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**“IT’S ONLY COMBINATIONS OF LETTERS, AFTER ALL, ISN’T IT”: THE
“VOICE” AND SPIRIT MEDIUMS IN THOMAS PYNCHON’S *AGAINST
THE DAY* (2006)**

ALEXANDER HOPE

Abstract

This chapter examines an odd passage from Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*. Relatively early on in the novel, a detective named Lew Basnight finds himself party to a strange séance in London. This scene does not merely involve a medium on the living side of the equation but a spirit medium as well.

The multiple displacements and ghostly voices in this scene provide a way of examining the Lacanian “object voice” in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s reinvigoration of *zoē* and *bios* as differing forms of life. The voice seems to both hold together and disrupt this distinction, as well as being key in the structural conceit that makes us all *homines sacri*.

Pynchon’s strange displacements, however, offer more than just an “example” of the object voice. They allow a link to be made between the object voice and the voice of narration, and also, more importantly perhaps, between the object voice, Agamben’s “bare life” and questions of sovereignty. The séance produces an uncanny excess of spectrality that, in this analysis, goes beyond Marx to make the commodity itself appear as a subject.

Introduction: beyond visibility, a strange séance and the “object voice”

Critical interest in Thomas Pynchon has tended towards trying to explain the grandness of his narratives, in other words, their excess:

the big idea that all the little ones add up to. It is rather like Pynchon laid out the map for the critical interpretation of his work with *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Much like Oedipa Maas, the novel's protagonist, we are left waiting for the final clue that will unlock the mystery, or show once and for all that there was no mystery at all, merely our own paranoia.¹

While there may well be a secret code that unlocks the mysterious structure of *Against the Day* (2006) — a novel with a great number of narrative strands, many of which seem only tangentially related — this chapter will not go searching for it. The “Chums of Chance” and their redoubtable speaking dog/crew-member Pugnax will, sadly, have to wait for another day. Instead, I will examine some odd sound effects in just part of one of the myriad strands, in fact only one specific scene, without making any claims that this analysis will be of relevance for whatever greater scheme might (or might not) be hidden within Pynchon's quasi-historical epic of 1085 pages.

My analysis of this scene will draw on Mladen Dolar's interpretation of the Lacanian “object voice”. In his introduction to *A Voice and Nothing More* Dolar explains that this “object voice” is something beyond our usual understanding of the voice: it is a third level, some sort of remainder that neither “goes up in smoke” with the “conveyance of meaning” (first level) nor is something that can “solidify in an object of fetish reverence” (second level).² Furthermore, this third level of voice, which disturbs its “aesthetic appreciation”, confronts us most evidently as a “mechanical voice”.³

The scene that draws my interest, however, concerns a rather odd manifestation of the “object voice” and is narrated from the perspective of one Lew Basnight, a private “psychical” detective

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, London: Vintage, 1996, 127.

² Mladen Dolar, *A Voice And Nothing More*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 4, 22.

somehow transported to London after being caught in an explosion.⁴ Mr Basnight seems to have “wandered” into becoming a detective “by way of a sin he was once supposed to have committed” but is now unable to remember or rediscover, since it is apparently too horrendous to be spoken about.⁵ Once in London, Basnight finds himself caught up with the T.W.I.T., the True Worshipers of the Ineffable Tetractys, who “had chosen to follow a secret neo-Pythagorean way of knowledge, based on the sacred *Tetractys*”:⁶

1

2 3

4 5 6

7 8 9 10,

The idea [...] was to look at the array of numbers as occupying not two dimensions but three, set in a regular tetrahedron—and then four dimensions, and so on, until you found yourself getting strange, which was taken to be a sign of impending enlightenment.⁷

Since the T.W.I.T. also have a deep interest in tarot and the major arcana, Lew, having been hired by them as a detective, ends up at a

⁴ Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2006, 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷ *Ibid.*

séance conducted by a T.W.I.T.-affiliated “ecstatica”: Madame Natalia Eskimoff “a classical English rose” with “the Kabbalist Tree of Life, [... including] the names of the Sephiroth spelled out in Hebrew” tattooed below the nape of her neck.⁸ For the T.W.I.T. an “ecstatica” is “a classification enjoying apparently somewhat more respect than a common medium”.⁹ This séance is part of a repeated series of motifs in *Against the Day* that question the pre-eminence and reliability of vision. The séance in general actually links a beyond of vision to the voice. Ghosts in a “sitting” of this kind generally manifest themselves aurally: sound, or speech even, is the *primary* marker of their presence. In contrast, “phantom” in English and “*fantôme*” in French both trace their etymology to the Greek *phantasma*, an appearance or image.

