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Knot of the voice*

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When I remember my mother who died in the summer of 2012, a few months short of her ninety-first birthday and wrapped into dementia, I never hear a voice. There is a distinct recollection of the Northwestern German, 'Westfalian' accent that she used to speak and that did not change at all during the seven decades she lived in the phonetically different environment of the German South. As it is typical, her way of articulating indeed became 'my mother tongue', so much so that people who meet me today both regularly and wrongly assume that I grew up in the Northern part of the country. But the 'accent' that I will copy until I die remains separate from the sound of my mother's voice that I have irretrievably lost.

My father's voice, by contrast, has left a burning presence in my existence whose somehow physical impact I am not able to escape. He was a remarkably good-looking man in the style, as some of his admirers liked to say, of Hollywood actors from the 1940s, 'Clark Gable' being one of the fond comparisons that I heard since my childhood days. He also achieved a steep professional career and thus acquired considerable wealth, at least until a certain point of his life, as a surgeon who, in the early 'Federal Republic', counted some eminent national figures among his patients. His voice, however, did not fit the looks, the success, and the wealth of my father, at least not in his only son's perception. As I am writing these words, it accompanies me with the sound of a women's voice, not in the sense of a 'high-pitched voice' but rather like a voice on an alto level, similar to the voice of the less good-looking and much more eminent Niklas Luhmann, a thinker who fascinated German intellectuals of my generation during the final decades of the past century.

* The following text will preface Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *Lives of the Voice*, Stanford University Press. The German translation will be published by Suhrkamp Verlag.

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Today it feels embarrassing to tell what irritated me so much about the voice of my beloved father. From early on in my life, I sensed the vague but intense impulse to compensate for what I experienced as a fundamental weakness that it manifested. And I feared the signs and consequences of such weakness that I believed to notice. Did my mother not often seem attracted by other men, men with lesser looks, success, or wealth – but deeper-sounding voices? Had I not heard such a deeper voice in our apartment one evening before I fell asleep, after eating scrambled eggs with a faint taste of prescription pills? Were there not all of a sudden less of those famous patients who sometimes invited our family to lavish restaurant dinners and spectacular vacation places? When I was eight years old we had spent a New Year's week as guests in a splendid villa on the Italian Riviera – where we never returned. And then those endless discussions between my parents about the announcement of the hospital's administration to scale down the number of beds in the department for which my father was responsible, a decision taken after several extended periods of his absence from work, due to diseases whose physical symptoms I did not see. One summer my father and I, again without my mother, went on a vacation at the Lake of Konstanz, close to the Swiss border, and during the car rides I actively tried to keep our conversations as short as possible because hearing his voice was so painful to me.

All the ways of coping with that impression of weakness have left a lasting effect on my life. After a difficult start into elementary school, I made every possible effort of close attention in class and of endless hours invested into homework to become a visibly outstanding student, a student with the highest grades in every subject, a student who never stayed at home for a single day until my graduation from the Gymnasium, and even a student popular enough among his peers to get elected 'school president'. After all, the honor of the family seemed at stake, and I had to defend it every day, with the obvious effect of never enjoying school. At no moment, the problems and my reactions detached themselves from my father's voice. This may explain why I approached puberty with the nightmare of changing to an adult voice similar to his, a possible development that, different from grades or popularity at school, I knew was out of my control.

So I started every morning with self-imposed tests (clearing my throat, speaking to myself, singing) in order to figure out whether my new voice had finally emerged and what it was like. At some point, later than with most classmates, the impression began to prevail that my adult voice would be at least 'average deep' and thus not beco-

me an aggravating reason for embarrassment, fear, and permanent compensation. And I got lucky indeed. My voice is between baritone and bass, it has turned out a voice that serves me well as a speaker at academic and public events because its volume can fill large spaces without using a microphone. But while I still feel grateful (without knowing to whom) about this physical fact, I have never been proud or at least relaxed about my voice. Each time that I use it outside current everyday conversations, I am nervous to check whether it still functions well – and then strangely eager to show the world that it does. Voices in general, not only my own voice, will forever occupy a central place in my existence because I measure myself against them, as I obsessively continue to build strength against the perceived weakness of my father's voice whose sound my imagination has kept alive since his death in 2005. Quite literally, I am haunted by voices, and until recently I used to lack the distance to think about them on a more abstract level.

