

Personifications

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As the deluded, the psychotic, and the paranoid realised early on, the media age is dominated by the preposition *through*, as signaled by the prefix *per-* and the experiences of permeation, percolation, percussion, performance, persuasion it expresses. In such a world, the discontinuity of insides and outsides is ecstatically, anxiously dissolved. And in such a world sound, with its capacity to permeate the membranes separating discrete beings and bodies and to move from inside to outside and from outside to inside, becomes the representative sense-modality. Erik Büniger is preoccupied throughout his work with such passages of sounds, musics, and vocalities between inside and outside.

The inside and the outside of what? For it seems that we are no longer located unilaterally on the inside of things, receiving sounds that come to us from an outside; rather, as the self-overhearing voice in Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* says, we are in the position of the diaphragm, the tenuous thickness that vibrates between the inside and outside:

Perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either. (Beckett 2010, 100)

Michel Serres has frequently evoked what he calls the 'black box' of hearing, which takes raw sound and processes it into signal, voice, melody, turning 'hard' form into 'soft' information (Serres 2008, 129). Erik Büniger is drawn to such processes of transformative incorporation, the actions of sonorous reception and emission that we constantly effect, and whose effect we are. For *Bytom Hymn Echo* (2006), Büniger recorded the inhabitants of the Polish town of Bytom trying to reproduce the one-minute trumpet hymn that since 1998 has been broadcast four times a day from a church tower in the town. What we listen to seems to be an overhearing of the way in which the melody has been unconsciously scored in the mind's-ears of the inhabitants. Recording the people of Bytom recalling the trumpet hymn seems to highlight the recording and playback devices that the people already are – in

hearing without listening. We have become so habituated to the ways in which recorded sound doubles or impersonates music that we may have lost sight, or hearing, of the ways in which we have ourselves become resonating or impersonating mechanisms. *Person* is from *persona*, Latin for a mask, but, more literally, that through which the sound of the voice passes. A person is a throughput, a sound-through, and a through-sound. You become a person through sound, the word seems to say, through the sound that passes through you, circulating between the three grammatical persons that every person comprises – first, second and third – pluralising its singularity. We are persons because we are sonified, we are personifications of the sounds that we absorb and exude. Ego is echo, personhood is resonance, the resounding of the persona: *personance*, held together by a sort of persistence of hearing equivalent to the cinematic persistence of vision.

Bünger's *Moonstruck* (2008) takes us inside this auditorium, using the interior dispositions of a building to help us overhear hearing, or to sound out the architecture of listening. As one entered Kulturhuset in Sweden, where it was installed, one heard dimly, amid the fog of background noise, the sounds of a piano playing. Arriving on the first floor, one recognised that the source of the music was a pianist playing the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. In a third room, there was a video projection of the scene from *Immortal Beloved* (1994) in which Gary Oldman as the deaf, elderly Beethoven presses his ear to a piano to make out the sound of what he is playing; but what one heard on the soundtrack was the degraded, distorted sound of the music one had seen and heard being played in the previous room. We have entered the cochlear labyrinth that Michel Serres has compared to the coiling of a piano keyboard (Serres 2008, 143). The music has no single site but is all reverberation, transduction, hearsay, resounding. The piece is a reflection on the oscillating exteriority and interiority of hearing – as sound, so strangely and menacingly persistent in other works, agonisingly fades and decays.

Bünger's early work *Variations on a Theme by Casey and Finch* (2003) attempted to effect the subordination of live performance to the mechanical exigencies of a stuck and skipping CD. Machine, instrument, and flesh enter into each other's composition, intention and accident transposed. Watching the piece performed, one witnesses and is party to a kind of comic agony, what Antonin Artaud called 'the sufferings of dubbing' (*les souffrances du 'dubbing'*) as the performers freely but compulsively act out their subordination to the convulsive stutterings of the dysfunctional machine they mimic (Artaud 1978). Entertainment is entrainment and entrapment.

A similar dislocation of passion is found throughout Bünger's work. Tools, instruments, and machines were once efficient, obedient, insentient; it was we who subjected them to sentimental education, saturating them with our passion and

sensitivity. But somehow our passion passed across into these tertiary mechanisms and started to live out its own life apart from us. The mindless world of things seems to have grown a mind. But no, rather than a mind, exactly, the world has grown a set of diffuse feelings and excitements. In place of animate creatures striving to make the inanimate world sing of their feelings, the world itself sings siren-like on its own account, apparently throbbing with feelings, but deprived of and therefore hungry for subjects to feel them. The result is a kind of inverted apostrophe, in which, rather than being summoned into imaginary being by acts of address ('O Wild West wind, thou breath of Autumn's being'. 'My country, 'tis of thee . . .'), the world itself appears and acts as pure vocative, urging us into fuller, more intense being. In amid all the incoherent strainings and longings in contemporary music, the most insistent is this longing to be felt, this longing for incorporation in us, as the twittering shades of the underworld in Book Eleven of the *Odyssey* long for the blood of the living to give body to their lamentations. As I sit in a café trying to compose these words the canned music moans, screams, and sobs, demanding that I put aside thinking and join in the passion play, assist the insensate passion to play itself out. The mediated, mediating world is voracious for our compliance, our willingness to impersonate the postures and gestures of feeling that it holds out for us.