However, the question of “voice” and voices has hitherto gone largely unremarked upon in Pynchon’s novel. For example, in a paper on money and economic exchange Käkälä-Puumala argues that in *Against the Day*

the question of representation, reality, and thus the possibility of understanding the world emerge through light. One of the big questions that the novel poses for us is how much of our concept of reality is dependent on vision, hence light. Not surprisingly, the novel is saturated by things and beings that are just past visibility — ghosts, visitations, electromagnetic phenomena.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 228. Many critics have argued persuasively that there are significant mystical and, in particular, gnostic elements to Pynchon’s work. See David Cowart, “Pynchon, Genealogy, History: Against the Day,” *Modern Philology*, 109.3, (2012), 385-407 for a useful roundup; and Dwight Eddins, *The Gnostic Pynchon*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, for more detail on gnosticism in early Pynchon.

¹⁰ Tiina Käkälä-Puumala, “‘There Is Money Everywhere’: Representation, Authority, and the Money Form in Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 54.2 (2013), 153, online, Internet, 11 Sep. 2013.

To put this in slightly more philosophical terms, the novel explores the reduction of the *aistheton* to aesthetics, or rather the domination of sight in discourses of knowledge and reality.¹¹ In Greek the *aistheton* and its associated verb *aisthanomai* refer not just to perception by sight but to all bodily perceptions. While Alain Badiou's argument that "there are only bodies and languages" — as highlighted by Dolar at the start of *Sound Effects* — has an element of truth to it, the eyes have clearly been valued far and above any other organ of perception.¹² Thus, Slavoj Žižek, commenting on Lacan's "object voice", argues: "voice itself would function as the *objet a* of the visual, as the blind spot from which the picture returns the gaze".¹³ As a result, the voice for Žižek is immediately situated as a supplement to sight. He also identifies this tradition himself in the same essay, noting "metaphysics relies on the predominance of seeing".¹⁴ Indeed, Lacan had begun to develop his major additions to the Freudian list of part-objects in *Seminar X*, but seems to have largely forgotten about the "voice" by the time of *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.¹⁵ Dolar notes that the two most notable of these

¹¹ We might even go so far, following Lyotard, to claim that it has been reduced further in modernity to solely an aesthetics of the beautiful — see his "Appendix: Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984 — but that might be a little hasty.

¹² Dolar also quotes this same passage from Badiou at the start of Chapter 3 of *A Voice and Nothing More*, p. 59.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek, "'I Hear You with My Eyes'; or, The Invisible Master", *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek eds, Durham: Duke UP, 1996, 90-128, 92. This is a slight flattening of Žižek's complex argument, which draws back from such a straightforwardly hierarchical relationship between voice and gaze, but it does certainly *begin* from this position.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵ Of the "five forms of the *objet petit a*" in *Seminar X* the "object voice" and the "gaze" are the most notable additions. Lacan had already

additions “the gaze and the voice” became something of a catchphrase. However, the voice was elided in much subsequent work to the extent that Dolar himself views *A Voice and Nothing More* as an attempt to redress the balance.¹⁶

An ecstatic medium, a spirit “control” and the subversion of auto-affection

The séance in *Against the Day* is particularly interesting, however, because of a number of Pynchonian twists on the theme of communication with the afterlife that reveal something unseemly about the naturalness of the voice. There is a mechanical element to the voices in the scene, as well as something clearly demarcated as being beyond visibility.

It was something that had come out during the séance tonight, none of which Madame Eskimoff had any direct memory of, although like all T.W.I.T.-sanctioned sittings, it had been recorded by means of a Parsons-Short Auxetophone.

[Madame Eskimoff —] “We take electros of the original wax impressions immediately after every sitting. Part of the routine. I have listened to these tonight already several times, and even if details are here and there obscure, I felt it a grave enough development to summon you here.”¹⁷

The “voice” the reader and Basnight are presented with here is clearly mediated, since the sitting is both recorded and reproduced through a

included “the phoneme, the gaze, the voice... and the nothing” in Jacques Lacan, “The Subversion of the Subject”, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006, 693.

¹⁶ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 127.

¹⁷ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 228.

