

Article received on 13th May 2010
Article accepted on 7th June 2010
UDC 612.784:786.6

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MONSTERIZATION OF SINGING: POLITICS OF VOCAL EXISTENCE

Abstract: In this paper I theorize embodiment of the voice in Steve Reich/Beryl Korot's video documentary opera *Three Tales* paying specific attention to the novel techniques of "production of the voice" that Steve Reich introduces. Emphasis is on Act 3 *Dolly* where a number of questions regarding cloning, defining human, and artificial intelligence have been raised. Voice appears beyond corporeality. I use two theoretical texts while performing analysis of *Three Tales*: Bojana Kunst's "Restaging the Monstrous" about the status and function of monstrous body and its political and theatrical productivity based on the cessation within the human, and constant production of the norm of what human is and is not and Mladen Dolar's considerations on politics and linguistics of the voice. I read those texts through *Three Tales* and analyze *Three Tales* through these texts aiming to introduce the monstrous voice concept. Monsterization of voice gives *Three Tales* status of operatic manifest whose subject is im/possibility of controlling the power of technology upon the human body and society. Opera appears as the place of social critique.

Key words: monstrous voice, post/opera, singing body, politics of the voice

"Today monsters remind us of the exclusion of the human from life, of life that is more and more being divided from humanity; of the ways in which 'total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man'"

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1 Giorgio Agamben quoted according to Bojana Kunst, "Restaging the Monstrous" in: Maaïke Bleeker (ed.), *Anatomy Live*, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, 217.

In this text my concern is how singing in opera appears to be beyond the body that produces it, how voice appears as the upgrading of the body's performance, and what consequences it has for the status and function of opera. In Steve Reich/Beryl Korot's video documentary opera *Three Tales* (1998–2002), technological devices are interlaced with the performer's corporeality. The voice that is heard is the result of the body joining forces and technological interventions performed upon the voice and body. Therefore, bodies singing live only partly produce the final vocal result. Asymmetry is established between the technologically upgraded voice and natural body as its primary source.

I theorize the embodiment of the voice in *Three Tales*, paying specific attention to the novel techniques of "production of the voice" that Steve Reich introduces. The emphasis is on Act 3 *Dolly* where a number of questions regarding cloning, defining human, and artificial intelligence have been raised. The voice appears beyond corporeality. I use two theoretical texts while performing the analysis of *Three Tales*: Bojana Kunst "Restaging the Monstrous"¹ about the status and function of the monstrous body and its political and theatrical productivity based on the cessation within the human, and the constant production of the norm of what human is and is not, and Mladen Dolar's considerations on the politics and linguistics of the voice². I read those texts through *Three Tales* and analyze *Three Tales* through these texts, aiming to introduce the monstrous voice concept. The singing body is vocally manifested as a monster. The monsterization of voice gives *Three Tales* the status of an operatic manifest whose subject is the im/possibility of controlling the power of using technology upon the human body and society. Opera functions as a critique of power.

The introductory story is old. Nevertheless, wrapped in the layers of contemporary athletics, technology, medicine and law, it acquires fresh radiance. Middle distance runner and world champion Mokgadi Caster Semenya won the gold in the 800 m at the World Championships in Berlin, in 2009. However, due to her triumphant performance that was far better than of her women competitors, muscular physique, narrow hips and low voice (sic) questions were raised about her sex.³ The tests were undertaken to establish her sex and that caused controversial reactions in political, medical, juridical and media centres. The extensive media reports suggested that Caster Semenya is other than female – or hermaphrodite, or male – and that she should be disqualified from women's competition. The mass media discussed issues of gender and sex definition. Semenya's body seemed to be like a machine inducing the mechanism of recognition of what is and what is not (fe)male. Her body appeared monstrous for others to confirm their own sex or gender "normality". The effect of that body was induc-

1 Bojana Kunst, "Restaging the Monstrous", in: *ibid*, 211–222.

2 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, MIT Press, 2006.

3 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2009/aug/20/caster-semenya-sex-row-athletics>, October 15, 2009.

ing medical, political and legislative procedures of accepting “monstrosity” and seeing how to treat it within the existing social norms. Interestingly, Semenyá’s low voice was mentioned as one of the indicators of her “wrong sex” although the voice is excluded from the figure of the athlete’s performance where the body competes, not the voice. For me, that raises questions about the monstrosity of the voice and its embodiment.

Bojana Kunst explores the “generative potential of the monstrous” that is “being subjected to contemporary economic and political power”.⁴ Monstrous is other than human, and a symptom of rethinking the human. “The monstrous becomes the ‘ever present possibility to destroy the natural order of authority’ not because it is some externalized other which has to be swept into the arms of regulating order, but because it is the constant production of otherness in the very *human* being, so that the human can recognize and define itself.”⁵ The political preoccupation with the monstrous is its domestication “evidence of which can be found in the ways in which the other (animal, slave, machine, woman, etc.) is continuously humanized to reflect back the face of “our” own (white, western and male) humanity.”⁶

The political dimension of the monstrous is the most intriguing one: “Politically, monstrous bodies serve the purpose of demonstrating what is and is not ‘human’.”⁷ Kunst claims that “the monstrous becomes a public object because it has a special function in the sphere of politics: its role is connected to establishing the political division between the human and non-human, where domestication, civilization and culturalization of the monstrous will play a decisive role.”⁸ Commenting upon Agamben’s conclusion that “Homo Sapiens (...) is rather a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human”⁹, Kunst claims that „the monstrous can therefore be understood to be a consequence of a political/ontological apparatus of separation which may disclose to us the difference between human and non-human.”¹⁰

Kunst also comments the spectacular nature of the monstrous body, and its theatricality: “When shown in public, when visible, the monstrous body becomes a theatrical one, associated with make-believe, imitation, transgression as its main (anatomical) characteristics: an obscene trick”.¹¹ The spectacular effect the monstrous body produces is used in the theatre and Kunst indicates the way how

4 Bojana Kunst, “Restaging the Monstrous”, in: M. Bleeker (ed.), *Anatomy Live*, op. cit., 213.

5 Ibid., 215.

6 Ibid., 215.

7 Ibid., 214.

8 Ibid., 214.

9 Giorgio Agamben (*The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, 26) quoted according to Bojana Kunst, “Restaging the Monstrous”, in: M. Bleeker (ed.), *Anatomy Live*, op. cit., 214.

