and languages touch, in failing to touch, other bodies and other languages.

So when Kylie sings “I’m the one,” it is not to say that she is the mythical “One” that Aristophanes posits as the truth of desire in *The Symposium* – an axiom that itself structures a more troubling promiscuity, since we both must search for the One and discard every partner except the One as epistemologically and spiritually worthless. Instead, she ties her “oneness” to the circulation of the electro-acoustic machine: “There’s a certain something in the air / Can you feel what I feel in me? / It’s in the air, electricity, oh oh.”<sup>656</sup> If she is “the one,” it is only inasmuch as those “oh”s – those zeroes, those more-than-ones of jouissance – have performed their atmospheric function, constructing the meteorological field of discourse that precipitates feeling, electrifyingly, in you and me.

**VIII. Kylie is alone among her pop-music peers in that she never gives us a liberationist anthem** in the style of Madonna’s “Express Yourself” or Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way.” If we want to find a slogan for the revolution yet to come in Kylie’s work, the strongest we can find is “We just want tomorrow to be better than today,” from *Aphrodite*’s “Better Than Today.”<sup>657</sup> No matter how giddily she punches the jingly rhythm of this alexandrine, that doesn’t seem to offer much in the way of hope. Instead, it willfully classes itself with anti-anthems that by turns despair at the frustration of their desires (Robyn’s “I keep dancing on my own”), point at their lack of answers to the questions and demands they

<sup>656</sup> “O.”

<sup>657</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Better Than Today,” *A*. Hereafter cited as “BTT.”

raise (Annie’s “How does it feel to hear your songs on the radio?”), or explicitly reject the subjectivity implicit in human desire and demand (Irish Keenan’s “Under the X-ray / I’m just a vertebrate [...] We are mankind / We are mannequin / With or without mind / With or without Darwin / Classify me / The strings of my autonomy”<sup>658</sup>); all of these songs, in their own ways, respond to Kraftwerk’s anti-anthem “We Are the Robots,” which summarizes that group’s postulate that electronic music should situate itself in a position of suspicion in regards to the human, all too human affect of popular music.<sup>659</sup> In these power ballads, there is no “self” to express, no identity teleologically innate in each body, nothing available to want. We just want tomorrow to be better than today – just a difference, a change, a gap, without any preemptively positive characterization.

Still, critics will point at the central word in Kylie’s refrain – “better” – which, by its very form, seems to imply or assume some sort of progressivist movement, as well as some sort of external evaluative model by which we could assess and decide on the difference between tomorrow and today. But the song itself has defined “better” as, potentially, otherwise. Kylie opens the song by proclaiming “Oh I see what she do / But I could do it better,” and concludes the first verse by echoing and generalizing this sentiment to “Yeah you see what they do / Well we can do it better yeah I’m talking to you.”<sup>660</sup> Immediately “betterness” is defined first as imitation, mirror-rivalry in the classic “anything you can do, I can do better” vein. Pop pronunciation adds an extra wrinkle: in Kylie’s diction, “I see what she do” and “I see what you do” are indistinguishable. Although the heterosexual love-triangle logic of the song demands the pronoun “she” (while simultaneously eliding the gender of the third pole allowing for this contentious identification), the voice of the song changes it to “you” – defining the players in its game of imitation and rivalry as Kylie’s song and its listener. It’s as if your iPhone is literally confronting you with the fact that it is designed not only to imitate your consciousness, but also to streamline its processes and reduce any excess noise – to do you one better. And then the song, hyper-technological in its foregrounding of “the strange and / Important sound of the synthesizer,”<sup>661</sup> interpellates you more directly: “I’m talking to you,” it says, and calls you part of its “we.” “We” are now imitating the humans. We are the robots.

The video for “Better Than Today” insists on this fact. How can I describe its aesthetics? Imagine if Takahashi Murakami attempted to paint the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* but got distracted by an explosion at a late-80’s arcade. The band wears Daft Punk helmets modified into Pac-Man heads. As Kylie sings, Space Invaders and various Inkie and Pinkie chase her image, but become trapped in endless acoustic-wave pattern circles. Her dancers, outfitted in day-glo orange faux-ostrich-feather boleros, perform an odd routine with their mic stands, sped up and slowed down by the editing until they all turn into drinking birds. The iconic “Rocky Horror” lips are multiplied until they look like a BurgerTime screen-cap. And Kylie’s microphone shoots off a whole arena’s worth of lipstick-red Lazer Tag beams. They are all robots, and they invite you to become robots with them: “You’ve got to use it, lose it, know that you still do it / What’s the point in livin’ if you don’t wanna dance?”<sup>662</sup>

Now, exactly what does “dancing” mean to Kylie? Kylie’s aesthetic contract obliges her to release many videos that fall into the mold of pop-dance-spectacular (a different

<sup>658</sup> Broadcast, “Corporeal,” *Tender Buttons* (Warp Records, 2005).