“Parsons-Short Auxetophone”.¹⁸ In addition, Madame Eskimoff has no “direct memory” of her activity as an “ecstatica”. She is explicitly only able to recover the message through supplementary technical means, and this blurs the distinction between Madame E. as a knowing subject and the technology used to record the séance.¹⁹

The Auxetophone may well be a Pynchonian joke, since Parsons and Short’s invention was used to amplify sounds with compressed air rather than to record them. In this scene, however, there are recordings on wax, which the historical Auxetophone could have replayed but not created. There is a similar playfulness with the “electros”, further displacing the séance from its “origin” and highlighting the technological mediations in the scene. Of course, as has been detailed in numerous articles, Pynchon’s relationship with history is ambiguous and full of contradictions.²⁰ As Käkälä-Puumala explains, “his prose combines meticulous and historically accurate descriptions with radical questioning of representation”.²¹ The twisting of small details — such as making the Auxetophone into both a recording and playback device — makes this “historical [in]accuracy” itself challenges the facticity of history and historical fiction. This “electro” recording of the wax cylinder seems to introduce a further doubling into an already complex set of displacements in the scene.

This séance offers a way into the elusive “third level” of aporetic voice identified by Dolar. Firstly, we have a distinctly mechanical

¹⁸ The historical Auxetophone was a form of amplifier. *Compressed Air Magazine*, W.L. Saunders, 1909, 5484; see also *Encyclopedia of Recorded Sound*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2005, 57.

¹⁹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 228. As a contemporary contrast, see Hilary Mantell’s *Beyond Black*, “[s]he was a medium: dead people talked to her, and she talked back”, London: Harper Perennial, 2006, 8.

²⁰ See Cowart, “Pynchon, Genealogy, History: Against the Day”; Jeffrey Severs and Christopher Leise eds, *Pynchon’s Against the Day: a Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide*, Lexington Books, 2011, esp. Terry Reilly’s essay.

²¹ Käkälä-Puumala, “There Is Money Everywhere”, 153.

voice, in the form of the recording from the Auxetophone or “electro” — and there are also some features of the “syntonic effect” between the medium and the recording machine that warrant further attention. Secondly, we also have an interesting conflation between *bios* and *technē* that any discussion of a voice beyond the conveyance of meaning will necessarily occasion: Madame Eskimoff needs a “control”, a spirit medium, “acting, for the departed soul on the other side, much in the same capacity as a medium on this side acts on behalf of the living”.²² Thus, Madame Eskimoff, though herself a biological entity, becomes part of the apparatus of the sitting, which is doubly emphasised by her lack of conscious memory of the events during the séance. She becomes a “medium” or possibly even “conduit” of communication in a manner a little more literal than generally found in fiction. She herself also has to access the “content” of the sitting through technical, supplementary means; her voice is not “self-present” as Jacques Derrida’s analysis of speech in the history of the metaphysics of presence would suggest.²³

This needs a more careful analysis, however; in *Speech and Phenomena*, when writing on Husserl, Derrida explains:

In order to really understand where the power of the voice lies, and how metaphysics, philosophy, and the determination of being as presence constitute the epoch of speech as technical mastery of objective being, to properly understand the unity of *technē* and *phōnē*, we must think through the objectivity of the object. The ideal object is the most objective of objects; independent of the here-and-now acts and events of the empirical subjectivity which intends it, it can be repeated infinitely while remaining the same.²⁴

²² Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229.

²³ See for example, amongst many texts, Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973; *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998.

²⁴ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 75.

Evidently, the “voice” (*voix*) of which Derrida writes here is not quite the “object” voice that Dolar asks us to go in search of. What Derrida illustrates instead is the phantasy of self-present meaning/self-presence and its complicity with the “voice” as the transparent conveyor of “meaning”. As Dolar adumbrates, also commenting on *Speech and Phenomena*, “[t]his illusion — the illusion par excellence — is thus constitutive of interiority and ultimately of consciousness, the self and autonomy”.²⁵ For Derrida,

this ideal being must be constituted, repeated, and expressed in a medium that does not impair the presence and self-presence of the acts that aim at it, a medium which both preserves the *presence of the object* before intuition and *self-presence*.²⁶

In Derrida’s argument, this object is idealized, but this idealization is only “appearance” or perhaps phantasy.²⁷ This “medium” is the voice, as hearing and understanding oneself speak *at the same time* (*s’entender parler*). This still leaves the problem of *technē*, its unity with *phonē* and how it functions in this relationship, unsolved. Oddly, Derrida does not provide a definition of *technē* in *Speech and Phenomena*, apart from opposing it to *physis*. As a way of dealing with this aporia, I will borrow Martin Heidegger’s definition of *technē* as “knowing pro-ducing”, which links it to the production of an object, as a skilled, knowing, worker.²⁸ Here, this can be read as the

²⁵ Dolar, *A Voice And Nothing More*, 38.