10 Bojana Kunst, op. cit., 214.

11 Ibid., 214.

a monstrous body could be productively used: “[T]he positive possibility of the anatomical spectacle is used against its own spectacular nature, and the dense fluidity and inventive time of life can begin to act.”¹²

According to Kunst, the human bears monstrosity as its constituent part: “The caesura inside the human turns out to be visible. The monstrous shows us that the caesura is not between the human and the outside, but is always internal and shifting: human is constitutively inhuman.”¹³ Kunst does not mention a monstrous voice. However, it is even hard to imagine the dumb monster. Besides, that caesura inside the human turns out to be visible, it is also, and sometimes primarily audible. Voice is one of the most sublime objects of identity, highly problematized in the monstrous body. In their various representations in culture, the voices of monsters are often the most prominent agents of their monstrosity. The monstrous voice contains inhuman impurity, the terrifying friction of inhuman noise. The internal caesura within the human is manifested by and through the monstrous voice.

Techniques of changing and deforming the vocal sphere in *Three Tales* coincide with the artists’ critique of producing the monstrous, or “deviating” the human as a clone, robot, machine. Monsterization of the voice by technology serves as a constant warning that produces consciousness over the body that is beyond that voice. Technologically modified voice indicates that “hybrid connections between nature and culture force us to rethink the borders between different regimes of representation (like science, politics and art)”.¹⁴ *Three Tales* that deal with issues of science, technology, politics and their intersections and interrogations appears as a polemical case study for further discussing the issue of rethinking the human through body-voice relations in opera.

Monsterization of the Voice

In both of their video-documentary operas *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales*¹⁵ Steve Reich and Beryl Korot are occupied with subjects connected to the global distribution of power, whether through religion or technology. Media-technology-political events that are the subject of *Three Tales* marked the last century: the explosion of the *Hindenburg* zeppelin in New Jersey in 1937, announcing the approach of World War II (Act I *Hindenburg*), the atomic explosions from 1946–52 on

12 Ibid., 221.

13 Ibid., 215.

14 Ibid., 216.

15 The instrumentation of *Three Tales* includes: 4 percussion (2 vibraphones, 2 snare drums, 2 kick drums [20 or 22 inch bass drums heavily dampened with blanket inside and played with pedal], suspended cymbal [about 16 inch crash cymbal]; snare drum 1 and kick drum 1 are played by one player as a small drum kit, snare drum 2 and kick drum 2 are also played by one player as a small drum kit), 2 keyboards (2 pianos), 2 sopranos, 3 tenors, String Quartet, Pre-recorded tape. All voices and instruments, with possible exceptions of drums, are amplified. From *Three Tales* score, Boosey and Hawkes, Hendon Music, 2002.

the Bikini Islands during the Cold War (Act II *Bikini*), and the cloning of the sheep Dolly in Scotland in 1997, which symbolizes technology entering the body and modifying life itself (Act III *Dolly*). These events are loaded with political connotations. The authors comment the extreme development and usage of technology during the twentieth century and criticize western contemporary society. At the same time, *Three Tales* itself appears as a symptom of high technology applied in the opera world since its visuals, and its music are created by complex digital procedures.

There are two novel techniques that are applied to the voice in *Three Tales*. Reich invented them during the sixties, but they became technically possible only recently. One of them is *slow motion sound* where the succession of sound events is elongated but the pitch of the voice stays equal. It “allows one to see and hear people speaking in slow motion without changing the pitch of what they say”.¹⁶ The other one is equivalent to the process of making film stills.¹⁷ Sound is “stopped” and the last syllable lasts considerably longer than it would be appropriate for the conventional pronunciation of the word in question. It is the sound equivalent of a film freeze frame in that a single vowel or consonant is extended for a long time, leaving a kind of audible vapour trail behind each speaker that becomes part of the overall harmony.¹⁸ Both techniques would not be possible without the aid of technology.

These two techniques are combined on a pre-recorded tape with different ways of singing and speaking, both live and pre-recorded, and also with different appearances of written accompanying text. The singers are on the stage of the opera; behind them is the video projection. The singers’ role in the dramaturgy of the scenic events is marginalized since they do not represent any character in the “story”. They are just emitters of voice. Apart from the live singing of three tenors and two sopranos, there are vocal manifestations that are close to singing in their expressivity, but are actually speech, intensified with various musical effects. I have registered all of eleven different ways of how the voices are manifested in *Three Tales*:

- Voices of three tenors singing *a cappella*, without instrumental accompaniment or pre-recorded sound, without interventions to the voices
- Voices of three tenors singing live with the pre-recorded sound of instrumental accompaniment
- Voices singing the text with an instrumental accompaniment, with the text projected on the screen like in karaoke procedures
- Instrumental melody extracted from the sound of a spoken text, the words of which are projected simultaneously on the screen as in karaoke procedures, and in the rhythm of the speech

16 www.steverreich.com

17 David Allenby, *A Theatre of Ideas, Steve Reich and Beryl Korot on Three Tales*, CD booklet, Nonesuch 7559-79835-2, 2003.