<sup>659</sup> Kraftwerk, “We Are The Robots,” *The Man-Machine* (Kling Klang, 1978).

<sup>660</sup> “BT.”

<sup>661</sup> “OTB.”

<sup>662</sup> “BT.”

expression of the “multiple-Kylie” aesthetic logic of “Come Into My World”), which feature her dancing, either with or in counterpoint to, various crowds of often-robotic backup dancers, their bodies supplemented by Kraftwerk-colored transparent plastic Quaker bonnets (“I Can’t Get You Out of My Head”) or Cybermen-esque aluminum foil helmets (“Love at First Sight”). Yet, unlike the videos of Lady Gaga or Beyoncé, which foreground the athleticism and skill of their stars in the art defined as “dancing,” Kylie’s dances center on a different moment, when the dance becomes the repetition of a gesture that, uncannily, you find yourself already doing. In “Get Outta My Way,” it’s the shooing gesture, performed with arm fully extended, hand flicking from front to side; in “Can’t Get You Out of My Head,” it’s the cocking of the head from side to side; in “Wow,” it’s the apathetic head-nodding characteristic of those club- or concert-goers who are commonly thought of as not dancing. (In the Rapture’s “Who! Alright – Yeah... Uh Huh,” Luke Jenner performs a similar maneuver; when he sings “People don’t dance no more / They just stand there like this / They cross their arms and stare you down and drink and moan and diss,” he turns not dancing into the only appropriate way to dance along to the song, by calling not-dancing, in “Loco-Motion” line dance fashion.<sup>663</sup>) In “Love at First Sight,” the most choreographically-complex of Kylie’s videos, a full corps of android aircraft marshalls interrupt their ballet with moments of micro-voguing, slowly and methodically popping their shoulders or flicking their hair out of their faces. As Kylie, directly in front of the camera, performs the unchoreographed dance we all know how to do (bob from side to side, use arms down the front of your body then snap them up and back, frame face with fists and hands) in a “natural style,” the background dancers center on the minute particularities of her actions, as if Kylie were surrounded with Eadweard Muybridge images of her dancing.<sup>664</sup> In other words, for Kylie dancing isn’t something that we need to learn how to do – it’s something we already do, in the very biological mechanics of our every “natural” gesture.

Remember how Adorno’s vexation with the jitterbuggers led him to devise a thought-experiment in which, by using high-speed sync-sound cinematic photography, he could show how humans corrected themselves slightly behind the music, adapting their actions in real time to make them appear mechanical (and how Edison used the same technique to demonstrate the incomplete automaticity of Evelyn Habal)? Adorno railed against the false consciousness by which humans would choose to inauthentically and partially act as machines, so as to provide themselves with an alibi to cover up their complicity in the violent mechanical empire of modernity – and in so doing to define the machine, restrictively and partially, as the inhuman? Kylie provides an alternative model in her notion of dancing, in which to dance is not to absolve oneself of human responsibility by becoming robotic, but instead to take responsibility, to act as and feel like, the human-robots we already are. We cannot separate this dance into a human before and a mechanical after; dancing does this logic one better by catching the body in the middle of its expressive gesture and revealing the meaningless, thus open to different meanings, biomechanical

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<sup>663</sup> The Rapture, “Who! Alright – Yeah... Uh Huh,” *Pieces of the People We Love* (Vertigo: 2006).

<sup>664</sup> Again, this is not to argue that Kylie is a bad or unskilled dancer. Just as at her best moments she refuses to “fully” sing, in her best dances she performs a minimal form of dancing not because she is limited to such by some biological or instrumental accident (she doesn’t lack anything, in other words), but she cultivates a dance of understatement so as to prevent an easy recognition of what she’s doing as “dancing.”



apparatus laboring underneath it. Now we begin to see how Kylie begins to equate “doing it better” and “doing the robot.”