²⁶ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 76.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 77. Italics in original.

²⁸ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229; Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2000, 18. Derrida’s definition of *technē* echoes that of Heidegger in that Derrida also relates *technē* to the

production of an object of sense. That Madame E. is “not entirely herself” opens a fissure in the seemingly seamless unity of *phōnē* and *technē* in the voice. This is because the presence of the object (of language) is maintained, but Madame Eskimoff is no longer self-present. Although *phōnē* and *technē* are still linked, there is a radical displacement and deferral because Madame Eskimoff’s “control” was “speaking *through* her”.²⁹ *Technē* is no longer able to function as copresent with the “phoneme [... as] the dominated ideality of the phenomenon”.³⁰ She does not knowingly produce, but is herself a medium of reproduction, displaced from both consciousness and the “technical mastery” of her being.³¹

In contrast, the suggestion in this séance from *Against the Day* is that Madame Eskimoff effectively chooses to give up her subjectivity, this illusion of mastery, by going into an “ecstatic” trance, acting as a conduit to the spirit world, and allowing her “control” on the spirit side to speak through her. In the terms of Giorgio Agamben, she, apparently “ecstatically”, chooses to be reduced from *bios* to *zōē*, to “bare life” or “reproductive life”.³² Madame Eskimoff’s voice is no longer that of “*s’entendre-parler*”, hearing/understanding oneself speak, but the voice of an-other.³³ This displacement is a de-consciousing of the voice as auto-affection and self-presence. With that displacement comes a radical foregrounding of what analytic philosophers call the “other minds problem” and the “mind-body” problem.³⁴ That is to say, once we have one account of displaced or

artwork.

²⁹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229. My italics.

³⁰ Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998, 1-2.

³³ Derrida, cited Žižek, “‘I Hear You with My Eyes’; or, The Invisible Master”, 94. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 79.

³⁴ Paul M. Churchland, “Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional

spectral consciousness (even if it is fictional), we can no longer take as given the auto-affection of the knowing subject and their unity with the properness of their “own” voice. As a consequence, both the Aristotelian and the Platonic conceptions of *zoōn echon logon* or *zoōn politikon* become problematic.

The voice of *zoē*, “bare life”

As Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* makes clear, for the Greeks there were two distinct terms for “life”: *zoē*, “bare life” or perhaps “natural/reproductive life”, and *bios*, which related more specifically to the *polis*, to “politically qualified life”.³⁵ Agamben argues forcefully that the tradition of political theology places the “*homo sacer*”, “who can be killed but not sacrificed”, in a position in-between *bios* and *zoē*: “Neither political *bios* nor natural *zoē*, sacred life is the zone of indistinction in which *zoē* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other”.³⁶ In commenting on Agamben’s argument, Dolar places the voice as the overlapping part of a Venn diagram between the pairs *phonē-zoē* and *logos-bios* and seeks to found a “politics of the voice” on the tensions inherent in these relationships.³⁷ In traditional terms, the possession of *logos* (the word, speech understood as sense, reason) is primarily what elevates bare *zoē* to the *zoōn politikon*, politically qualified life. Dolar’s diagram illustrates that this elevation is still dependant on *zoē* and *phonē*, with the voice as neither fully lack nor presence always offering to undermine this transformation in the very moment it provides the medium for its enactment. Madame Eskimoff’s reduction to reproductive *zoē*, then, provides an example of an act that demonstrates this elevation is not necessarily permanent or continuous.

Attitudes”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 78.2 (1981), 68.

³⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110, 90.

³⁷ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 121.

This *zoōn politikon* is the mythologeme against which Agamben is arguing — that is to say, “our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will, and social contracts”.³⁸ *Bios* as the *zoōn politikon* depends precisely on this confusion that produces the voice as self-presence, and excludes its materiality and relation to the object. That the “voice of the people” must be heard is an expression of collective free will, a social contract that presumes that this voice is inherently transparent, that it will be heard, that the postman of truth will deliver the letter to its destination.³⁹ In short, it presumes that the “voice” of the people is politically valid, as a form of mass auto-affection. Consequently, discourses on democracy inevitably focus on what portion of the people has to be “listened to” and what constitutes a legitimate mandate. This is where the voice *as speech (legein)* constitutes the link between bare life (*zoē*) and *bios* as *zoōn logon echon*, the animal who speaks, at least for the traditional social contract.