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In the present cultural, above all academic climate, an interpretation comes to mind, almost inevitably, that promises to dissolve the traumatic impact of my father's voice. Had I not been the victim of a banal gender stereotype in assuming that my father, as a man, needed to have a deep voice and that the absence of such a deep male voice revealed a weakness with a negative impact on the honor and standing of my family? It is doubtlessly true that men with an alto voice can be strong and successful in many ways, which implies that I should never have worried. But this retrospective commentary will neither undo the pain of my childhood years nor have a redemptive effect on the neurotic forms of behavior that it triggered.

But although it illustrates a historical gender bias that we may hope to have overcome, I am beginning to see how the story about my father's voice lends itself as an example for certain phenomena that are both crucial in our lives and difficult to tackle with concepts from the Humanities and Social Sciences. I will refer to them as belonging to an 'ontology of individual existence'. What I have in mind are individual body features as we perceive them in persons we interact with. We all know that we cannot avoid reacting, in one way or the other, to tall bodies, to faces that we find good-looking, to what we identify as physical 'deformities', or to the sounds of individual voices (among which most of us are supposed to remember and distinguish about a hundred). At the same time, we have all learnt that such

spontaneous reactions should not play a role in our social behavior because they undermine a premise of equity that obliges us to ignore details that are not in the other person's control (like tallness, looks, or the level of voices). This is one reason why we hardly ever deal with phenomena belonging to the ontology of individual existence. A second reason for the same abstention has to do with the fact that no general rules exist for our ways of processing them. Faces that look or voices that sound appealing to certain persons may have the opposite effect on others. There seems to be no chance to identify shared filters of social knowledge that we all are using in this existential dimension and that shape our social relations.

Among the phenomena pertaining to the ontology of individual existence, the voice has a specifically complicated status. For in relation to 'meaning' the voice fulfills a double function. Together with writing, it is the medium through which we express propositional contents that, broadly speaking, we have previously formed in our mind – and from this angle voices are different from body shapes, faces, or deformities that never articulate well circumscribed meanings. But at the same time – and in this sense converging with body shapes, faces, or deformities – voices trigger vague associations that do not have the determinate forms of propositional contents. One example is the embarrassing weakness that I 'heard' in my father's voice whenever he was speaking. On this second level – and different from that of the voice as a medium for propositional contents – it seems impossible to fully separate the associations from physical features that we perceive and that trigger them. This may be the reason why I cannot think about my father's voice without 'hearing' it in my memory.

At the same time and also specific to the voice, it is impossible to detach the propositional content expressed by a voice that we understand from those subjective associations. When my father talked to me about the players of the 1954 German soccer world champion team whom I so admired, his voice continued to produce the embarrassing effect of weakness. This close, indeed inseparable proximity between meanings, associations, and the physical perception on which the latter depend – we may describe the entire syndrome as the 'knot of the voice' – makes up for the specific complexity and complicatedness indeed of the voice as a phenomenon.

We process that 'knot' whenever we listen to a voice in a language that we understand, whereas we obviously miss the propositional content articulated by voices that speak in a language we are not familiar with. Why certain voices that we have heard remain in our memory with their sound (my father's voice) and others not (my

mother's voice) seems to be another good question without more than subjective answers. My imagination can distinctly produce the different sounds of my four children's voices in their absence. I quite obsessively 'hear' the always same sentence in the voice of my great grandmother Marie who lived in the same narrow apartment with the families of her two sons and sometimes threatened that she would «throw herself out of the window in front of the passing by streetcar» when their mutual tensions became unbearable. Another voice that has stayed alive for me is that of her son, my great uncle Franz, who in 1951 had returned to his hometown after six years as a prisoner of war in a Siberian concentration camp. «Free I want to be, free, free», he used to shout, almost to sing all of a sudden with a deep, irritatingly melodious and nasal tone, during our Sunday afternoon walks together, until one winter's day he hung himself from a tree, and his frozen body was only found several weeks later covered with snow.

