

Jacob Smith:

Vocal Tracks. Performance and Sound Media.

Berkeley: University of California Press 2008

This is a very good book indeed, and should be read by all academics in the fields of media science, musicology, cultural history and cultural studies, performance studies, etc. (at the very least). That being said, there are of course some weaknesses and shortcomings, but for the moment I will leave them as a kind of *cliffhanger* which I will return to in the end of this review.

My first and general argument for this, overall, very positive assessment is the fact that the book is the first thorough and original work that deals with both the cultural history of sound media, different sound media genres, the sound itself and the listener/the audience and their framing – that is how the sound of voice works, its effects and means and what kind of meaning play and production of signification the sound may facilitate. The book's bibliography testifies to the fact that the author, through his scholarship, has gained a very deep and broad knowledge of the different cross-disciplinary research areas needed for this kind of study. That goes for the media history and theory, voice theory, music- and cultural studies, performance theory, etc. But most importantly the extent of the author's knowledge can be seen in the text and to a similar extent in the many highly informative notes, where a lot of "extras" are hidden: information, discussions and further perspectives.

I will now describe how this study is structured and organized through certain aspects and motives in the field of voice and sound recording, concluding with a description of the outcome and findings of this historical, theoretical and analytical study of "the ways in which performance has developed in an era of sound media technologies" (p. 243).

The book is structured around three aspects: Part one: *Flooding Out*; Part two: *A Finer Grain of the Voice* (which is the increased significance of timbre and inflection of the voice) and Part Three: *Bugging the Backstage*, which deals with the use of secret recording. Each part consists of two chapters, which focus on central analyses of composite phenomena, such as *Recorded Laughter and the Performance of Authenticity* and *Erotic Performance on Record*; *The Nearness of You*; or *The Voice of Melodrama* and *Rough Mix*; *The Act of Being Yourself* and *Phoney Performances*. These chapter titles reflect the substance and overall aim of the book very well: "to provide a close analysis of audible structures of pleasure in a range of sound media genres" (p. 8), "...drawing the reader's attention to the often unnoticed but insistent and all too-human sounds of the mediated voice" (p. 11). I feel that it is this last formulation of purpose that the author succeeds best in realizing. I will return to this when I reach the disclosure of my *cliffhanger* in a moment.

It is one of the many strengths of this book about recorded voice *sound*, that the reader is placed in the role of listener, as he/she is for instance at the start of the book: "Imagine that you are the audience for a phonograph record in the first decade of the twentieth century. You might be listening through ear tubes at a public phonograph parlour in an urban shopping area, or at home with your ear cocked to a large amplifying horn. The first sound you hear is a voice, which speaks the fol-

lowing words in a stentorian tone: “The Laughing Spectator, by Steve porter, Edison Records””. This placing of the reader in the role of listener is consistently explicated in the text, combined with the descriptions or paraphrases of the sound phenomena in question. This is only one example of the author’s awareness of the many difficulties in studying and writing about this subject. He also cites Roland Barthes as saying “...there is no science that can exhaust the voice” (p. 249) and on the last page, with his closing words, he says: “The modern media have offered texts that need to be heard from these multiple positions, since the voice is always saying so many things at once – speaking of culture, identity, technology, and performance with the same fragile, complex, and beautiful tones.” (p. 249).

Here – at last – the weaknesses or shortcomings of the book draw near. Although it is the intention of the author – see above – to provide a close analysis of audible structures of pleasure in a range of sound media genres, he has too many other agendas among the “many things” that the voice is “speaking of”, for instance in chapter 5 (*The Act of Being Yourself*) about the Allen Funt’s *Candid Microphone* and *Candid Camera*, which leads him into a long and more speculative digression about secret recording and the problems with surveillance today. This seems to stray somewhat from the main focus of the book. Furthermore, it is an example of the prioritizing of politically correct theme, such as societal, power, gender and race issues, instead of providing the “close analysis of audible structures of pleasure” promised earlier – especially the aesthetic aspects thereof. What I would call the “sound for pleasure” or “sound for nothing” are missing or only under-prioritized. I think that these skewed priorities may be explained by the fact that literature on modern aesthetic theory and aesthetization is somewhat under-represented in the grounding theories of the book. Thus the analysis sometimes avoids “poetics”, aesthetics and pleasure, and instead falls into the trap of focussing on sound for “purpose” or strictly intended communication. For instance we never get to know, what the historical attraction or audible structures behind the early recordings of Enrico Caruso’s *bel canto* voice are. Though he is presented as one of the two *voice icons* that the author sets up as a dichotomy pair – Louis Armstrong as the “rasp” and Caruso as the *bel canto* voice – we only get the analysis of the voice of Louis Armstrong, albeit very interesting. The analysis of Caruso is either forgotten or simply left out. That being said, it must be emphasized that the focussed voice analysis of Louis Armstrong is really good. And though it would have strengthened the book if the analyst had also more aesthetic sensibility, he comes a long way with his project as it is.

The book is well written and composed, with a clear and fine flow: it is essayistic in its form, but very concise in its substance. It is the best, the most thorough and innovative input on sound and voice in the media history of recorded sound to date. It is a *must* for anyone looking for knowledge and perspective when interacting and working with voice sound in the media. Being positioned at the intersection between the voice, sound media technologies and performance I would also recommend it to anyone interested in notions and concepts of authenticity (also as an aesthetic project) and identity in modern media and culture. In our search for signs of authentic human presence and in the construction of vocal “authenticity” we must – concludes the book – accept, that “...the voice in particular emerges as an instrument of performance with a particu-

larly subtle give-and-take between expressing the individual and the type: another reflection of the voice's double nature as both 'the intimate kernel of subjectivity' and 'the axis of our social bonds'" (p.247).

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