While not I do not want to delve too deeply into the realm of sovereignty, Agamben argues, in an extension of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, that “from the point of view of sovereignty *only bare life is authentically political*”, and that it is the exceptional character of the sovereign’s ability to “to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish” that constitutes the essence of the political.⁴⁰ However, the commanding voice of the sovereign does not seem to be the object voice. In contrast, this other voice — the voice of sovereignty — is given over to *logos*. This voice must still (potentially) command *as such*. The letter *has* to be able to arrive at a destination.⁴¹

³⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 106.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. “*Le facteur de la vérité*” or “the postman of truth” is Derrida’s somewhat overly critical essay on Lacan’s “Seminar on the Purloined Letter”.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 106. Italics in original.

⁴¹ Although the question of it arriving at the right destination, intent, is largely irrelevant to Agamben’s argument.

As Dolar notes, when the voice that links *zoē* and *bios* becomes a plenitude and “this voice is taken as something positive and compelling on its own”, it becomes “His Master’s Voice, supplanting the law”.⁴² In a more radical reading of *Homo Sacer*, I would argue that this, for Agamben, is the position occupied by the sovereign and his/her right to punish. Thus, the voice as speech and presence, *legein*, can be said to be instrumental in the structural conceit that makes us all *homines sacri*.⁴³ By Agamben’s account, it is the actual possibility of being killed without recourse to the law that is the essence of the political, the manner of being in the *polis*.

The dis-embodied voice

Returning to Madame Eskimoff’s position in the séance from Pynchon’s novel, her own voice becomes “acousmatic” — a voice that does not “stick” to the body, that and does not have a properly visible origin, to paraphrase Dolar’s reading of Michel Chion. Dolar notes that the “acousmatics” were Pythagoras’ pupils who “followed his teaching for five years without seeing him”, providing a resonance with the neo-Pythagorean T.W.I.T. séance. In this scene, rather than reinforcing “technical mastery of objective being”, the ecstasica’s position as *zoē* — as bare, reproductive life — is unveiled by the manner in which the displacement of her voice destabilizes the link between *phonē* and *technē*.⁴⁴

To attempt to clarify the effects of this break in *Against the Day*, I will analyze a longer citation. The strange interplay between *technē*, as a form of thinking (a “process of deliberation in service to doing and making”),⁴⁵ and technicity (in the form of the supplemental

⁴² Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, 121.

⁴³ Dolar himself makes a more explicit case for the voice of the father as the “impossible origin of the law” in his essay “The Object Voice”, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, Salecl and Žižek eds, 26–27.

⁴⁴ Dolar, *A Voice And Nothing More*, 61.

⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge

recording and amplification equipment) will help me to trace the “object voice”. There are also additional questions of translation and the “voice” of narration. The Auxteophone recording is, after all, presented as being in Turkish, but only the part that disturbs the expected flow of the séance is highlighted as such. Finally, there is the “voice” of the spirit itself as it speaks through Madame Eskimoff, and the question of whether the spectre might be bare life *par excellence*. Alternatively, is a spectre or *phantasm* (if we can give such a visual name to an aural/oral manifestation) perhaps something irreducible to the pairing *zoē-bios*?

Madame Eskimoff placed the wax cylinder in the machine, started the air-pump, adjusted a series of rheostats, and they listened. The several voices were at first difficult to distinguish, and unaccountable whispers and whistling came and went in the background. One voice, seemingly Madame Eskimoff’s, was much clearer, as if through some unexplained syntonetic effect between wherever this spirit was speaking from and the recording machine. Later she explained that this was not entirely herself speaking but a “control,” a spirit on the other side acting, for the departed soul one wished to contact, much in the same capacity as a medium on this side acts on behalf of the living. Madame Eskimoff’s control, speaking through her, was a rifleman named Mahmoud who had died in Thrace back in the days of the Russo-Turkish War. He was responding as best he could to Clive Crouchmas’s detailed inquiries as to per-kilometer guarantees for various branches and extensions of the Smyrna-Casaba line, and being translated into English by the third voice Crouchmas had hired for the séance, when without warning —

“Here,” said Madame Eskimoff — “listen.”