I do not believe, however, that the permanence of certain voices in my mind is a function of tragic plots and their authenticity. Voices that actors lend to the characters they embody often turn out an essential part of their engaging performance. I have always admired how Marlon Brando, in the first part of the *Godfather*-trilogy, spoke Vito Corleone's role with a perfect Italo-American accent and an underlying sound of serious friendliness and even care that made me sympathize with the organized crime the character stood for. But while I could describe in large detail what I am hearing and the feelings that the Godfather-voice triggers in me, I would not be able to say why it has that very effect. As we said, there are no socially objective codes that determine our ways of processing the sounds of different voices.

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Although voices thus seem to resist, among phenomena making up for the ontology of individual existence, any conceptually systematic grasp, the notion has gone through an almost dramatic history during the past six decades of writing and debate within the Humanities. Based on a competent critical reading of Edmund Husserl's philosophy, it became foundational within 'Deconstruction' as the intellectual style inaugurated by Jacques Derrida's first book *Voice and Phenomena* from 1967[1]. According to Derrida, the fact, often highlighted by Husserl

1 *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl, Presses universitaires de France*, Paris 1967.

indeed, that we listen to our own voice while we are speaking was responsible for the conviction that we are able to understand, analyze, and describe our consciousness in its totality. Due to the inevitably temporal structure of consciousness and language, Derrida exposed this belief as an illusion, an illusion that was supposed to have begun with the discursive unfolding of Plato's philosophy in the form of dialogues (that is with characters who listen to themselves while they are speaking), an illusion, finally and above all, that he saw as foundational for the entire 'metaphysical' tradition in Western thinking.

While it was not Derrida's intention to eliminate phenomena of the 'voice' from topics to be dealt with in the Humanities, the very strong – and sometimes undifferentiated – resonance that Deconstruction found, above all during the 1970s and 1980s, gave a negative connotation to the concept and temporarily excluded it from the ongoing philosophical debates. Against this background it is quite astonishing that the voice, more specifically the singing voice, had an almost ecstatic comeback in the late work of Friedrich Kittler, one of the founding figures of 'media studies', all the more so, as Kittler was notoriously eager to insist on his closeness to Derrida's philosophical positions. The first volume of his (unfinished) history of *Music and Mathematics*[2] highlights the performance of Ancient Greek rhapsodes as the «first victory of serene knowledge»[3] because it allowed the singers and their audiences to capture and ultimately describe in mathematical terms prosodic structures they were following. Here Kittler saw the original connection between music and mathematics that Media Studies should pursue as a matrix producing ever new developments and genres throughout the centuries.

If Kittler was a thinker and author who, with remarkable mythographic talent, brought together conceptual configurations of his time and dense images of what he esteemed as decisive historical moments, the new academic subdiscipline of 'Media Studies' had already settled on the voice as one of its favorite topics. Among a number of collective volumes published in the early twenty-first century and dedicated to the concept, the German book on *Stimme*, edited by Doris Kolesch und Sybille Krämer[4], seems representative. In their preface and after explicitly taking distance from the concept's negative connotation coming from Deconstruction, Kolesch and Krämer outlined two main goals that they pursued. Given the fact that, by then, 'voice' had become a

2 *Musik und Mathematik*, Bd. 1: *Hellas*, Teil 1: *Aphrodite*, Fink, München 2006.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

4 *Stimme. Annäherung an ein Phänomen*, hrsg. v. Doris Kolesch – Sybille Krämer, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2006.

focus in many different academic pursuits, they firstly insisted on the need to work toward a new repertoire of specific concepts capable of overcoming the centrifugal diversity among different disciplinary traditions. Secondly, Kolesch and Krämer wanted to showcase the broad variety of historical contexts and cultural dimensions in which phenomena of voice are of central relevance.