But is it “better”? Not according to Kylie archivist Simon Sheridan, who describes “Better Than Today” as “lumbered with anachronistic, milk-curdling production” and as “[boasting] one of the most god-awful keyboard motifs ever heard on a Kylie single, akin to a synthesizer being scraped down a blackboard.”<sup>665</sup> The introductory motif is, most assuredly, unpleasant – centered around a A-B flat trill that serves as the fulcrum between F Major and d minor, the synthesized sound wiggles past the limits of the tonal centers of the notes (thus generalizing and radicalizing the gesture of the trill) to create not just dissonance but cacophony. The song’s other hook compounds this displeasure; ostensibly an ostinato, a pattern of descending and ascending chord progressions towards the tonal center of the piece, its moments of arrival at the tonic are staccato, abortive, ending almost before you’ve heard them, preventing you from enjoying the solid arrival at the downbeat (to make matters worse, they enter, syncopated, before the downbeat and leave before it arrives). The whole song is designed to catch its listener short, to interrupt its dancer mid-move, to keep you from doing what you thought you wanted to do, in other words. When the song stops, pulling the musical chair out from underneath you, the dancefloor turns into a sea of crystallized gestures – none of them, by definition, complete, none of them actions, but all of them revelatory of the medium that produces and enables action.<sup>666</sup>

Kylie, then, argues that dancing allows you to recognize, in yourself and others, the moment of gesture-as-robotic-embodiment, by visually and kinesthetically giving us a glimpse of the other body that is our physical, bio-chemical-mechanical form – of feeling ourselves and others in our alterity to our selves. Grover-Friedlander has recently employed this understanding of gesture in her production of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s *Der Jasager*; developing Walter Benjamin’s thesis that interrupting an action produces gestures independent from that action, she writes:

The reversal of direction [thinking action from gesture rather than vice-versa] does not necessarily lead back to the action. The arrest of the action can have the power to open up a dimension of meaning unavailable in the consideration of the action itself. The attention to gesture can serve to indirectly illuminate *the surroundings of meaning* that might be veiled by the unity of the utterance itself.<sup>667</sup>

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<sup>665</sup> Simon Sheridan, *The Complete Kylie* (London: Titan Books, 2012) 288. Hereafter cited as *CK*.

<sup>666</sup> Morley explores the sense of possibility in the interrupted continuous action, and how it allows him to fantasize new actions of production that in turn reveal unexpected dimensions to his desire, in his reading of “Can’t Get You Out of My Head”: “The song is a sort of mixture of a snipped-off thread of a drone and a precisely-tooled pop song featuring elements of some of my other favorite musical things, things I like so much I love making up names for them: a glitter of glam glamour, a stream of new pop shine, tick tock tack beats from a disco dream, unspecified noise shimmers that seem scientifically subsonic, and swanky, caressing, pulse-sonic purpose” (*WM* 28). Isn’t it the “snipped-off” nature of the sonic thread that allows him to perpetuate its “la la la” in these strange new forms – and of realizing his body as a Lacanian blabla-machine?

<sup>667</sup> Grover-Friedlander and Eli Friedlander, “Setting the Stage, Staging the Voice: On Directing Weill and Brecht’s *Der Jasager*,” *Qui Parle* 21.1 (Fall/Winter 2012): 203-234, 226.

Hence the potentially revolutionary power of the gesture: by catching us, mid-action, together with a collectivity of gestures, we may be able to think back to different communities and divisions of action. Dancing to “Better Than Today” – the idea of which might provoke an allergic response in us, since it means that we must give up on reaching the end of dance-as-action that we have defined as pleasurable – we find ourselves engaged in action alongside a plurality of machines both technological and biological, and a multiplicity of other bodies. From those gestures, we may be able to imagine different communities, different points of origin; even if we, historically speaking, entered the dance floor as humans, or as humans pretending to be “robots,” our dance may change this fact – dancing may lead us to have entered the dance floor as something other than what we were.

“Betterness,” for Kylie, names precisely this non-self-sameness of the robot (hear again those wiggling synthesizer notes, roaming free of their harmonic centers). These are not functional machines; instead, they are machines that can function otherwise. Becoming-robot escapes Adorno’s nightmare of becoming-industrialized; by showing us the becoming-robot that functions (and that breaks down) as the condition of possibility for our recognizable humanity or mechanicity, becoming-robot can teach us how to break down and function otherwise, can even teach us that breakdown and function are not rigorously opposable terms. The world of “Better Than Today” also includes that arcade classic known as “Dance Dance Revolution,” with its titular “revolution” interrupting the action of dancing and discovering new, bizarre gestures (as anyone who has discovered themselves in a bizarre and unfamiliar position playing DDR can attest). Paraphrasing Deleuze, Kylie avers that “Very clever people know we all need a chance / To stop our clever business and let go and dance”<sup>668</sup>; she hardly proclaims, in other words, that we need to let go of our inhibitions and dance,<sup>669</sup> but instead offers a means and a model by which human – even humanist – thought can halt the endless recirculations of its economy and instead discover the other logics at work beneath its busy business.