It was not exactly an explosion, though the mahogany sound-horn of the Auxetophone certainly became overloaded as if it were, shuddering, rattling in its mountings, quite unable to handle the mysterious event. Perhaps it was the form a violent release of energy in this world would appear to take to a disembodied reporter such as Mahmoud — the voice of an explosion, or at least the same abolition of coherence, the same rapid flying-apart.... And directly, before the

last of it had quite racketed away, like a train over the next ridge, someone, a woman, could clearly be heard, singing in Turkish to one of the Eastern modes. Amán, amán ... Have pity.⁴⁶

Against the Day's narration is playing with the links between the "consciousness" of the spirit, Madame Eskmoff's "voice", her body, and the recording technology. The "comely ecstática" embodies the voice of Mahmoud, "wherever [he] was speaking from", but this voice does not even seem to come straightforwardly from her body. There are "unaccountable whispers and whistling" in the background, but the voice that is "seemingly" Madame Eskmoff's does not come through more clearly because it is in the foreground; rather, it is audibly "much clearer", "as if through some unexplained syntonic effect between wherever this spirit was speaking from and the recording machine".⁴⁷ It is notable that this "syntonic effect" is not between the consciousness/spirit and the body of Madame E., but between the non-place of the spirit world and the recording technology. "Syntonic," as defined by the *OED*, is either derived from "syntonous", relating to classic Greek definitions of tone;⁴⁸ or, alternatively, it "denot[es] a system of wireless telegraphy in which the transmitting and receiving instruments are accurately 'tuned' or adjusted so that the latter responds only to vibrations of the frequency of those emitted by the former".⁴⁹ The latter implies that the mode of communication is akin to a telegraph or telephone system, which was already indicated by the role of the "ecstática" as a receiver and the dead Turkish rifleman as the "control".

However, this also suggests similarities to Electronic Voice

⁴⁶ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 228-229.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁴⁸ "Syntonic, adj.1", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, n.d., online, Internet, 19 Sept. 2013; "syntonous, adj.," *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, n.d., online, Internet, 19 Sept. 2013.

⁴⁹ "Syntonic, adj.2", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, n.d., online, Internet, 19 Sept. 2013.

Phenomena (EVP), a process whereby “the ‘voices’ of the dead can be found imprinted upon the ambient sounds (or ‘noise’) produced when recording in an ordinary empty room”.⁵⁰ As Brian Baker explains, this technological mode of mediumship tended to supplant earlier, “gifted” biological individuals and the figure of the female adept. In contrast, this scene from *Against the Day* collapses and blends the technological media of the wax cylinder/“electros” and the biological “bare life” of the ecstasica, Madame E. The voices, “whispers”, that are in the background are akin to EVP, because these whispers are either a *technical* effect of the machine or the relation between the *machine* and the other side. Furthermore, although Madame Eskimoff’s voice must have been heard by the Turkish translator (on the side of the living during the “live” séance), on the recording it becomes blended with the EVP-like sounds. Her voice only comes through as clearer because of the “unexplained syntonic effect” between the location of the rifleman and the recording technology. This emphasizes that the voice is no longer her own.

Baker notes that vinyl, as an inscription technology, was often associated with externalisations of memory “as a metaphor for human consciousness itself”, but that early electronic recording (particularly tapes) with their “wow and flutter” provided the ideal conditions for EVP.⁵¹ The wax cylinder here, in the first instance, clearly acts as an externalisation of memory in the way that Derrida has characterised writing for the Ancient Greeks (*hypomnēsis*), but with the exception that the “consciousness” in question is never presented as self-present to have the inscribed media as a supplement.⁵² It is rather difficult to be self-present without a body to be present in. However, at the same time there is an influence from some form of EVP because the additional voices do not seem to have come from Madame E.’s body. There is a blending of different media technologies, confusing the

⁵⁰ Brian Baker, “Tape Spectra”, *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 11 (2012), online, Internet, 20 Sept. 2013.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, London: Athlone Press, 1981, especially “Plato’s Pharmacy”, 61-172.

underlying metaphor of telegraphy or telephony with the voice of the spirit and its biological receiver. The sound of these voices has been inscribed in the wax (and also copied to the “electros”), but it is the link with the other side and its syntonicity with the machine that is emphasized by the text. This blending suggests some form of originary technicity in the process of the “ecstatic” mediumship, or at the least in this specific séance. The “event” or non-explosion from the other side is also evidently reproducible by the technology of the Auxetophone. Madame Eskimoff has “listened to these [the recordings] tonight already several times”, which confounds the usual expectations of fleeting or unclear contact with the dead.