In his more recent works *A Lecture on Schizophrenia* (2007–09) and *The Third Man* (2010) Erik Bünger has reinvented a genre that flourished in the eighteenth-century theater: the lecture-performance. One of the most successful of these was George Stevens's *Lecture On Heads*, which used a series of busts of historical figures to develop some meditations upon the idea of character (Stevens 1765). In *The Third Man*, the plaster busts have become the animated talking heads of film and video excerpts, but the interchange and reciprocity between the speaker and the spoken persists. The lecture itself is cool, clear, articulate; considerate to its audience. There is little or nothing to distinguish it from a real lecture, and, transcribed and reperformed, it could easily be passed off by another as such. Yet we should be unsure whether we are being given here a straight lecture or the performance or staging of one, whether a reading out, or the 'reading' of that act of reading.

Lecture originally meant simply the act of reading in general, or the singular act of reading a particular text. The Oxford English Dictionary also records an early (and now obsolete) reading of the word *lecture* to mean just that: a reading – or interpretation, say – of a particular passage of scripture, or, as the definition puts it, 'the way in which a text reads.' A lecture, in this sense, is equivalent to the obsolete word *lection*, which is cognate with the word *lesson*, which itself originally meant a reading out. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the word *lecture* had acquired the familiar modern meaning of the act of reading a written text out loud. We may say that the word hints at a kind of automatic or impersonal process, in which texts somehow read themselves out loud through our reading of them. When we say that a piece of writing 'reads well' or 'reads poorly' we are referring to

our sense of the way in which the written text somehow includes its performance in itself, in advance, as a kind of pre-lection (and actually the word *prelection* did flourish for a while in English, to mean a particular kind of selection or picking out from the work of an author for certain passages to be read aloud). The text ‘reads’ in the same way as we will later say that a drama and later a recording and, in recent years, a media story ‘plays.’ When we read a text out loud, we give it our reading, selecting from it certain features and neglecting others. But we do so with the intention of simply giving voice to what it anyway already says, doubling or impersonating the way it ‘reads.’ We embody it, we fit it out with the body it does not yet have yet seems to demand, we give to it the body that it lacks yet knows it requires.

In part, this is the theme of *The Third Man*. Everywhere, Büniger makes out the workings of what William Burroughs called the virus of language. Virus seems exactly right, since a virus is an organism that lies between the organic and the inorganic, being incapable of propagating without a host. Although Rosalind Franklin was able to make visible the structure of DNA from photographs of the tobacco mosaic virus, a virus itself is a kind of invigorated death, since it consists simply of DNA surrounded by a protein shell, without most of the internal mechanisms for metabolism or self-reproduction that characterise what are known as ‘living’ organisms. In the absence of an organic host, a virus exists in a state of suspended animation. And yet, viruses have had huge effects on the evolution of living forms and may have been necessary to the development of all the functions of the living cell.

Concerning itself with the ‘thirdness’ of our media, Büniger’s lecture must itself occupy this tertiary position, this middle ground. When I say ‘I’. there is a razor-thin cut or seam down the middle of that slim, singular stroke, which distinguishes twins and separates enunciator and the enunciated, the I that speaks and the I named in that act of speaking, which the saying of the word ‘I’ at once draws together and distinguishes. But this twinning means that there is also, immediately, a third thing, the enunciation itself, the act and event of the saying, which brings about this liaison and lesion of the enunciator and the enunciated. In ordinary speech, this act of enunciation is perpetually forming and fading, like the particles of anti-matter that we are told are constantly coming into existence and being annihilated within a vacuum. With the invention (or discovery?) of writing, a means was found to arrest this perpetual arising and passing away. Writing was the third that began to occupy an ever more substantial and more persisting place, both between ‘I’ and ‘me’ and between me and the whole range of other persons, pronouns, and prepositions. With the arrival of the various forms of phonography and kinematics at the end of the nineteenth century, the old formula *verba volant, scripta manent* – speech flees, writing endures – lost its mandate, for now the spoken had entered into iterability and persistence.