18 www.steverreich.com

- Voice speaking, projected from an archive recording, with no accompaniment or interventions (American soldier in *Bikini*)
- Artificial voice speaking without an accompaniment (robot Kismet, Act 3)
- Voices of scientists speaking over instrumental music, without interventions to the voices (Act 3)
- Voices of scientists speaking over an instrumental accompaniment, with interventions to the voices (repetitions, freeze frame sound, slow motion sound)
- Voices of scientists speaking over instrumental drones, with subtitles of the text projected on screen (Henri Atlan appearance in Act 3)
- Voices speaking over the instrumental accompaniment and vocal accompaniment (Dawkins, towards the end of Act 3)
- Voice speaking over another voice speaking (both with repetitive interventions) altogether over an instrumental accompaniment (with Cynthia Breazeal and Marvin Minsky, towards the end of Act 3)

Those manifestations of voices, although originating from the human body show performing abilities beyond the possibilities of the body they originate from. If the post-human is defined as the organism starting its life and appearing as human, but is further technologically upgraded, then following a similar logic, the voices heard in *Three Tales* could be called post-human voices. The collision of human, live singing and the technologically manipulated voice, in this case, creates a result that constantly interrogates and politicizes the cessation within the human, the concept of monstrosity as introduced by Kunst, through its vocal manifestations.

The electronically transformed voice invokes a kind of cyborg entity as its generator. The body that produces technology-aided voice is transformed by the same voice. When “cyber” voices are superimposed on documentary images, then both the sonic and visual means of representation are problematized. Although there are no sung characters, only singing bodies, the cyber quality of voices is still strong enough to re-signify the documentary approach in visuals.

Transformed voices that sing the text suggest that the voice should not be the exception in the body ‘upgrade’ process. The concept of monstrosity enters the vocal sphere through technology that emphasizes the audibility of the cessation between the human and the inhuman manifested through the voice produced simultaneously by the body and a machine. Performers are confronted with the situation of singing/playing with pre-recorded sound that deconstructs the usual position of the performer and his perception, as well as the perception of the listener.

The procedures of “slow motion sound” and “freeze frame sound” could also be considered as a kind of dissection of the voice. Dissection according to Maaike Bleeker is „to take apart, to analyze, and to examine how (...) [in her text ‘just

looking'] is produced"¹⁹. Dissection could be taken as the general procedure Reich applies to the voices. The voice has been taken apart, molecularized by recording and slow motioning or "freezing". Further, it has been deeply analyzed in terms of its connection to the intonation of the pronounced text and meticulously engraving those intonations in both the vocal and instrumental part of the music. The connection between dissection and the monstrosity of the voice lies in the technological means used. Dissection of the voice is not possible without specific equipment. Dissecting a voice means perceiving it from a different perspective that enables its molecularization. The monsterization of the voice grows from technically upgrading the capabilities of the source of the sound. In Reich's case, that was by using freeze frame or slow motion sound procedures.

The analogy with the Visible Human Project (VHP) emerges. The VHP was first created in 1994 as an effort to make available a detailed data set of cross-sectional photographs of the human body for anatomy/medical purposes. Both male and female dead bodies (donated for scientific research) were cut into thin slices which were then photographed and digitized. The application is today available via the internet. Following the VHP, currently an Audible Human Project (AHP) is being developed²⁰. This body acoustics simulator "would accurately simulate the production, transmission and non-invasive measurement (for example using stethoscopes) of naturally-occurring sounds associated with cardiovascular, pulmonary and gastro-intestinal functions. It would also model externally introduced sounds, for example, through percussion on the skin surface".²¹ The plan is to gather data for the AHP from three healthy human males. The audibility of the body's interior gains scientific attention and that coincides with the operatic interest in getting into the media of the voice and redefining it.

The fact that the body is dissected and its inside is exposed evokes monstrosity. One of the most powerful impressions I had when I went through the images of the Visible Human Project was the brutality of exposed human flesh. It is uncommon to connect piles of flesh resembling sights from a butcher's shop as constitutive parts of a thinking, speaking, or singing subject and identity. What I was culturally thought to see as a picture of meat, is now supposed to be perceived as a representation of the human. The monster serves as a machine to question the norms and boundaries of the human. The outcome of the VHP has a similar function. It demonstrates the division between the human body and meat. It is silent, without a voice. But, if it would have been possible to dissect the voice together with its respective body, I would assume the sound picture would be similar to the distorted voices in *Three Tales* that show the division between the different functions of the voice, its linguistics, physics and politics.

19 Maaik Bleeker, *The Locus of Looking, Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre*, The Hague, ANDO BV, 2002.

20 See more about this scientific project at: <http://www.researchgrantdatabase.com/g/1R03EB008373-01A1/The-Audible-Human-Project/> Accessed December 12, 2008.

21 <http://www.researchgrantdatabase.com/g/1R03EB008373-01A1/The-Audible-Human-Project/> Accessed December 12, 2008.

The processes Reich performs on the voices, the intention to molecularize recorded voice particles indicates a methodology similar to the previously mentioned scientific projects. When one knows about the cloning as the opera's third act theme, the effect of the vocal dissection Reich performs appears as a kind of "cloned voice". The possibility to multiply the uniqueness of that voice through technology is analogous to the possibility to multiply the genetic material of a once unique person, using the procedures of cloning. The cancellation of uniqueness both in terms of the body and the voice as its sound manifestation is what concerns Reich and Korot. The voice appears as the symptom of cessation between the human and the inhuman, the human and monstrosity.