Without any doubt, the twelve essays published in their volume provide a colorful impression of the topic's multiple fascinations on a high level of particular expertise. There are contributions about the history of opera voices, about voices produced, without human bodies, by modern technology, about the power of voices in political rhetoric, about the functions of animal voices, or about silence in art, literature, theater, and ritual. What the book on 'Stimme' fails to achieve, however, is the announced philosophical groundwork in direction toward a new, integrated terminology or perhaps even toward a unifying theory. The question comes up whether authors and editors are to be blamed for this shortcoming or whether it is the inevitable result of the topic's specific structure of complexity. Can we truly imagine concepts that apply to the three different phenomenal layers that are simultaneously in play and need to be taken into account when we speak about the life of the voice, that is to 'voice' as a medium of language (where the relation between the level of the signifier and that of the signified is 'arbitrary' in the sense of Saussure), to 'voice' processed as part and symptom of the speaking person's character or psyche (where the sound cannot be separated from the associations it produces), and 'voice' in its pure material being (where scientific tools of description seem most appropriate)? We may of course dream of a somehow utopian philosophical environment or of an individual philosophical genius capable of producing such overarching concepts, but against the realistic background of our different discursive traditions, with their inherent limits and mutual tensions of incompatibility, it seems unrealistic to count on them. This would explain why, during the past decade and behind the too often repeated premise of stunning interdisciplinary plurality, the fascination of 'voice' has lost some of the energy by which it used to be permeated during its remarkable academic history since 1967. Has it become too late for a book on the 'Lives of the voice'?

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One of the few intellectual impulses that encouraged me not to give up on such a project came from Roland Barthes' essay on the *Grain*

of the Voice, written in 1972[5]. Not even Barthes offers any hints for a solution of the philosophical problem concerning an integrative terminology that Doris Kolesch's and Sybille Krämer's volume had tackled without success, but he moved along the lines of difficult conceptual distinctions convergent with our intuitions about the 'knot of the voice'. I also sensed in his text a contagious enthusiasm triggered about some related aesthetic effects. For Barthes dealt with 'voice' from a perspective of singing, more precisely from the performance practice of the mainly German repertoire of 'Kunstlieder'. He evoked singing as «the space where a language meets a voice»[6], and thus started out to define as the «the grain of the voice» those cases where the voice simultaneously functions «as language and music»[7] (as his reflection developed, he progressively abandoned the 'language'-side). Now the originally highlighted simultaneity does not only occur in singing but in most situations where we use our voices. The advantage of singing as an example lies in rendering more palpable the difference between voice as a medium of language and voice as a specific presence of the speaker's or singer's bodies as symptoms of their personalities.

From his initial concept of the 'grain of the voice', Barthes then proceeds to a distinction between two dimensions of singing that he refers to as «phéno-chant» and «géno-chant». «Phéno-chant» includes «all the features pertaining to the language sung […], in short to everything that serves the functions of communication, representation, expression, to what one normally talks about, to the tissue of cultural values»[8]. «Géno-chant», by contrast, corresponds to «the volume of the singing or speaking voice, to the space where meanings ('significations') sprout ('germent') from the innermost language and from its very materiality; to a play of meaning ('jeu significant') that is alien to communication, representation (of feelings), expression»[9]. What matters the most here is the focus on the 'sprouting' of a special type of meanings (that we had called 'associations') inherent to the 'materiality' of language.

In order to illustrate the difference between 'phéno-chant' and 'géno-chant' that are both simultaneously present in every use of the human voice, Barthes refers to the performance styles embodied by two singers of 'Kunstlieder', the then world-famous German baritone

5 *Le grain de la voix* [1972], in Roland Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1982, pp. 236-245.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 238-239.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the Swiss baritone Charles Auguste Louis Panzéra whose art he had followed for many years with true passion. Fischer-Dieskau appears as the champion of 'phéno-chant', that is as the master of the «stupid organ» [sic!] of the lungs and of respiration, as the singer who maximally fulfilled «the clarity of meaning»[10] («la clarté du sens»). Panzéra, by contrast, stands for 'géno-chant', for the «metallic vibration» in both the vowels and consonants of French language that he was producing: «Panzéra pushed his 'r-sounds' beyond the norms of the singer, without denying these norms: his 'r's' were certainly rolling 'r's', as in all classical art of singing, but this rolling had nothing of a peasant or of a French-Canadian accent: it was an artificial rolling, the paradoxical state of a sounding letter that was completely abstract (due to the metallic brevity of its vibration) and completely material (due to the moving throat as its obvious root)»[11].