Of course, the matter-of-fact way in which this interaction with spirits is presented by the narration also has to be considered. The control, Mahmoud, is responding to “Crouchmas’s detailed enquiries as to per-kilometer guarantees for various branches and extensions of the Smyrna-Casaba line”, which suggests a certain facticity to the communication with the spirit world.⁵³ The reader is presented with a very practical, very economic reason for the séance. This functionality is reiterated by the status of the translator, “the third voice hired by Crouchmas for the séance”; as a dis-embodied voice, the translator is reduced purely to a function subsumed into the transparency of narrative “communication”.

This provides a neat segue into the narrative voice and translation. The rifleman who is acting as Madame Eskimoff’s “control” is speaking in Turkish, but the narrator only gives us a direct quotation in that language “when without warning —” there is something that “was not exactly an explosion”. It is something that causes the Auxetophone to become overloaded, something like “the voice of an explosion, or at least the same abolition of coherence” and then “someone, a woman, could clearly be heard, singing in Turkish to one of the Eastern modes. *Amán, amán* ... Have pity”.⁵⁴ Thus, although the whole conversation takes place in Turkish, with Mahmoud speaking through Madame Eskimoff’s body, the reader only becomes

⁵³ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 228.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 229. Italics in original.

aware of the narratorial elision when something breaks down the “syntonic” relationship with the spirit world. The narration allows the Turkish voice to break through from “the other side” directly onto the page. At the same time as the “mahogany sound-horn” overloads through this mysterious “release of energy” so does the narration. Instead of the mediation of the narration we have the Turkish voice on the recording, seemingly without going through Madame Eskimoff as a biological receiver or even, perhaps, the narrator. In this the scene seems to echo EVP. However, unlike in EVP — which usually interprets weak or muffled sounds on recordings that sound like voices — the voice here comes through clearly only due to an excess of energy, or some sort of event that disturbs the “normal” chain of spirit -“control”-“ecstatica”-recording equipment.⁵⁵

In an article on narratology in *Against the Day* Richard Hardack, exploring this narrative “breakdown” argues that the narrator, as a variation on free indirect speech in Pynchon,

becomes the singular repository of consciousness, creating difference by disingenuously “displacing” the same voice or event in time, both forward and backward. Cohn calls a more familiar version of this process, after Leo Spitzer, “stylistic contagion,” whereby a narrator mixes a character’s interior monologue with its own reportorial technique or overarching voice. Pynchon’s technique is often reminiscent of what Hugh Kenner calls the Uncle Charles principle in Joyce, in which characters’ worldviews and limitations modulate the narrator’s depiction of them.⁵⁶

In this section, the narrative voice both draws attention to its prior mediation by giving the reader a snippet of Turkish and reasserts its transparency by doing so. The punctuation also performs “the

⁵⁵ Baker, “Tape Spectra”.

⁵⁶ Richard Hardack, “Consciousness without Borders: Narratology in *Against the Day* and the Works of Thomas Pynchon,” *Criticism*, 52.1 (2010), 94.

abolition of coherence, the same rapid flying-apart...” as this “voice of an explosion”. That is to say, the ellipsis opens up the inability of the narrative voice to cope with this “voice of an explosion” as much as the sound-horn of the Auxetophone. This performance of a breakdown in the narrative voice at the same time situates that “voice” within the fictional world of *Against the Day*. It also demonstrates that the narrative voice is not just affected not just by the characters but also by events within the story world. Hardack presents an extremely enthusiastic reading, claiming that this “singular” narrative “consciousness” in *Against the Day* (and possibly *Gravity’s Rainbow* too) links to some form of transcendental world-consciousness through repetition. However, this elliptical breakdown suggests some sort of irrecoupable failure that goes beyond Hardack’s proposed transcendental-pantheistic reading. Indeed, this attribution of consciousness to the narration, even in a transcendentalized form, reinscribes auto-affection into a text that appears inclined to subvert it. The frequent slips and displacements of Pynchon’s narratives seem to suggest a potential consciousness that is by no means self-present. If anything, the playful superficiality of certain characters, and even sometimes the narrative voice, imply consciousness as only a surface, to paraphrase Freud.