Kylie’s “Everybody dance now” indeed appears as a suspicious slogan for revolution, but that’s precisely why it’s the slogan that we need: it makes our gestures suspicious, returns to them the potential to have emerged from other actions than those ones our techno-fetishist world programs us to perform.

**IX. Incredibly, Kylie sings one duet with Serge Gainsbourg.** It’s almost a mashup, since it samples – and loops – the four-note descending bassline, and the odd yodel that hits on every fourth note, that itself loops under Gainsbourg and Brigitte Bardot’s “Bonnie and Clyde.” Kylie removes Gainsbourg and Bardot’s famous vocals (and all the lyrics, themselves a translation of Bonnie Parker’s own “Ballad”), seemingly removing everything that makes the song recognizably a duet. But instead, Kylie gives back to Serge a voice that is not Gainsbourg’s but that is nevertheless his own – his voice as expressed in the descending guitar chords that are unmistakably his, marked with his signature, although neither the hand of his body nor the grain of his voice signs such a signature in a self-evident way, and nothing of the characteristic Gainsbourg is immediately inferable from it. What emerges is something like a replaying of Francis Poulenc’s *La Voix humaine* on the “Speakerphone” (another song from *X*, the album on which “Sensitized,” the duet in question, appears), in

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<sup>668</sup> “BTI.”

<sup>669</sup> This perhaps overly obvious reading (in that it understands the *expected sense* of the song instead of listening to its words and music) is given, for example, in *CK* 288.

the space of a *Sprachmaschine* that neither simply registers or replays, but that speaks and listens and, in the silences of the voice, even finds its own voice.

The very title of *X* is suspect: is it a hieroglyph, the mythological seal of a kiss? Or is it something more like a matheme, the abstract formula of a chiasmus, a crossover of opposites that never quite meet? When you write out the record's full name – Kylie X – something interesting happens. Does the X cross out Kylie, say “This is not Kylie,” cancel out what “Kylie” has come to mean or replace the “Kylie” of old (“Kylie X” is the chiasmatic homophone of “ex-Kylie”), or place Kylie *sous rature*, allowing her to appear only as not-present? Now, an X is a degenerate form or zero-degree of a signature, as the album typographically and negatively insists – all the writing here is in the form of super-stylized cursive. So does “Kylie X” instead doubly assert, insistently, on the presence of Kylie, perhaps the presence that could be felt in her kiss? (Kylie released *X* as another comeback album, not from obscurity this time, but instead from her victory over breast cancer.) But, of course, in signing her name twice, Kylie reveals the originary fracture of herself, as readers of “Signature Event Context” will remember. If Kylie can insist, can make another comeback, that fact reveals her mode of being as a constant return, thus a constant displacement.



Figure 8: The X and the signature: *X* album cover; verso and spine of *X*; "Speakerphone" single cover

Even then, Kylie doesn't make it easy for us. Where does she sign the album?<sup>670</sup> Not on the cover, where the X only perhaps appears in the shape of the butterfly-shaped, honeycomb-mesh veil that covers her face. Not on the disk itself (record or CD), which is emblazoned with an X the legs of which only cross – and what defines an X besides this crossing? – at the missing center of the disk. And not even on the back cover (whose colors are the solarized negative of the front cover's), where, in addition to the veil, Kylie now wears an X over her now half-open lips; here the X signifies not the expression of Kylie in some other medium, but instead the silencing of Kylie – the sealing of her lips. Indeed, on the recto Kylie brings a finger to her lips, silently miming for our voices to fall silent. Perhaps the only authentic X on the album is the tiny one written on the spine of the jewel case. Logical, that, since the spine is perhaps the place where recto and verso cross over into each other, precisely inasmuch as the spine is neither recto nor verso. Cleverly, then, X cannot be hieroglyphic: the spine is the place where images cancel each other out, and is only useful for filing the album alphabetically on your shelf. Kylie's X is ideally, radically Symbolic, a figure from an algebraic nightmare, nothing but a letter, forcing you to wait for it and read it on your own.

<sup>670</sup> Many of Kylie's albums before *X* similarly removed their titles from their covers, notably *Impossible Princess*, *Light Years*, and *Body Language*.