Increasingly, the 'tyranny of meaning', unilaterally attributed Fischer-Dieskau, gets on the bad side of Barthes' aesthetic appreciation which is plausible for an art form often confronting its listeners with languages they do not understand. What would after the point of reaching maximal transparence in a discourse inaccessible to the many of them? But the bias against 'phéno-chant' should not let us forget that in most everyday situations we simultaneously, inseparably, and yet differently react to the meanings articulated and to the physical sounds brought forth in the utterance of a voice. Barthes, however, leaves the side of 'language' behind and finishes his essay with a thesis exclusive to the aesthetic function of the voice as purely material sound, a thesis quite typical among French thinkers of his generation: «the 'grain' is the body in the voice that sings, in the hand that writes, in the limb that performs. If I perceive the 'grain' in a music […], I need to establish a new, doubtlessly individual form of evaluation because I am decided to hear my relation to the body of the man or the woman who sings or plays, and this relation is erotic but by no means 'subjective' (it is not the psychological 'subject' in me who listens; instead of strengthening – or expressing – the relationship, the lust ('jouissance') that the subject hopes for will rather undo it). That evaluation has no law, it rejects the law of culture and of anti-culture»[12]. I do not agree with the implicit assumption that every relationship mediated by the grain of the voice between different bodies needs to be 'erotic' and lead to 'jouissance' (a concept mostly

10 *Ibid.*, p. 240.
11 *Ibid.*
12 *Ibid.*, pp. 243-244.

associated with 'orgasm' in French). Yet I retain Barthes' intuition that the type of bodily contact emerging from the use of our voice is neither subject based nor obeying any regularity or 'law'. No code nor rule made it necessary for me to precisely sense a weakness in my father's voice to which I was connected nor was it my individual choice or interpretation to do so. Existentially, the father's voice has determined the course of my life, epistemologically its status remains uncertain.

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Barthes conjures up the complexity and the not only intellectual appeal of what I try to approach as the 'knot of the voice' in a double strategy whose two components collaborate without being epistemologically complementary. Above all he shows how – and in some cases: why – concepts from the Western philosophical tradition never fully grasp the phenomena that he tries to pinpoint and somehow paradoxically gets us closer to them in the process. At the same time, he illustrates the topic by activating memories that his readers may have from the performance of singers like Fischer-Dieskau or Panzéra. Such a double procedure seems to impose itself with practical necessity in any intellectual writing about the voice. As for the epistemological side, the situation is indeed even more complicated than what Barthes states because, strictly speaking, the classical 'mind – body' distinction does both work – and not work – for most cases concerning the knot of the voice. It does work for 'voice', as a medium articulating propositional contents, and it does not work for the other phenomenal layer that Barthes ends up calling 'the grain of the voice'. This state of fundamental ambiguity in the functioning of the available conceptual and discursive traditions prevents us from dealing with the topic in a coherent – inductive or deductive – line of unfolding its complexity, as my original book-title 'Phenomenology of the Human Voice' would have suggested. A similar problem concerns the relationship between phenomena of 'voice' and the concept of 'presence' that has fascinated me in earlier stages of my writing trajectory[13]. Quite obviously 'presence', as the spatial dimension that we cannot help developing between our bodies and other material objects in their environment, plays a crucial role within the knot of the voice. But there is no way of keeping 'presence' as neatly separate from the 'sprouting of

13 See, above all, *Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004.

meaning' in a voice as my typological distinction between 'presence cultures' and 'meaning cultures' insinuates. Voice, too, both is – and is not – a presence phenomenon.

Such difficulties must have motivated my friend Eva Giilmer's soberly adequate remark that 'voice' makes up for a «disorderly topic»[14], a topic, as we have said, that does not lend itself to an epistemologically coherent and discursively continuous exposition. The problem, however, is not exclusive to the topic of 'voice' or even to phenomena belonging to the 'ontology of individual existence'. It seems to occur whenever we try to think or to write about 'human life' without reducing the concept of 'life', as we normally do in the Humanities, to its non-physical dimensions[15]. Seen from this angle, the multiple conceptual difficulties that I have been subsuming under the expression of 'the knot of the voice', turn from a reason to avoid confrontation with the topic in its full complexity into the structure of an intellectual decision. If we want to seriously deal with phenomena of human life, then we need to accept and cope with epistemological and discursive difficulties stemming from their status as 'disorderly topics'. The human voice is certainly not the only such case, but it may have a potentially paradigmatic status within its larger context.