This third sphere of abstract, impersonal enunciation has expanded from the thinnest, most epiphenomenal profile to an entire regime; an elemental, mindless mentality, between the animate and inanimate, between event and artifact. Sound and voice have passed across into this huge and propagating Third Estate of lively things and reified quasi-lives. A growing preoccupation through Erik Büniger's work is the force of what might be called preoccupation itself; that is, the ways in which we are all of us inhabited in advance by the cadences and rhythms of the media, always already in place alongside us, before us, within us, nagging, niggling, jingling. *A Lecture on Schizophonia* centers around the convivial deathliness of the half-lives emitted and reanimated by recording technology, voices without a body and yet, insofar as they are voices, always evoking the kind of quasi-corporeality that I once thought to call the 'vocalic body' (Connor 2000, 35-42). *A Lecture on Schizophonia* ends with a couple of examples of posthumous duets between living singers and the recorded dead – Celine Dion singing 'All the Way' with Frank Sinatra, Natalie Cole singing 'Unforgettable' with her father Nat King Cole, technology's final victory over death making 'unforgettable' seem more like a menace than a promise. There are plenty of other examples on which Büniger might have drawn: Hank Williams Jr. joining with his father for 'There's a Tear in My Beer' in 1989, Lisa Marie Presley dueting with her father Elvis on 'In the Ghetto'. and the surviving Beatles joining with John Lennon on his 'Free as a Bird.' Büniger has himself put together a duet of this kind, making Celine Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On' lip-synch with Blind Willie Nelson's 'God Moves on the Water'. his 1929 song about the sinking of the Titanic.

The Third Man is in fact itself a kind of duet with itself, existing as it does, like its predecessor *A Lecture on Schizophonia*, in two versions: as a film and as a script for 'live' performance. The shadow thrown hugely and menacingly on the wall behind Büniger as he performs his exploration of the various forms of impersonal tertiaries that circulate among and between living persons in the media hints at this *pas de trois*, this 'Me and My Shadow' choreography. As he tells us of his haunting by the voice and face of the Third Man, Büniger body-doubles the Orson Welles who hosted the *Great Mysteries* series on television in the 1970s, reprising his own radio dramas with the Mercury Theatre in the 1930s.

Such chimera couplings of voice are everywhere in the world of fluid voice-bodies that Büniger explores. In *The Allens*, Büniger effects a duet between Woody Allen and himself, or rather, himself – with the many substitutes and stand-ins that are constituted by the voice-doubles who dub him in different languages. This polyphony disturbs the traditional economy that demands that a singular body be occupied by a singular voice. Here Allen's body undergoes decomposition, or *sparagmos* – akin to that suffered by Orpheus when he was torn apart by the Thracian maenads – as his body becomes possessed by many other candidate voice-bodies. Woody Allen's characteristic, Tourettish repertoire of tics, shrugs, and twitches are a screen upon which these many alternative voices crowd and

cluster. His mobile face and fingers are a radio dial that cycles through the different versions of himself that exist across the airwaves and the language-worlds of Europe. In one sense, Allen is their conductor, pulling their strings, calling the tune, setting the tempo; in another sense, he is scripted or animated by these alternative voices in a reciprocal possession. As Bünger reminds us in *A Lecture on Schizophrenia*, the name of the possessing devil is Legion.

The Third Man is an anatomy of the condition of obsession, in which we are all besieged by voices, hints, solicitations, floating fragments of desire and affect; all seeking to take root, to find a space of interiority in which to resound and prolong themselves. But an effect of iteration or citationality is added to the lecture in performance, in which the subordinate relation in which Bünger stands to his own text as it reads itself or plays itself out through his performance of it rhymes with the obsessional theme of the lecture itself, namely the way in which we are read, ghosted, or reeled off by the ubiquitous soundtracks of modern media. We are induced to wonder: is it possible to speak of such a condition of obsession non-obsessively? Is the diagnosis of the paranoid condition always in part a confirmatory symptom of it?

The world is full of our noises, our emissions, our emanations, thickening and saturating our electromagnetic atmosphere. The world plays us back to ourselves, but in so doing, seems also to steal into the space between us and ourselves, between our ears and what we hear with them, and thereby steals us from ourselves, spiriting us away, yet all the time cleaving as close as a shadow, like the presence evoked in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

Who is that third who walks always beside you?
When I count there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded (Eliot 1969, 73)

Bünger's work makes us ghosts lost in the machinery. The end result of all his explorations of the body-doubles and vocalic bodies that inhabit us like parasites is the recognition that we may be the parasites, we may be the noise in the circuit. But, if there is a mounting note of unease in Bünger's work there is also a kind of exhilaration, even exultation, mingled with the panic at the panaphonia of our present condition. If we are fated never again to be fully alive, fully present to ourselves and each other in the mythical region of the here and now, this may hint at the condition of virtuality towards which human beings have been tending since they first began to provide an auditorium for the resoundings of personification, which is perhaps to say, since they first heard the whispers of what it would be to be human. It is a new modulation of humanity that is hinted at in the mysterious meta-person evoked by the witnesses in *Gospels* (2006), a seeming messiah constituted of a perfect openness to all frequencies and influences. It is as though

the media – that strange, tertiary entity that is more than singular but less than fully plural – were here stammering the praise of itself, patching together piecemeal its own prosopopoeia.

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