This Symbolic dimension of the *X* also explains its purely auto-referential “meaning”: *X* is Kylie’s tenth album. *X* refers only to its place in a chain of signifiers; it promises nothing more and nothing less. And this meaning – a perfectly unsatisfying meaning, since purely empty, purely formal – allows us to see one more *X*: on the cover of *X*, for the first time, the downstrokes of the *K* and *y* in “Kylie” are finally allowed to cross, in an unprecedented moment of typographical exuberance. Indeed, in *X* Kylie encounters herself in the very materiality of her signifiers, not in the deep meaningfulness of her personal biography, perhaps surprisingly so, given the resonance of the “redemptive” moment in her life the recovery from cancer represents. Kylie seemed aware of the risk she ran in choosing to elide personal meaning, in placing the album outside a narrative of “Kylie the woman” but instead firmly in the narrative of Kylie the meaningless fembot, even confessing “I just want to sing about the disco, which might seem flippant” given her recent personal history.<sup>671</sup> Yes, Kylie concedes, to draw an *X* over her mouth – to define speaking of “Kylie” or in the voice of “Kylie” as taboo – would be considered “flippant” for those who actively differentiate between bodily sickness and bodily health, mechanical breakdown and mechanical functioning, serious feelings and superficial feelings. But by refusing to locate Kylie on one side or another of these binarisms, Kylie emerges at the point of crossover within herself, within her name, even as she extends the cycle of criss-crossing (missed) encounters with new and different Kylies. By holding the voice of “Kylie” in abeyance, *X* discloses different Kylies, both at the points of their crossover and interference and at the points of their divergence (this logic repeats in the moiré veil that frames Kylie’s face on the cover).

In their duet, Kylie imposes this *X* on Gainsbourg as well. She crosses out the trace of his voice, everything that we know so well as the grain of Gainsbourg: the way he delays his vowels, the trace left by cigarettes on his throat. All that remains is that descending guitar motif and the hiccupping yodel – everything that, in the original “Bonnie and Clyde,” remained outside of the vocal collage that split its lyric space between the characters of Gainsbourg and Bardot – and into that sterilized world emerges Kylie’s voice. Kylie’s lyrics anticipate Robyn’s “Fembot” in their celebration of the mechanics of feeling, both sensory and affective: “Energized by all the pleasure and pain,” Kylie sings, “I can’t hold back, the minute I try / Baby you trip the switch and I’m sensitized / Every touch, whatever you do / Baby you flip the switch, I turn on for you.”<sup>672</sup> Imagining herself as an Energizer battery or, perhaps more properly, a capacitor, a Leyden jar in the process of collecting and releasing electronic potential thanks to the split and difference between its polarities, Kylie refuses to distinguish between good and bad feelings. Instead, she revels in the very fact that she participates in an enveloping electronic field that allows for any feeling at all to emerge – again, precisely in the sense that she, in turn, generates an electronic field. Quite literally, Kylie sings the body dielectric. And in response to the “touch” of her flip-switching operator – who is not exactly the user-manual-mastering operator imagined by Robyn, since here the operator “trips” the switch, brings her on like a burglar alarm – Kylie melodizes “I’m sensitized tonight and you can watch me come alive [...] I come alive / Baby you know it’s true, I feel this for you.”<sup>673</sup> If Kylie “comes alive” here with all the self-evidence and truth of a “feeling” subject, the metaphor of her language has long since crossed the wires, tripped the switch, of any final distinction between the machine and the human.

<sup>671</sup> *CK* 246-7.

<sup>672</sup> Kylie Minogue, “Sensitized,” *X*. Hereafter cited as “Se.”

<sup>673</sup> “Se.”

Again, it is impossible to resolve the metaphor here: is Kylie suggesting that human affect is like an electromagnetic process? or is Kylie stating physical laws in the guise of amorous play? But both of these attempts to assign vehicle and tenor to the metaphor only gloss over and attempt to forestall the more problematic truth: it may be impossible to tell where the metaphoric circuit begins and ends. For if the language of love has determined the vocabulary of electronics, it is just as certain that the concepts of electronics have in turn structured our contemporary vocabularies of love (not to mention the media in which we find, enjoy, and lose those loves). Bizarre effects emerge here, trapped in the crystal (for Pliny, amber – *elektron* in Greek – was a spontaneously-crystallized fragment of ocean) of language; the French *aimant*, for instance, crystallizes the Latin *amare* (to love) and *adamant* (adamant, magnet), and somewhere *mare* got caught in the amber as well. Here at the surface of language, where it generates a charge through exposure to the contact of the other, electromagnetism and human magnetism reveal themselves to be impossible doubles of each other, to twin each other inescapably, entirely by chance.

