

Research Article

Salomé Voegelin*

Singing Philosophy: Deviating Voices and Rhythms without a Time Signature

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Abstract: This text practices a philosophical voice that deviates from visuo-centric theory and the muteness of its language and instead sings a complex simultaneity of things and thoughts that burn through the walls of the discipline and illuminate the activities at the margins. This philosophical voice sings a refrain of “I,” which brings us back to bring us forward, surprising us in its renewal again and again. It is a body that is, as Samuel Beckett’s *Not I*, at once not I and I; an idiosyncratic subjectivity that carries its plural name in its mouth. In this way, it further diffracts the sonic possibility of counterfactual slices into simultaneous dimensionalities open to our gaze in the dark, when we have let go of a normative orientation and are able to see the image at its depth. Between text scores, Churten theory, Canto Cardenche, and the breath of a humpback whale, this voice tries not to theorise. It does not want to produce a philosophical message, supporting a “philosophism” which akin to “scientism” treats philosophy as a phenomenon unconnected to cultural values or location, gender or racial specificity. Instead, it aims to practice a philosophy that opens in song to its own anxiety of objectivity, its fear of a reflective centre, and performs a translucent marginality that generates the view of a plural world burning through a permeable skin.

Keywords: song, voice, simultaneity, time, space, sounding, listening, philosophy, polyphony, body

Text score 1:

Listen to a movement
Listen again
Enact it with your body

For Andrei Tarkovsky the refrain of the film soundtrack renews the picture. “The refrain brings us back to our first experience of entering the poetic world, making it immediate and at the same time renewing it.”¹ It brings us back to bring us forward, surprising us in its renewal again and again. In this way, it opens up the image to show us at its depth all that is possible to see. His refrain is not a repetition but produces ever-new layers through which we pass in the process of perception. It engages us in the expansive density of the image, producing its duration as a potentially endless mobility that is not made of time as forward motion, but from the thickness of sound when it stands in excess of semantic or diegetic meaning, and makes a space rather than a signature.

This “sonic time” is ambiguous and porous. Its shape is unstable and uncertain, things seep in and out. There is no reliable referent that can hold its passing form. Instead, it demands the body to perform it, to

¹ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 158.

* Corresponding author: Salomé Voegelin, CRISAP, University of the Arts London, London SE1 6SB, United Kingdom, e-mail: mail@salomevoegelin.net

sing, dance, and speak it. Because it is produced in practice and in the encounter, from and between all that happens and has happened in its repetitions; and from the memory of having heard it before, generated in the present moment of practising it. It is a multi-dimensional in-between of all these things. Not this or that, and not even between this or that, but between this or that now and always before and in the future, from memory and in imagination. And it is, where they are not but where their sounds meet each other's sounds, and those of other things, and generate their interbeing as a material expanse created from each other now and at other times, again and again, but always different, and without a referent to recognise it by.

This complex and mobile interdependency and multi-temporal expanse explodes vision's lines and time's chronology. And it diffracts sonic possibility beyond its counterfactual slices, the plurality of concurrent worlds, into simultaneous dimensionalities of anytime and anyplace, open to our gaze in the dark, when we have ceased hold on our normative orientation and have let go of our predisposition for the familiar.

Such a view transgresses objectivity as the parameter of intelligibility and sense, and generates a voluminous and narrative cartography that abandons the structure and aims of its discipline: to measure and abstract. Instead it shows the invisible and mobile in-betweens: performing topology between body and land, rather than modelled on a map and territorialising both, it focuses on the relationality of the world in which we are not positioned but entangled. Thus, this sonic view reimagines a "gothic" subjectivity: an "I" that is not a "universal-masculine" identity, autonomous and individuated in a contemporary sense. Its name does not refer to the lexicon of identities and the organisation of a taxonomical real. Instead, it is formed from within its surroundings, from the collective of people and things, from the same flesh, contingent and always in relation, without the ground of grammar, identity, or the map, which as technologies of distance and separation pretend at least that there is a space to view the world from and to take a position, rather than performing it contingently.