Singing on Cloning

Unprecedented for the world of opera, the last Act of *Three Tales* examines cloning and the ethical issues of using technology on the body. Here is how Act 3 *Dolly* is described by the composer: "The third tale, **Dolly**, will briefly show footage, text and interview comments about the cloning of an adult sheep in Scotland in 1997. It will then deal extensively with the idea of the human body as a machine, genetic engineering, technological evolution and robotics".²² The explorations of rethinking the human, questioning the limits and boundaries of the human body and how the body could be defined are represented. The body and the possibility to clone it, or to upgrade it became the metaphor of political power, and that power is Reich and Korot's critical concern. Even more unusual for the world of opera, they decided to feature some of the leading figures of science and religion as speakers, and expose their standpoints over the issue: "While *Hindenburg* uses only one 'cameo' interview from the present to comment on the past and *Bikini* uses none, *Dolly* is filled with interview fragments from members of the scientific and religious communities."²³ The interviewees are Richard Dawkins²⁴,

22 http://www.stevereich.com/threetales_info.html, October 2, 2010.

23 http://www.stevereich.com/threetales_info.html, October 2, 2010.

24 **Richard Dawkins** is the first Charles Simonyi Professor of Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. His bestselling books include *The Selfish Gene*, *The Blind Watchmaker* and *River out of Eden*. He has won the 1987 Royal Society of Literature Award, the 1990 Michael Faraday Award, the 1994 Nakayama Award for Human Science and the 1997 International Cosmos Prize. According to: www.stevereich.com (Accessed on August 15, 2007).

James D. Watson²⁵, Sherry Turkle²⁶, Kevin Warwick²⁷, Rodney Brooks²⁸, Marvin Minsky²⁹, Steven Pinker, Bill Joy³⁰, Jaron Lanier³¹, among others.

The subdivisions of this act have the titles *Cloning, Dolly, Human Body Machine, Darwin, Interlude, Robots/Cyborgs/Immortality*. Korot further explains their decision to pick up the subject: “[I]n contrast to the first two acts, ‘Dolly’ is looking within, to ourselves, to the impact of technology on our own physical bodies. And it symbolized the whole range of issues now brought about by technology to impact our bodies, not only by manipulating the basic blueprint of that body, but by actually bringing technology into our bodies.”³² All the interviewed scientists appearing in this act are talking about the possibilities of making the human body technologically more advanced. That advancement involves issues from cloning to artificial intelligence. Although the act is named after the first cloned mammal,

25 **James D. Watson** along with Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1962 for their work discovering the structure of DNA. He is the author of *The Double Helix* and the groundbreaking textbook *The Molecular Biology of the Gene*. He is currently President of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, New York and was the first Director of the National Center for Human Genome Research. According to: www.stevereich.com (Accessed on August 15, 2007).

26 **Sherry Turkle** is Professor of the Sociology of Science at MIT and a clinical psychologist. She is the author of *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet* and *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Her current research is on the psychological impact of computational objects ranging from “affective computers” to robotic dolls and pets. According to: www.stevereich.com (Accessed on August 15, 2007).

27 **Kevin Warwick** is Professor of Cybernetics at the University of Reading in U.K. He attracted considerable attention recently when he had a small computer implant surgically put into his arm and is planning further bodily implants. He is at the forefront of those who would like to merge themselves with technology to become the first cyborgs. According to: www.stevereich.com (Accessed on August 15, 2007).

28 **Rodney Brooks** is Director of the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, and is the Fujitsu Professor of Computer Science. His research is concerned with both the engineering of intelligent robots and with understanding human intelligence through building humanoid robots. He books include *Cambrian Intelligence* (1999) and *Flesh and Machines* published in 2002.

29 **Marvin Minsky** is Toshiba Professor of Media Arts and Sciences, and Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, at MIT. His research has led to both theoretical and practical advances in artificial intelligence and placed his imprint upon the entire field. He is the author of *The Society of Mind*. Since the early 1950s, he has worked on using computational ideas to characterize human psychological processes, as well as working to endow machines with intelligence.

30 **Bill Joy** is co-founder and Chief Scientist of Sun Microsystems. He is co-author of *The Java Language Specification* and principal designer of Berkeley Unix (BSD), the first “open source” operating system. In 1997, President Clinton appointed him Co-Chairman of the Presidential Information Technology Advisory Committee. His article “Why the Future Doesn’t Need Us” in *Wired* produced a huge response and he is now at work on a book expanding this subject.

31 **Jaron Lanier** coined the term “Virtual Reality”. He co-developed the first glove device for virtual world interaction and the first virtual reality applications in surgical simulation. He is a visiting artist at the Interactive Telecommunications Program of the Tisch School of the Arts, at New York University, and a visiting scholar at the Columbia University Computer Science Department.

32 A Theatre of Ideas, Steve Reich and Beryl Korot on *Three Tales*, interviewed by David Allenby, 2002. See: www.stevereich.com (accessed on August 11, 2007).

cloning is only one of the possibilities of intervening in the human body that the interviewees are talking about.

The intention to underline the possibilities of intervening in the “natural” is present both in the libretto and in the created realm of cyber-voices. There is a necessity to upgrade the “obsolete” body, and to make it more accessible and available, mobile, digital. The significant impact of technology on corporeality is implied by the libretto, and the following fragments illustrate it:

Ray Kurzweil: Technology is a continuation of evolution

Kurzweil: we can create things

Kurzweil: far faster than biological evolution

Kurzweil: can create something more intelligent than ourselves

Kurzweil: intelligent machines.

Kurzweil: machines, machines, intelligent, ‘telligent machines (looped)³³

(...)

Kurzweil: If I scan your brain, download that information, I’ll have a little you, right here in my personal computer.