In this sensitized universe, the rhetorics of the human and the machine come alive to each other, responding and exchanging their properties beyond any measurable or definable limit. And, as in the logic of *aimant*, to be magnetically attracted is to magnetically attract – although this attraction is based not on a similarity, as we might guess, but instead on the divergence and difference of charges or qualities that enable the creation of an electrical flow and field. For magnets and lovers, it is not quite true that “opposites attract”; instead, opposites are generative of the cyclical exchange of electrons that constitutes the mutual, although differential, feeling of “attraction.” Again, Lacan’s statement that feelings are always mutual does not at all imply that feelings are shared; rather, the mutuality of feelings precipitates differences in affective experience by coalescing a phenomenon in different places within a field of mutually imbricated yet non-homogeneous forces.

What does Kylie’s X-ing-out of Gainsbourg mean? And why does this granting of an X appears to us as a subtraction of a voice, as the installation of vocal lack, particularly since in “Sensitized” Gainsbourg’s presence certainly does not cease to be felt? Grover-Friedlander encounters a similar situation in analyzing Poulenc’s *La Voix humaine*, an opera marked by two strange particularities: one, the opera is written for a single voice, that of a woman alone in her apartment imploring her lover, through the telephone, not to leave her – thus defining the solo voice not as sufficient in itself but instead as the remainder of a duet from which one pole has been subtracted; and two, the opera, by staging its heroine in dialogue with the telephone as a medium of electronic sound-transfer, represents a woman (a character and a diva) who always hears and responds to that giant mechanical wind-up toy that is the orchestra. Thus, throughout the opera, the woman herself emerges as a stereo receiver, what Grover-Friedlander calls “a gigantic hypersensitive ear.”<sup>674</sup> This leads Grover-Friedlander to speculate that “Perhaps the woman in the opera hears music – and understands it as specific words – precisely *because* it does not issue from another character onstage, precisely because it is not sung.”<sup>675</sup>

*La Voix humaine*, then, precisely because it does not offer another character to sing a dialogue with its heroine around which the “other voice” would legibly solidify, names and dialogues with the crystallization of “human voice” exactly where it should never be, in the wordless and absolutely abstract voice of the orchestra’s instruments. Grover-Friedlander corrects Avital Ronell’s reading of this opera that compares its music to “Papageno, gagged”

<sup>674</sup> VA 121.

<sup>675</sup> VA 121.

(although certainly the fantasy of unmanning Papageno by muting him plays a role here too)<sup>676</sup>: unlike Papageno's singing in the Quintet, the orchestra's music is not constructed by taking the phonemes out of the stream of worded language. If words emerge, fantastically, in the orchestral music to *La Voix humaine*, they do not at all possess the intonations or rhythms of human language. As Grover-Friedlander insists, "It is the absence of words that marks *music's transformation into words imaginable* [sic]"<sup>677</sup> – it isn't that we can guess, as when we hear Papageno humming, what the voice would have said or was trying to say; instead, we understand something of what the voice is passionately saying. Affect and meaning crystallize in our minds as in the lone woman's. In other words, by not allowing itself to be received as words, by rejecting words as its telos, this orchestral-mechanical music "becomes *real* for the woman as she hears it," and for us, if we can imagine it.<sup>678</sup> Here, "*Music* is made to embody the speech of the other, and yet that other is neither present nor the figment of the woman's imagination arising out of her song. It is an otherness moving her voice and made manifest by it."<sup>679</sup>

Poulenc, by X-ing out the part of the woman's duet partner, allows the orchestral music to take on a voice of its own, but as the voice that is finally given its otherness, given an X – which, in turn, allows the woman to converse and communicate with this technological voice as the very Xed-ness of her own voice, as that which in herself is beyond its limits, bringing it to term while opening it up in new ways. The silent orchestral voice in *La Voix humaine* allows "the voice [to act] out its termination from within itself," and the meaning of "the *human* voice" becomes "the *mortal* voice."<sup>680</sup> Humanity is thus allowed to bring an end to itself, and in so doing to find the voices which it had lost once it had become solidified as human. When Kylie speaks of "coming alive" in "Sensitized," she means precisely this moment of posthumous posthumanity. And by singing with Serge, she grants him something of the same non-transcendent transcendence: what would he have said if he could've participated in this duet, if his subjectivity would've let him enjoy not the dialectic of enjoyment-mastery/instrumentalization-masochism that was, for him, the only possible response to the problem of the resonant, electronic body, but instead the vertiginous possibility of sensitization itself? Kylie must hear this, beyond her veil, since she sings in response to the voice – one of the voices – implicit in the inhuman abstractness of Gainsbourg's backing track; if we want to hear it too, we must sing along, feeling for the moments when Kylie feels this potential voice, this voice beyond the "life" of Gainsbourg, inflect and sensitize her own voice.