Text score 2:

Stand on a rickety chair and sing the phrase "why am I I?" until you are dizzy

The dizziness provoked through the questioning of one's own "I" from the unstable position on a rickety chair performs Heidegger's anxiety about a lack of ground: the foundationalist's fear of "Bodenlosigkeit," of a lack of roots and grounding in ontology and identity that prevents us from grasping the logic of the phenomenon as it is given and intelligible.²

Agitated, on a precarious ledge, we are teetering towards a groundlessness that does not seek this logic but enjoys the substance of the phenomenon; and that does not hold a word for ground, or its expectation, but exists through our individual and collective agencies and in perpetual re-forming, in the disorder of an unexplainable world. This is being in the timespace refrain of "I" which through repetition but never the same, dissolves into an "us" of people and things in restless concatenation carrying, rather than standing on a groundless ground.

We are boosted into this fertile groundlessness through listening to voices untethered from semantic sense and Ursula K Le Guin's Churten theory, which performs the "displacing of the virtual field in order to realize relational coherence in terms of transilient experientiality."³ An experientiality that is invested in

² Heidegger's, *Sein*, his being, relies on *Bodenständigkeit*, on having a ground and being situated by a ground as ontology and reference (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 36). Consequently, the loss of ground, the drift towards *Bodenlosigkeit*, groundlessness, where phenomena cannot present themselves in the logic of their given and explainable nature, causes anxiety of a loss of reality and historicity. Since, according to Heidegger, it is the ground, as cause and territory, *Grund und Boden*, that allows us to establish the objective terminology of research and knowledge (*ibid.*, 37). In the context of this essay, the rationale of the solid ground that Heidegger insists on for the objective logic of research to grasp the phenomenon as real, is the very same rationale that rejects a nomadic, migratory, and thus marginal and subjective materialisation, because, it does not form in relation to a foundational baseline, but contingently, and formlessly, through repetitions, but never the same.

³ LeGuin, "The Shobies Story," 83.

the confusion of a plural simultaneity and the uncertainty of achronological time that generates an elasticity of intervals and a permeability of boundaries, where stars “burn through the dark gauze of the walls and hulls and the bedding and her body,” generating the view of a plural world suspended in translucent space.⁴

I can! I can see all the stars everywhere. And I can see Ve Port and I can see anything

I want! (...) And there is a planet, there is too! No don't hold me! Don't!

*Let me go!*⁵

Do we dare enter this perception variation, to embrace the possibility of achronology and permeability pluralising time and space; to let go of the frame of actuality and what we think we see on the basis of enculturation and expectations of the familiar? So we might, like LeGuin's people, see the stars through the walls, and simultaneously see the past and the present, the here and the there, without barriers, without the infrastructure of meaning, but in transience, burning through. – Will it render us mad, disconnected, unable to speak in the prevailing discourse? Will we fall through the walls of language and of sense?

Rather than theorising on how we might not, and to counteract the unspeakable of a sonic simultaneity through a philosophical language that creates firm positions and a perspectival view, I want to practice the confusion of simultaneity: to purposefully and deliberately fall through the gauze of meaning and practice deviating voices, hums, and clicks that produce a different echo of the real and provide the reality of everything reverberating at once: on my body and with my body; to see the asymmetries not as differences, but as simultaneous actualities in a relational sphere. This is not a “hallucinating nonfunction,” but a material and political reality that politics pretends not to see, because simultaneity defies hierarchies and historical privileges, and relationality rejects the actuality of borders and generates entanglements that unperform organising structures and ideologies through the intertwining of those who they govern for and those who are governed against.⁶ By contrast, difference articulates opposing positions and creates terrain, as ground and reason for clarity and distance, legitimising governance as an organising principle along visual lines.

Following literary theorist Ruth Ronen, who affords fictional worlds freedom from the rules and strictures of real time – “fictional worlds allow, in principle at least, radical deviations from the regularities of time in the actual world” – I understand that sound, free from the duty of keeping time, enjoys the autonomy of its own expanse, and thus affords us radical deviations and the chance for irregularities to become real.⁷ This expanse is complex, deep, and wide rather than long and thin. It becomes reversible and non-linear and houses all sorts of things, unordered and at the same time. Thus, it offers the relationality of “everywhere” and “at once” that meaning and politics avoids. And it generates the world beyond the logic of cause and effect in a quantum shift, where we exist without a well-defined order of events.

A chain of cause and effect is an easy thing to describe; a cessation of cause and effect is not. To those who live in time sequency is the norm, the only model, and simultaneity seems a muddle, a mess, a hopeless confusion, and the description of that confusion hopelessly confusing.⁸

This confusion performs the resistance to a cartographic world as well as to a political identity that might give you a voice, and a place, and a name, but which are forever caught in the asymmetries of power and voicelessness. In these asymmetries we are relative rather than relational, as the landlessness of the migrant, the dispossessed, the oppressed, and the transient, makes my ground heavy and infertile of any thought and creativity not determined and thus expressive of my relative privilege and orientation. It does not offer me the logic of the phenomenon, but only the logic of my thinking. And this thinking makes

⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵ Ibid., 92–3.

⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁷ Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, 202.

⁸ LeGuin, “The Shobies Story,” 95.

a sonic conversation impossible, as our exchange remains forever tethered to the semantic, that is the governance of difference and similarity, which leaves no room for our plural simultaneity.

Inspired by Aleyda Rocha Sepulveda's text on Canto Cardenche, a polyphonic a capello singing and "melancholic self-expression of labourers working in farms and mines in the mid nineteenth-century" in Northern Mexico, I turn to singing to hear and practice a voice that speaks perception variation in elastic intervals, to deviate from the historicity of the individual voice into a simultaneity of time and collectivity.⁹

Rocha Sepulveda refers to the Cardenche singing as "embodying the soundscape of internalized identities, histories and multiple realities."¹⁰ They are "singing their maps of belonging by transforming songs into soundwalks," that as mobile narrations expand in a plural time and space.¹¹ There is no training, no standard, no predictability. Instead, the voices produce a world that is a plurality of worlds generated in the voice of each singer and the body of each listener, simultaneously from the past and the present, engendering a high-quality listening and enriching "our visualization of the North Mexican landscape by distorting the 'sacred image of the same' expected in a [semantic, musical, geographical and named] voice."¹² While polyphony represents an established musical ontology, its embodied practice with the land "offers unconventional dimensions,"¹³ which we inhabit in listening as "a way of territorializing from within (...) [as a] grounding to a land that is not our home, but a body that carries us."¹⁴

I hear in this grounding without ground an embracing of the possibility of simultaneity and permeability carried by the body in song. And sense a pluralising time and space that provides the opportunity to let go of the frame of actuality, of what we think we see on the basis of predisposition, to instead bring the refrain as plural memory and simultaneous present into the construction of place to explode the organisation in which we live.

Text score 3:

Sing the shape of your home
move in.

Singing generates a home without walls or floors from the plural surroundings through which we walk. Singing, without musical time or words, deviates from language as the structure of difference and hierarchies, practising instead a plural simultaneity of time and space through which stars can shine and the sun and the moon, and anything that radiates without words. Singing is listening and sounding at the same time; from the body as part of what it sounds. Thus, we can inhabit a soundscape that we generate, alone and together. Contingently conjuring in our voices a confluence of histories and movements that are not canonical and straight but queer and queering time, places and bodies. To live relationally, in transit, rather than on asymmetrical territories and bound to normative lines.

The way to be in this simultaneous and mobile world is to sing. To sing the land and the map and the planet and the "I." To lead us through "singing to claim what was considered private and public in the past and subvert it" to be together in the flesh of song.¹⁵

Can singing avoid the meaning and ontology of language and its negative? – singing ourselves a relational sphere, and a body in simultaneity with a plural world.

Can song voice a body that is not seen in its individuated form, but in its leaky, porous, permeability, and connections? – singing a body through which we can see stars, other bodies, and other things, and hear their polyphony as slices of sonic possibility that are not only synchronous in space but open simultaneous dimensionalities of time. This is a body that sings a refrain of "I" while precariously perched on the edge of

⁹ Sepulveda Rocha, "Territorializing from within: Protocols [En Transito] Para Attender Lo De Adentro," 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 99.

¹² Ibid., 98.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., 102.

an unsteady chair. Always the same to become different and plural, growing dizzy and vertiginous on the precipice of time's possible actuality.

The voices of Maggie Nicols, Jocy de Oliveira, Beatriz Ferreyra, among others live on such a precipice. They practice a sonic transience and open a portal to a different sense that comes from the confusion of simultaneity and the freedom of sound's own expanse. Their voices appear unintelligible, uncategorizable, and unexplainable in relation to language as proper articulation, and music as an organisation of tones. They refuse theorization and a lexical name. Instead, they perform the conceit of the line and of grammar, and seed comprehension on their body and *its* plural time. They perform the reality of quantum possibility: an entangling of bodies and time in a translucent and permeable space of song that provides a system of reference that is anecdotal and contingent; that is ambiguous about causation, "about how objects influence one another across time and space," and that practices this ambiguity through the logic of the body in practice, rather than through the institution of philosophy, whose walls would never admit the vision of stars.¹⁶