Kevin Warwick: The human body is extremely limited. I would love to upgrade myself (...)³⁴

Marvin Minsky: You go and buy this module at the mind store, have it connected to your brain and then you do four or five part counterpoint (...)

Act 3 is both opened and closed by the robot Kismet constructed in the MIT laboratories, who is capable of talking and performing simple gestures. The appearance of the robot is, at the same time, the annulment of the human body, and its imitation, simulacrum – artificial body.

The possibility to design the genetic structure of the body, to produce the clone is a scientific experiment with far-reaching cultural consequences. The fact that cloning allows the multiplication of chosen genetic material introduces the body and life to the age of their technological reproduction. The body becomes a weapon of power, stronger when it is multiplied. The possibility to interfere with the reproduction process and genetic structure is intensified with the possibility of the infinite multiplication of the desired specimens. The birth of the first successfully cloned mammal – the sheep Dolly – opened a new era, “the age of biological control,”³⁵ of producing genetically identical organisms. That raised questions about the ethics of man-made life, made “intensification of the politics of reproduction,”³⁶ showed “how scientific knowledge comes to be **embodied**,”³⁷

33 www.stevereich.com

34 Kevin Warwick, <http://www.stevereich.com/> accessed on November 7, 2006.

35 Sarah Franklin, “Dolly’s Body: Gender, Genetics and the New Genetic Capital”, in: “The Body”, *Filozofski vestnik*, Ed. Marina Grzinic Mauhler, Volume XXIII, Number 2, 2002, 119-136.

36 *Ibid.*, 131.

37 *Ibid.*, 120.

and appeared as a “newly-viable form of genetic capital”³⁸. The structure of the inner universe of the body is questioned: “If Dolly were a sentence, we would need a new syntax to parse her, because her counterfactual existence troubles existing grammars of species, breed, property, and sex.”³⁹ Here is the libretto fragment explaining the process of cloning Dolly:

Ruth Deech⁴⁰ – The process is as follows

Deech – The process is as

Richard Dawkins – They removed the nucleus from an egg.

Dawkins – No genes in it at all

Deech – Take out, that DNA

James Watson – DNA is the script – DNA is script for life.

2 Sopranos: The process is as follows

Dawkins – They put in all the genes – from another cell

Deech – Which can come from the skin, the hair, anywhere you like.

Gina Kolata⁴¹ – They took a frozen, frozen udder cell. From a sheep that was dead

Dawkins – We, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes.

Dawkins: machines, machines, are machines (looped)

Kolata – f r o z e n u d d e r c e l l⁴²

Deech – You pop it into your enucleated egg

Deech – You then fertilize it – with a little electric shock.

Deech – It starts growing.

2 Sopranos: It starts growing

Deech – Hasn’t happened with humans, but it happened with Dolly⁴³

It is important to be aware also of the religious perspective that affects artists’ concepts. To confirm their religious views, Reich and Korot always use the inscription of the word God as “G-d” in the projected written text of the libretto. Substitution like this is not required by Judaism, since only the Hebrew name

38 Ibid., 121.

39 Ibid., 120.

40 **Ruth Deech** is chair of the U.K. Human Fertilization & Embryology Authority which oversees embryo research and assisted reproduction and advises the government on related issues such as cloning. She is a Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, a trustee of the Rhodes Scholarship Trust and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine. According to: www.stevereich.com (Accessed on August 15, 2007)

41 **Gina Kolata** has been writing about science for the New York Times for over a decade. She originally broke the story of Dolly in America and is the author of *Clone – the Road to Dolly and the Path Ahead*. She has a degree in microbiology and has studied molecular biology at MIT at the graduate level. She has taught writing at Princeton University.

42 Double spaced letters designate that the words are reproduced by technique of slow motion sound Reich developed.

43 http://www.stevereich.com/threetales_lib.html

of God is considered as holy, and to write it is forbidden. This transcription is, however often used by those who insist on the holiness attached to God's name. The question of the power to create a human being as a clone is problematic. This power taken from the metaphysical world of religion to the pragmatic world of science is what concerns Reich and Korot ethically and politically. The concern is about who is going to have the power to "turn off" those human machines, and primarily who is allowed to produce them and why. The words of the biophysicist and philosopher Henri Atlan from the libretto appear as the message that Reich and Korot want to send as a kind of response to cloning and the human as a machine concept:

Henri Atlan: The Prophet Jeremiah

Atlan: decided

Atlan: to build

Atlan: an artificial man

Atlan: he was perfect

Atlan: was able to talk

Atlan: immediately he talked to Jeremiah

Atlan: and he ask him

Atlan: "What did you do?"

Atlan: "Well, look, I have succeeded"

Atlan: Say, "No, no, no, is not good."

Atlan: "From now on

Atlan: when people will meet other people in the street

Atlan: they will not know

Atlan: whether you made them

Atlan: or G-d made them"

Atlan: "Undo - me"

Atlan: So that's what Jeremiah did.⁴⁴

Being orthodox practitioners of Judaism, Reich and Korot take the position that human is only to be made by God. Therefore, *Three Tales* is their fierce critique of taking the power to create a human from God and transferring it to science.

Although the sheep Dolly physically appears to be an animal similar to other animals of the same species, the knowledge about her genetic structure reveals her monstrosity. The uneasiness that artificiality introduces to the already known "natural" arouses fear. And the main cause of that fear is the inability to predict how the artificial would behave, and how or would it be possible to control it. Writing on the human and the inhuman, Agamben underlines the potentiality of power issues that arise: "[I]t is not so much a matter of asking which of the two machines (or the two variants of the same machine) is better or more effective,

44 http://www.stevereich.com/threetales_lib.html

or rather less lethal or bloody, as it is understanding how they work so that we might eventually be able to stop them.”⁴⁵ Reich and Korot imply in Act 3 that Dolly is a monster. Although the issue of cloning the animal has induced discussion, it becomes obvious that Reich and Korot’s main concern is the prospect of cloning the human. The interrogation of the cessation of the human and the inhuman is underlined by discussing the issues of artificial intelligence. The monstrosity of the voices Reich produces underlines the subjects of the libretto.