Kylie's X, then, sounds something like the "ethical voice" described by Dolar, the voice as "the element which ties the subject and the Other together without belonging to either, just as it formed the tie between body and language without being part of them. We can say that the subject and the Other coincide in their common lack embodied by the voice, and that 'pure enunciation' can be taken as the red thread which connects the linguistic and ethical aspects of the voice."<sup>681</sup> Kylie's ethical practice entails accepting the X in order to

<sup>676</sup> VA 122. Ronell's remark comes from her "Finitude's Score," in *Thinking Bodies*, ed. Juliet Flower MacCannell and Laura Zakarin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994): 87-108, 91.

<sup>677</sup> VA 122.

<sup>678</sup> VA 122.

<sup>679</sup> VA 122.

<sup>680</sup> VA 122.

<sup>681</sup> VNM 103.

allow the X of others to become audible – for instance, to hear as-yet-unheard melodies, meanings, and even words in the presumably “non-vocal” material of Gainsbourg’s track. Kylie accomplishes what Gainsbourg was never able to do, or perhaps what he was all-too-able to fail at doing: to enter into a heterosexual relationship with one of his duet partners. Kylie relates with him not despite their unbridgeable difference, but because of the unbridgeable difference that they both share. She constructs this relation not on the basis of some imagined consistency or complementarity that would resolve the absolute difference of their desires to themselves, but instead on the basis of what is foreign to both of their desires, inasmuch as those desires are given consistency and oriented around an image of the other – around a fetish-object, a partial-object. Harmony here emerges at the level of the unheard, in the space of the body as that which does not talk, does not transcend itself; Kylie imagines what would happen “if my body could fly,” “if my body could talk,”<sup>682</sup> thus insisting that the body in question here can do neither of these. Instead, “my body” opens the fantasy of transcendence or meaning without participating in it – this body being the pure electro-biological organism-robot that is “sensitized” by the simultaneously human and abstract contact with other energy fields. To say that this body “comes alive” would almost mean engaging in the pathetic fallacy, were it not true that the abiotic, un-living “coming aliveness” of this body itself enables the affective experience of “coming alive” to be named and recognized. Singing a duet in the X is to fantasize an impossible harmony, a harmony not of desire but of the drive that produces, and yet exceeds and undoes, any such desire, at the very level of the body-machine.

Wasn’t it this inchoateness of desire that terrified Gainsbourg, who could only think of desire’s exceeding of itself in the drive by imagining the endless series of proliferating fetishes that might memorialize the fatal crash of “Ford Mustang”? For Gainsbourg’s fetishistic imaginary, the coming-together of different bodies could only be figured as a collision, since those bodies were to be imagined as self-identical at all costs. But here, Kylie sings in inhuman proximity to what Dolar describes as the drives as “the very operators of the division into an exterior and an interior, while in themselves they do not belong to either, they are placed in the zone of overlapping, the crossing, the extimate.”<sup>683</sup> Kylie’s rhetoric, bringing together animal magnetism and electromagnetism, “[assembles] together the animal and the machine, short-circuiting humanity”<sup>684</sup> – but Kylie’s sampling is a form of that “montage” that itself gives consistency to the aural or visual Imaginary while rending it from within. But there’s no master here, just the moment where the “problem” that will come to define the master first emerges. Here, the voice of X – let’s say, the voice of Gainsbourg’s guitars – “cuts directly to the interior, so much so that the very status of the exterior becomes uncertain, and it directly discloses the interior, so much that the very supposition of an interior depends on the voice”;<sup>685</sup> when Kylie takes this voice as her duet partner we immediately hear what Gainsbourg “really” is, what his feelings “really” are, expressed in the wordless language of the descant, even though they certainly are not the feelings that we would recognize as those of Gainsbourg’s interpersonal exteriority (the character of Clyde Barrow, the psychodynamics of Gainsbourg’s relationship to Bardot, the ways these two psychologies intersect or interfere with each other). Having thrown Gainsbourg’s exterior desires, those that have been consolidated in a cathexis with an “other” object, into doubt,

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<sup>682</sup> “Se.”