Text score 4:

Stand up
Fill your lungs with as much air as you can
Sing without words

The voice without time and without words, which provide a place in relation to the lexicon and offer a meter to the line, forces conventional theory and philosophy to reveal the infrastructure of its discourse and show the anxiety of its objectivity. Because, rather than entering into conversation with the body as it sings in refrain, repeating but never the same, philosophy seeks to capture these material explosions in the muteness of a theoretical text. Thus it "domesticates" the voice into the familiar, into adjectives and a likeness to the humpback whale,¹⁷ and finds rationality and sense by avoiding the simultaneous dimensionality opened in its breath. However, in this way it also avoids the emancipatory force of a multidimensional in-between, and fails to hear sound's matter and voices mattering beyond their organisation and semantic sense.

Theory, conventional language, avoids the unintelligible and unstable in-between and its unexplainable interbeing. It avoids song and singing, the breath and hum of bodies that do not speak the land but its conjecture. Instead, it focuses on what objects and subjects are, do, stand for, effect and affect, describing causes and consequences along visual lines in horizontally linked units of meaning that fulfil the purpose of intelligibility and confirm its rationale: a dualistic thinking, nature-culture-human-non-human, this is not that. To do so theory mutes disturbances to its own frame and ignores the invisible depth of contingent co-existence. It assumes a "philosophism" which akin to "scientism," stands unconnected to cultural values or location, gender or racial specificity;¹⁸ and articulates as universal values and messages that reject the contingent practice and disordered performance of thought. For this reason, philosophy ignores the vertical drop into sound, which remains unintelligible but felt, and thus is part of matter as its unexplainable and sensorial real.

The material truth found along horizontal lines is that of a cultural viscosity and of a philosophical visuo-centrism that works with distance and differentiation to see outlines and stability that do not disturb what things are called and what they are as "not that": not sound, not instability, not unexplainable – not the feminine. The response is a philosophy that opens in song to its own anxiety of objectivity, and performs an idiosyncratic voice.

¹⁶ Ball, "A World Without Cause and Effect," 590.

¹⁷ Ihde, *Listening and Voice, Phenomenologies of Sound*, 187. In this passage, Ihde discusses the problem of a perception steeped in language as expectation of recognition and a making of comparisons. Listening to the voice of a humpback whale, he decides that it is language, as referential tool of the familiar, that reduces its sounds into pre-existing explanations and organisations: sounding like a bellowing bull, or a bird, that eradicate its mystery "that we have not yet fully entered, but that we might forget if we simply allow the whale's voice to be domesticated..."

¹⁸ Aikenhead, "Whose Scientific Knowledge? The Colonizer and the Colonized," 151.

Text score 5:

Stand face to face
Hum at each other
Open mouthed

I do not aim to set up a dualism between hearing and looking as another “not that.” Instead I hope to suggest a critique and augmentation of the cultural entrainment through which we engage them in opposition. To be, as Beckett’s *Not I* at once not I and I, an idiosyncratic subjectivity that carries its plural name in its mouth.¹⁹ And to perform the practice of transilience and start to see the complex simultaneity of things and thoughts and stars and voices burning through the walls.

Because dualism is not in the world but in theory and in philosophy. And it is not the cause but the symptom and consequence of a cultural visuality that could see through the gauze if it would only divest itself of its structures and deviate from its aim for intelligibility, sought in a mute voice. Theory, as a visuo-philosophical pursuit, does not have an ear to where matter is entangled and forming. And thus it cannot sing a plural simultaneity, as a cross-time polyphony, sounding beyond ontology and the language of music and the semantic. It cannot articulate what we see in the dark explosions of everything at once, but tends to the surface and the signature of what is real along a certain line.

The visual time of music and of speech, captured in bars and semantic sense, invites us to dance on its surface. The lexical words and countable rhythms offer us a space on its time. We know where we are. It’s the coda to sing along to, to move to its beat and dance its time. Their language and rhythm time us into their time, marching on its land. Their recurrences do not surprise or renew, but confirm the experience in the expected, setting our time on the surface of its sound without access to what remains mysterious and a matter of breath rather than of language.