In the absence of a one and only solution that can claim to be phenomenologically and epistemologically 'necessary', what may be a good structure of presentation for a comprehensive book on the human voice? As I tried to find a practical answer to this question, I remembered how, more than ten years ago, I was struggling with the same type of problem in searching the form for a book on 'Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung'. The fact that this happened in relation to a concept whose German word ('Stimm-ung') has 'Stimme' ('voice') as its root cannot have been random – and it indeed encouraged me to return to similar solution. The best strategy for the comprehensive presentation of disorderly topics may be to 'circumscribe' them, in the literal sense of the verb. This means, on one level, that we leave

14 As an acquisitions editor at Suhrkamp Verlag, Eva reacted with these words to my first drafts for this book, implying that «disorderly topics» deserve intellectual attention in spite of – or because of – their specific challenges.

15 In recent decades, philosophically complex proposals to solve the epistemological problem related to the concept of 'human life' have rather come from the so-called 'Life Sciences' than from the Humanities. Such attempts often start out with long-term evolutionary overviews about the emergence of life in general and of human life in specific, as a process with two thresholds of extremely high improbability. Two eminent examples for this approach are Lynn Margulis – Dorion Sagan – Niles Eldridge, *What is Life?*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1995, and Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*, Penguin Books, London 2016.

empty the discursive space of the topic's systematically 'necessary' description and, on the other level, surround the conceptual void with a series of essays on partial aspects and specific phenomena involved. Such circumscribing presentations can never be complete, they have no pertinent order or logical ending and, as we saw in Roland Barthes' text on 'The Grain of the Voice', they tend to recur to the potential of illustrating their topics with colorful individual examples.

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What would be the intellectual – and perhaps even existential – point of trying to circumscribe the human voice? How is it different from the centrifugal plurality of similar topics offered by multi-author volumes like Doris Kolesch's and Sybille Krämer's book on 'Stimme'? I sense that the act of circumscribing and the reading that it imposes have an affinity to the ways we live our lives (normally without thinking much about them). We live our lives by activating the capacities of our bodies and of our minds in a constant transition and shifting between different existential dimensions, from sleeping and dreaming to eating, walking, driving, pursuing our professional work, speaking, listening to others, reading fiction, enjoying music or a landscape, having sex, shopping, thinking about investments, and sleeping again. These dimensions are always intertwined and always overlap, while we hardly ever to go through them twice in the exact same order. Our everyday existential journeys thus produce intensity and boredom, density and exhaustion, but they neither have an essential core nor a logically 'necessary' ending. 'Lives of the Voice' appears to be an appropriate title for a book developing along such lines. The better I manage to bring different dimensions of the voice into in a relation of close juxtaposition, the more I capture their overlapping and their intertwinedness, the greater the density and intensity of the book about voice as a paradigmatic zone of life.

Its six chapters go from social dimensions and functions of the voice through a speculation about its possible status in prehistorical times to individual uses of voices and reactions to them today. The first chapter starts out from the well-known observation that certain animals mark territories for individual behavior and dominance with the repeated production of sounds and leads to the question what could be an equivalent human framework. As an answer it develops the concept of – highly flexible – 'existential spaces' that emerge as relations of distance and closeness between bodies that make themselves perceived through the physical presence of their voices. We

will discuss processes of habitualization and institutionalization that can give existential spaces a lasting quality, and we will also try to understand the conditions under which they change and disappear. From the constitution of spaces in voice-based interactions we will proceed, in the second chapter, to the impulse of 'singing along' as core-element of a sociability which, different from the types of sociability normally dealt with in the discipline of 'Sociology', does include human bodies. We will focus on the singing of stadium crowds, go further in the specific analysis of the singing voices as opposed to speaking voices, and pursue the emergence of 'Stimmung', 'mood', 'atmosphere' from a joint use of individual voices.