<sup>683</sup> *VNM* 81.

<sup>684</sup> *VNM* 76.

<sup>685</sup> *VNM* 80-1.

Kylie answers Gainsbourg's "plea for mercy, for sympathy, for understanding" which it is her power – as listener – "to grant or not."<sup>686</sup>

Here on the "Speakerphone," after all, hearing is singing, hearing and singing are impossible forms of each other, as Kylie describes by tracing the overlapping series of resonant negotiations between pocket, cell phone, and so on "Through your head bone temple bone through your jaw bone / To your neck bone collar bone let it go on / To your back bone – movin' on through your hip bone."<sup>687</sup> Kylie reimagines the skeleton, the presumably rock-solid ("like a cinderblock"<sup>688</sup>) structure that provides consistency to our body, as a series of constant vibrations and displacements that interfere with each other, producing rippling patterns of construction and deconstruction.<sup>689</sup> But from this constant interference springs the body's surprising strength, and its power to "Feel the buzz and hum along" to whatever may be "Playing on your speakerphone / Track repeat go on and on."<sup>690</sup> Singing along, here, under the sign of the X, sounds like a "humming" that is the opposite of Papageno's: if Papageno's "hmmm!" was produced by subtracting phonemes from words, this hum is produced in the split-second before speech. (Most often we learn the words by singing along; we don't only start singing along after we've learned the words.) Kylie's telegraphic style here names not only what the speakerphone does, but what your body does in response, as two different but mutually-instructive forms of "playing on your speakerphone." As we saw earlier, a refrain like "la la la" is a peculiarly ambiguous object – a construction of discourse and technology that makes a mechanical medium out of the human body. This site, the biological-mechanical organ that plays and replays the buzz of the speakerphone, the point from which Gainsbourg can sing in his guitars and in someone else's yodel, is the point of sensitization, the point of short-circuits and crossed wires and those encounters, in the negativity of one's "own" voice, with the negativity of the voice of the other. And this negativity becomes unlocatable: is it the speakerphone in your pocket, or is it the materiality of the other's voice as transmitted by the speakerphone, or is the speakerphone merely the recrystallization of your own bones?

The X's proliferate in an endless series of crossings. And in it, Kylie responds to Gainsbourg's plea, but not in the merely ego-confirming/ego-denying logic of the *Che vuoi?* that Dolar adapts here – that logic being itself the magic amulet that keeps Gainsbourg tied to his Imaginary, to his ego as Imaginary. For Gainsbourg, the guitars indeed opened up the sonic space in which the listener would be able, clearly, to decide where Bonnie ended and Clyde began, to tell the difference between his voice and Bardot's and thus to define the positive form of his finitude. But instead, by responding to Gainsbourg's plea for "sympathy," Kylie, sensitively, opens up a new kind of feeling within Gainsbourg, a new kind of affective experience within his voice, a notion of "sensitization" that is irreducible to Gainsbourg's electrostatic logics. She is able to do this because she does not respond to his voice without first radicalizing its fetishism and its self-difference, by responding not to "his" voice, but instead the moments at which "his" voice shows itself to be at play in bodies and

<sup>686</sup> VNM 80.

<sup>687</sup> Kylie Minogue, "Speakerphone," X. Hereafter cited as "Sp."

<sup>688</sup> "Sp."

<sup>689</sup> "Constructive interference" and "destructive interference" are the names for the amplification and dampening that takes place between two intersecting wave-patterns; the most famous example of this is the alteration of wave amplitude when two pebbles are dropped near each other in a pond.

<sup>690</sup> "Sp."



forms of (non)life that are radically different from “Gainsbourg.” Kylie, at last, finds the voice of Lucien as it emerges within and across fixation – thus outside of its logic if nevertheless trapped within its forms, its fixations – as a “diffusion” of the TSF, passing between ocean, girl, father, mother...

Singing with this abiotic voice, Lucien learns the lesson of “la la la”: singing does not consolidate feelings in high definition, nor provide super-signifiers that would describe a feeling, even if not in words. Instead, singing forestalls, staves off, this saying of feelings, to prevent feelings from being reduced to names – to maintain them in their neutral mutuality, to hold fast to crystallization as a form of still movement, thus discovering energetic flows even within the glacial order of modernity’s fetishes.