It is in a philosophy that sings, as in that practices the plural simultaneity of words with breath and in a rhythm without a time signature, that dualism does never even come to be. A singing philosophy produces the sonic time of music that creates a simultaneous space without bars or a meter. It invites us into a dark motility to dance not on the surface but within “unconventional dimensions,” which we inhabit in sounding and listening and through which we can deviate from historical traditions and decolonialise philosophy’s view, not by proposing another, but by seeing everything at once: travelling by Churten into a transilient reality, whose margins never end.

Text score 6:

Sing until you are out of breath.

What is the voice, what is the body, the machine, the work? What keeps what alive and sounding? Their interbeing is not a resolve or an end point. It is not a new position but an energy that uses its own instability to perform the impossibility of positioning, of being certain, placed, formed. Such a voice generates belonging without a ground but as a body that is with everything and from everything, and that carries the past, the future and the present as the possibility of a simultaneous view. Its form is unreliable, unstable. It is the feminine which in its transformation is in excess and outside philosophical articulation. A deviance that embodies another soundscape, that is performed by walking and singing, without a conventional map or language, and without expectations but on the body. Its thoughts are actions and the generative force of touch, producing unsteady concatenations on the skin.

¹⁹ *Not I* is a dramatic monologue by Samuel Beckett, 1972. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8C4HL2LyWU>)

Text score 7:

Turn to the person next to you
touch their hands with yours.

The skin is our boundary and our openness and our map. It is the gauze whose permeability makes us part of the plural simultaneity of the world as sonic sphere. It makes us boundary-subjects: subjects with the plasticity to exist in contingency, in elastic intervals, in the in-between, and from the exchange across realities without losing integrity. Here we are subjects made from the contact of the inside with what is outside and beyond the visual outline and description, as a multi-sensory, multi-contact self.

A boundary-subject is through the vibration of her voice sounding on and with her body, like stars burning through her skin; and she is through the touch of her skin on the other's skin as exchange and porous permeability. She is with others and other things, as contingent and mobile selves, that are "I"s without a centre, but with possibilities to invent a voice that deviates from the expected of a sacred land and a sacred language: at once I and not I.

This skin as boundary is also a margin, and defines subjectivity as marginal in the sense that it is not orientated towards a centre. Its identity is not defined in paternal history or in the lexical designation. Instead, she is the performance of her skin, touching and being touched. The skin is her song as simultaneous sounding and listening; of hearing herself with others across plural times and places. It contingently creates unstable and unreliable subjectivities in contact and in passing, but with the integrity of their needs and a responsibility to their bodies. These subjectivities are unsecured, hovering at the edge of actuality, and carrying a reality beyond the realisation or the resistance to the past, or to the over there, in a truly queer universe without dialectical polarisations.

For Rosi Braidotti it is at the margins that all the action takes place, while the centre is void.²⁰ Since, while the centre is the location of normative, white masculine visibility, of sight as cultural norm, he cannot see himself, because he sees everything mirroring him; creating the artifice of transparency, universality, and recognition. He is never *Not-I*, as an idiosyncratic "I" aware of being simultaneously I and not I: at the same time intelligible and non-intelligible, and carrying a plural name, because he coincides with the reflection of reality and cannot hear an unfamiliar voice. He is the ground and cause of normative articulation, whose construction and exclusions he cannot see. Thus, he has no desire or need to subvert or pluralise its infrastructure to find recognition and a voice.

By contrast, the infrastructure of the margins is not reflective but translucent. It generates the view of a plural world burning through a permeable skin, dissolving walls and maps and language into simultaneous vibrations of light and texture, and embodying a multidimensional and mobile environment that generates and accommodates what is not I.

The boundary-subject sings this translucent reality as permeable skin and margin, to be in excess, uncontrollable, and contingent, through the vibrations of the invisible in-between, of touch, of song, and of poetry. However, she does not perform an anti-centre, or the anti-masculine. Her song is not a vibration against, but a queering of everything. The antonymic logic of the binary would only ever re-confirm the centre in its certain form and marginalise the feminine without the power of her own margin: her skin, her sound, her song, with which she is in the plural simultaneity of past and present, time and space. From where she sings a philosophy with a deviating voice that sounds in rhythms without a time signature a body that carries us.

The question is then not where does the margin begin, but what is it made of and where does it end. What can it touch and what is it touched by, without going via a central position but from all directions and into the future – block-chain like, mobile, and abundant, everywhere.

²⁰ Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory, The Portable Braidotti*, 42.

Text score 8:

Listen to an object you think is still
listen until you can hear it move.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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