Commenting upon the museums which contained mechanisms of optical distortion common during the Baroque period, Kunst concludes about their purpose: “They were mechanisms for recognition: only when the spectator can see himself as (for example) an animal, can he really define what he is.”⁴⁶ *Three Tales* appears as a kind of “museum” that contains mechanisms for vocal distortion. Although the listener/spectator cannot hear him/herself there, s/he hears how distorted the human voice sounds. It sounds like a cyborg, whose technologically upgraded organism reworks the boundaries of the human. Hearing those voices singing on cloning and artificial intelligence, but also on atomic tests and the birth of Nazism, one is encouraged to ask him/herself about the definition of human. *Three Tales* is a symbolical machine displaying what human is and is not, and what it should not be. It is the critique of the im/possibility of social power to control itself.

Body and Voice, Divided

The political dimension of *Three Tales* is divided between the political activism of its narratives, and the performativity of sung voices, written texts and documentary images. The fact that issues emphasizing sovereign power like the Hindenburg and the Bikini explosions are brought to the opera stage, initiates discussion that could be further developed by examining the ways of how those events are represented in opera, mostly how they are sung and written about.

The first tale, Hindenburg, consists of four scenes, of which the second is instrumental without using a text. The scenes are as follows: I It could not have been a technical matter, II Nibelung Zeppelin, III A very impressive thing to see (includes fragments of a video interview with Freya von Moltke),⁴⁷ IV I couldn’t understand it. This tale “utilizes historical footage, photographs, specially constructed stills and a videotaped interview, which provide a setting for the archival material and text about the zeppelin. Starting with the explosion in Lakehurst, New Jersey in 1937, it also includes material about the zeppelin’s construction

45 Agamben, 2004, 38, quoted according to: Kunst, 218.

46 Bojana Kunst, op. cit., 214.

47 As states on www.steverreich.com (accessed on August 11, 2007), **Freya von Moltke** is the widow of Helmuth James von Moltke, the German aristocrat who served in the Abwehr (German Intelligence Service) in the World War II where he worked to undermine Hitler. He was found out and hung in 1944. Freya lived in Germany during World War I, through Hindenburg’s presidency and Hitler’s rise to power. She now lives in Hanover, New Hampshire.

in Germany in 1935 and its final Atlantic crossing. The unambiguously positive attitude towards technology is presented through newscasters of the era".⁴⁸ The first and fourth scenes are similar in appearance and structure since they both use footage of the Hindenburg catastrophe. The second scene conveys a powerful reflection of the working class through images of workers constructing the zeppelin.

There are also references to Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungs*, both in the title of the second scene and the musical motives used. In Wagner's musical drama, the descent of the gods into Niebelheim is represented with the leitmotiv of the Tarnhelm⁴⁹ which is obsessively repeated in Scene 2. Reich's score evokes the music from Wagner's *Rheingold* when Alberich the dwarf terrorizes his minions into mining for gold, while Korot uses documentary images of workers constructing the dirigible Hindenburg. Drawing a parallel between Alberich and Hitler is inevitable.

One scene from *Hindenburg* was cut from the final version of the piece, but remained on the *Three Tales* DVD as an "out-take". The scene is of General Hindenburg, who was the last president of the Weimar Republic. The video layer of the piece involves several sub-screens representing soldiers marching, "entering" from one screen to another, looped. The audio layer accompanying the video is the sound of marching, looped. Multiplied, anonymous soldiers' bodies contrast multiplied common people bodies waving to them, waving to Hindenburg, and waving to Hitler. Documentary photos of General Hindenburg were shown. His descending body symbolizes his departure.

Although thematically distant, the second act brings similar subjects, interwoven with the documentary story of the Bikini bomb explosions: "Bikini is based on footage, photographs, and text from the atom bomb tests at the Bikini Atoll from 1946-1954. It also tells of the dislocation and relocation of the Bikini people, living totally outside the Western world which determined their fate. While Hindenburg is presented more or less chronologically in four discreet scenes with silence and a black leader separating them, Bikini is arranged in three image/music blocks that recur in a non-stop cycle, repeated three times, forming a kind of cyclical meditation on the documentary events. A short coda explores the period of time after the explosions and ends the tale. Interspersed throughout are the two stories of the creation of human beings from Genesis. Not sung, but rather 'drummed out' by the percussion and pianos as if they existed (as indeed they do) in another dimension."⁵⁰

In *Bikini*, the body of aborigines, their bare life, is shown as an object whose existence for Western civilization is only proof of exotic otherness. The territory of Bikini Atoll was used for demonstrating the explosion of the atomic bomb. The aborigines of Bikini were resettled, persuaded that they were doing a good deed for humankind. During twelve years, from 1946-58, twenty three nuclear tests

48 www.stevereich.com, October 10, 2009.

49 Motive appears at 1'07" at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCXxr44gh0U> or see: <http://www.trell.org/wagner/motifs.html> for Alberich motives

50 www.stevereich.com, 10 October 2009.

were performed there. It is believed that the explosion of the nuclear bomb on Bikini in 1954 was one thousand times stronger than the one thrown on Hiroshima. The power of the “atomic situation”, as Foucault calls it, to “expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual’s continued existence”⁵¹. Reich and Korot criticize the atomic power issue. Documentary clips of Bikini aborigines re-signify the context of the power questions the nuclear tests raised. Used by Korot, these clips function as a public warning and desperate appeal. The bare life of the aborigines, the pure zoe⁵² was placed in a paradoxical situation. One of the characteristic privileges of sovereign power was demonstrated – “the right to decide on life and death”⁵³.