The phenomenon of 'singing along' has occasionally encouraged speculations about its possible status in prehistorical stages of human interaction, speculations that we will take up in the third chapter. How plausible is it to assume that a status of the voice exclusively based on physical qualities preceded its function as a human medium for the articulation of meanings? If we assume that content-free sounds produced by their voices were central in the social contacts between prehistorical humans, then the history of their progressive functional differentiation, beginning with the connection of the voice to propositional contents and provisionally ending with the detachment of instrumental music from singing during the eighteenth century, will appear as a process in which it loses an original dominance. At the same time, such a history encourages the thought that each contemporary use of our voices implies and makes potentially accessible an archaic state of human existence.

This archaic connotation might explain the surprisingly frequent associations between voices and the human imagination that will be the focus of chapter four, probably constituting the greatest philosophical challenge of the book. Imagination has been defined as 'substance of content', that is as contents of the human mind independent of or prior to their shaping through forms (through concepts or syntactical structures for example). This understanding suggests that the capacity of being inspired by imagination also has to do with a talent of letting archaic energies of the mind come to the fore. A number of theorists have also assumed a comparative closeness, between imagination, among all mental capacities, and the body, which idea provides another context affinity between imagination and the human voice. We all know how voices of bodies we do not see inevitably trigger pictures of the bodies to which they may belong. On the other hand, there is the question about the conditions under which our acoustic imagination (if we can consider this notion viable at all) is able to make present

the sounds of voices that we have heard in the past. Sometimes voice recordings even suggest a palpable contact with worlds that existed before we were born. And is there something specific and differential about the quality of imaginations triggered by speaking voices, singing voices, or music without voices?

Chapter five will be about voices of transcendental beings that only orthodox religious believers would not qualify as products of the human imagination. How have the holy texts and the myths of different faiths described the voices of their gods? I am specifically interested in what the three great monotheistic traditions have convergently described as the 'voice of conscience' because it does not seem immediately obvious that the function to which the concept refers needs the imagination of articulated vocal sounds. A related question is whether the voice of conscience always and necessarily has a male tone or whether this widespread assumption should be dismissed as the consequence of historical traditions of gender dominance. In the same context I will discuss the phenomena to which the biblical phrase of 'speaking in tongues' refers, the supposed divine inspiration enabling humans to become understandable for listeners who do not know the languages they speak.

If believers react to transcendental voices as overwhelming authorities due to their imagined higher, otherworldly status, my sixth and final chapter will describe a different, mostly pleasant feeling of being overwhelmed that has been essential in my life. Since childhood and perhaps due to lack of sophistication about 'classical' forms of opera singing, voices from popular music, above all the voices of Elvis Presley, Edith Piaf, Janis Joplin, Whitney Houston, and Adele, have given me the joy of a physical closeness and even the sense of a bodily union that I do not necessarily identify as 'erotic'. Sometimes they come with a faint impulse of 'singing along' but then they typically turn into a freedom of letting go and letting happen, a freedom of my body and my emotions to become one with the vibrations, melodies, and rhythms of those voices. It is a freedom that can take me into worlds different from of my own, with Elvis Presley, Edith Piaf, Janis Joplin, and Whitney Houston even into the presence of historical worlds that no longer exist, a freedom, above all, that undoes the care about the shape of personal individuality and thus gives me a material horizon to hold on to in an often too complex and confusing everyday life. Only voices have this present of a non-philosophical consolation for me, and while it is pleasantly overwhelming, it has never threatened to become an addiction.

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Going through the different social, historical, and existential dimensions evoked by the chapters of this book on 'Lives of the Voice' surprised me with the effect of a new distance from the pain related to the memory of my father's voice. It has shaped my psyche forever as it released me into life under conditions over which I had no agency. Nor do I have any complaints in particular. Quite a normal and probably even typical story about the role of voices in our existence, a role that we seldom feel able to talk about. If anything, those conditions must have been behind my fascination for the voice as a topic and behind a non-educated sensitivity for individual voices. Together, the fascination and the sensitivity have been strong enough to make me think and finally write about 'Lives of the Voice' – against all philosophical and epistemological odds.