There are a number of silent bodies represented through *Hindenburg* and *Bikini*. Although those are not singing bodies, they are nevertheless included in the process of singing. Their silence speaks along with singing voices. The role of the human body in different political situations is emphasized. In both of these acts, there are bodies as political investments – bodies as representatives of the state power, official bodies, and on the other side, victimized, submissive bodies. In *Hindenburg* bodies are shown through documentary images, and stylized documentary images, as objects being victimized by the crash that happened. The body has been shown as the body of a subject engaged in a system of different public and state domains. For example, workers are shown while building the Hindenburg aircraft, workers are shown escaping the Hindenburg crash site, pilots of the Hindenburg are shown conducting the aircraft, naval officers in *Bikini* are shown, occupied in preparing for the atomic tests and moving the Bikini aborigines and their belongings. In scene 2 of *Hindenburg*, body silhouettes are multiplied in making frame for the screen on which a documentary video is projected. The common feature is that individual characteristics are hidden below their subject’s public function. And all the represented bodies are anonymous, and often pictured from the rear. They are official bodies. They do not have individual faces: they are the face of power. In the represented systems, the identity of the individual is not important, the body is important as the proof of belonging to the hierarchies of state power. Both in *Hindenburg* and *Bikini*, the realism of the documentary images of the body contrasts the way the transformed voices are suggesting the cyber vocal quality that resists its “belonging” to the documentary images of the represented bodies.

The way Reich generates the melodic materials of *Three Tales* is in close connection to the melody and rhythm of the text used. His groundbreaking works *Come Out* (1966) and *It’s Gonna Rain* (1965) were based on the usage of phasing

51 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, Vol. I, New York, Vintage Books, 1978, 137.

52 According to biopolitical theory there are two forms of life – zoe and bios. “Zoe is naked life, bare life, life reduced to animality; bios is life in the community, in the polis, political life”. Quoted according to: Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, MIT Press, 2006, 106.

53 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, Vol. I, New York, Vintage Books, 1978, 135.

compositional technique to the recorded vocal units. With *Different Trains* (1988) for string quartet and tape, Reich developed this technique further. Fragmented melodies played by the strings were extracted from the melody of the spoken words pre-recorded on the tape that is heard simultaneously with live performance. In the video documentary opera *Cave* (1994), he used this procedure for the first time in a piece of musical theatre, and with *Three Tales* the technique was developed in complex relations between the speech, speech melody, singing, projected words and projected images. *Three Tales* appears as an archive of different relations between the body, voice, singing, speaking, writing and the visuality of the text. When speech is used, it is often enhanced by instrumental support, melodizing its words in the rhythm of speech. This has the effect of the increased expressivity of the text leading to singing.

New York Times headline May 7, 1937 – drummed out:

Hindenburg burns in Lakehurst crash, 21 known Dead, 12 missing, 64 escape.

3 tenors: *It could not have been a technical matter*

Headline: Dr. Hans Luther, the German Ambassador, said the disaster must not cause the world to loose faith in dirigibles and that it could not have been a technical matter.⁵⁴

This was the excerpt from the libretto of the beginning of Act 1, *Hindenburg*. The words from the libretto text are ‘drummed out’, typed rhythmically on the screen while drums accompany them in the rhythm of the words’ pronunciation. When the three tenors’ part starts, the words they sing are also typed on the screen in the rhythm of singing. There is a doubling of the spoken/sung text by the written text being placed on the screen. This distinctive procedure is used throughout *Three Tales*. The doubling is often “drummed out” in the rhythm of the text pronounced, like in karaoke entertainment procedure, but sometimes it also appears as a static text or text collage on the screen.

This doubling of the sung text with its written inscription emphasizes the division between the phonetic and the semantic. By writing out the text, its meaning appears more distant from how the text sounds than would be the case if it were only sung. The meaning of the text is emphasized by its written and silent forms, while the sung text insists on its phonetic dimension. While I hear the voice, I read the text to catch up with the meaning. The division between phone and logos is the point from which Mladen Dolar starts his theory of object voice.

Dolar writes that “the voice appears as the link which ties the signifier to the body”⁵⁵ and that “the first obvious quality of the voice is that it fades away the moment it is produced”⁵⁶ which makes the body both its birth and death place

54 http://www.steverreich.com/threetales_lib.html

55 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, MIT Press, 2006, 59.

56 *Ibid.*, 59.

at the same time.⁵⁷ If the previous is true, then “karaokeing” the text to the sung voice could be interpreted as an attempt to emphasize the meaning of the sung text, but also to prolong, to intensify the duration of the life of the voice. If we keep in mind that the sound of the voice is constantly problematized by pre-recorded interventions, the written text appears to recall what is undone by freeze-frame and slow motion sound procedures.

Whether elaborating the issues of linguistics or politics of the voice, Dolar discusses the dualistic principle upon which the voice is built. Evoking an anecdote about Italian soldiers who, on hearing an order, disobey it, neglecting to hear its meaning because they are fascinated by the beauty of the voice, Dolar emphasizes two main functions of the voice: „1) the voice as the vehicle of meaning and 2) the voice as the source of aesthetic admiration”.⁵⁸ He states that the voice stands on the axis of our social bonds, he investigates the progression from voice to meaning⁵⁹ and claims that the “Saussurean turn has a lot to do with the voice”.⁶⁰ In opera, the division between the two main functions of the voice, as Dolar sees them, becomes transparent since the act of singing produces a gap between the meaning of the sung text and the melody assigned to the text. Not only does the meaning of the text often become incomprehensible due to the high pitches, but even when the comprehensibility of the words is preserved, setting the text within the duration of singing maintains the gap between the meaning and the materiality and corporeality of the sound.

In both principles, Dolar sees a lack of understanding the voice: if there is only interest in the meaning of the words the voice conveys, then the physical dimension of the voice is ignored. On the other hand, the aesthetization of the voice makes it become a fetish. In both of these approaches the voice is not fully understood. Dolar focuses on the object voice, the voice that functions as the Lacanian “objet petit a”. He defines it by showing what it is not: (...) there is no meaning that could be assigned to it (...), it does not have the function of a signifier, since it presents precisely a non-signifying reminder, something resisting the signifying operations (...) this remnant has nothing to do with some irreducible individuality of the voice, the personal surplus over the standard mould. (...) Nor is it reducible to what Barthes has called “the grain of the voice” (...).⁶¹ Dolar finds the embodiment of the concept of the object voice in aphonia, a hysterical symptom that shows one losing control over the voice, producing enforced silence, “the silence that, all the more, makes the object voice appear, maybe in its pure form”.⁶² The

57 Ibid., 59.

58 Ibid., 4.

59 Ibid., 16.

60 Ibid., 17.

61 Mladen Dolar, 'The Object Voice', in: Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (eds.) *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 10.

62 Ibid., 15.

object voice, as I understand it from Dolar's writings, is corporeality structured into the language.

Dolar starts the discussion on the politics of the voice with the claim that "the very institution of the political depends on a certain division of the voice, a division within the voice, its partition".⁶³ He finds the political force of the vocal in its division into meaning and sounding. The division Dolar mentions is between phone and the logos, as Dolar suggests, or the mere voice and the speech, which is intelligible voice. The dichotomy between phone and logos Dolar brings into connection with the biopolitical "opposition between two forms of life: zoe and bios" explaining that "zoe is naked life, bare life, life reduced to animality; bios is life in the community, in the polis, political life".⁶⁴ In connection to the relation between the voice and speech, Dolar elaborates, recalling Agamben, that there is no such simple externality: the basic structure, the topology of the political, for Agamben, is that of an "inclusive exclusion" of naked life (...) just as the voice is not simply an element external to speech, but persists at its core, making it possible and constantly haunting it by the impossibility of symbolizing it.⁶⁵

The way voices appear in *Three Tales*, favours triple duality:

- between "natural" and artificial voices (live singing voices interlaced with pre-recorded freeze frame and slow motion sound distorted voices)
- between live performed and projected voices
- between the meaning of the voice and sounding of the voice (voices we hear singing the text doubled by the written texts on the screen)

Although *Three Tales* was performed live, since there is a commercially available DVD, the necessity to experience this piece live is minimized. Video conveys the sequence of events, and singers are singing along it, over the gap between the physicality of the voice they produce, and the meaning of the words that are inscribed into the video. The singers are in the opera, rather as the members of the ensemble, but are not of the opera, since they are not opera characters, and therefore not incorporated into the "story" that is being "told" by the video. The voice appears between its semantic and fetish functions that are both problematized: voice sounds monstrous which cuts its seducing fetish potentiality, and the meaning does not need to be caught from the voice, since it can be simultaneously read from the screen. Since there are no roles, the singing bodies of this opera function as mere generators of voice, as singing machines.

By commenting the political distribution of power, Reich and Korot question if today, it is at all possible for the artist to act as a political individual, and if so, what should the strategies and effects of that activism be. The video-documentary opera *Three Tales* raises questions about political activism in opera. They make

63 Ibid., 109.

64 Ibid., 106.

65 Ibid., 106.

their operatic work a field of expressing their acts as political individuals. What is expressed by the text of the libretto is the resistance to the governing platforms of political power and the disagreement of the artists with the conditions, effects and strategies of contemporary Western civilization. Using the monstrous singing voice makes it possible to perform an opera spectacle that becomes the place for an outspoken critique of society. The monstrous voice and its place in the opera are the essence of that critique.

Јелена Новак

ЧУДОВИШНОСТ ПЕВАЊА: ПОЛИТИКА ВОКАЛНЕ ЕГЗИСТЕНЦИЈЕ

РЕЗИМЕ

Посебно обрађујући пажњу на нове технике „продуковања гласа“ које Стив Рајш уводи, у овом тексту теоретизујем телесност гласа у видео документарној опери *Три приче* чији су аутори Рајш и Берил Корот. Посебно обраћам пажњу на трећи чин – *Доли* – у коме су проблематизована питања која се тичу клонирања, дефинисања појма људског, као и вештачке интелигенције. Певајући глас се у овој постопери указује „преко“ концепта телесног. Дело сучељавам са два теоријска текста: „Реинсценирање монструозног“ (*Restating the Monstrous*) Бојане Кунст који је о статусу и функцији монструозног тела и његове политичке и позоришне продуктивности, те константног редефинисања норматива у вези с тиме шта јесте, а шта није у домену „људског“, као и разматрања политике и лингвистике гласа Младена Долара. Читам ове текстове „кроз“ оперу *Три приче* и анализирам оперу кроз ове текстове развијајући концепт монструозног гласа. Чудовишност гласова даје делу статус оперског манифеста чија тема је немогућност контролisaња моћи технологије над људским телом и друштвом у целини. Опера се указује као поље социјалне критике.

Кључне речи: монструозни глас, постопера, певајуће тело, политика гласа