The exploded voice and technical uncanniness

Nonetheless, let us return to this “voice of an explosion”, a figure that is far too tempting not to devote greater analysis to here, in a volume entitled *Sound Effects*. Pynchon’s text gives the reader, firstly, something that “was not exactly an explosion”, but then undercuts this description by following it with the qualification that “the mahogany sound-horn of the Auxetophone certainly became overloaded as if it were”. The recording somehow reproduces this “mysterious event” that is not an explosion but “sounds” as one might, if recorded by a Parsons-Short Auxetophone. The confusion between this world and the other side, which we saw with the voice of the woman singing breaking through “directly” onto the page in Turkish, is also present with this “abolition of coherence”. It plays with the multiple displacements in the chain between the spirit agent; the control, Mahmoud; Madame E. and the recording equipment by stating that

“perhaps” this mysterious event was the form “a violent release of energy *in this world* would appear to take to a disembodied reporter *such as* Mahmoud”.⁵⁷ It implies that this “voice of an explosion” is the phenomenal effect of a “violent release of energy” in the physical world, but makes of that phenomenon something spectral, only perceptible by a spectral subject. In this case, however, there is a kind of short-circuit, meaning that the energy can pass back into the physical realm through the Auxetophone. Whether this mysterious sound had passed by way of the vocal chords of Madame Eskimoff is not clear. However, it can be inferred from the absence of any complaints from Madame E. about her physical condition that she was somehow bypassed, at least physically if not psychically, by this transcription in the machine (she mentions only a “tiring” night).⁵⁸

Oddly, the “abolition of cohesion” occasioned by this event makes the link between the side of the spectre and the technology more coherent. The reproduction, like EVP, becomes a zone of indistinction between “real” and “spectral”. In contrast to EVP, however, this event’s *excess* is somehow recorded and reproducible, perhaps due to the “syntonicity” with the machine. The “other side” somehow breaks through into this one, but there is such an excess to the *hypomnēsis* that it causes the technology to threaten to break down, even in its very reproduction: “shuddering, rattling in its mountings, quite unable to handle the mysterious event”. There is then another technical metaphor, as this “voice of an explosion” “racketed away, like a train over the next ridge”.⁵⁹ The Turkish voice, singing, then becomes audible. It seems that this voice has bypassed the physical voice of Madame E. — as had the mysterious “voice of an explosion”, the event that opens the way for it to pass directly into the recording machine — making it even more akin to EVP. The key difference to EVP remains, as this voice is exceptionally clear, and it is partly this that disturbs Madame Eskimoff and the other members of the T.W.I.T. in the scene.

⁵⁷ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

What do these strange displacements and transferences tell us about the object voice? According to Dolar, the object voice is most easily found in a “mechanical voice”, and, furthermore, this mechanical voice somehow evokes the Freudian “uncanny”:

There is an uncanniness in the gap which enables a machine, by purely mechanical means, to produce something so uniquely human as voice and speech. It is as if the effect could emancipate itself from its mechanical origin, and start functioning as a surplus — indeed, as the ghost in the machine; as if there were an effect without a proper cause, an effect surpassing its explicable cause.⁶⁰

By Dolar’s analysis in relation to Wolfgang von Kempelen’s “speaking machine”, the uncanny in the mechanical voice arises due to a lack of explicable cause.⁶¹ That is to say, in the language I have been using as regards the voice in this chapter, the mechanical voice appears as a surplus to the auto-affection of the knowing subject. In this way it challenges the phantasy of self-presence by narrowing the perceived gap between man and machine. I would argue, however, that it was the giving of an analogous body to von Kempelen’s machine that made it particularly uncanny. (Dolar mentions that it had both “lungs” and a “mouth”).⁶² The key difference to modern recording technologies with their high signal to noise ratios is that they function almost magically: one connects the speakers, amplifier and source, and the sound appears clearly. While massive loudspeaker cones (now unpopular) allow the function of the device to be seen, they have no analogue in the human or animal body and so their *form* in no way generates an uncanny sensation. Furthermore, the uncanniness is reduced by the accuracy of reproduction because there is not enough of a gap to be continually reminded of the sound as a reproduction or copy. Both von Kempelen’s speaking machine and

⁶⁰ Dolar, *A Voice And Nothing More*, 7-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 7.

EVP are uncanny precisely because they allow a small gap between the technology and the knowing subject to be made manifest. These, however, are clearly different kinds of gap: von Kempelen's machine (because it is a body without consciousness) produces apparent consciousness (speech), which is *given* to it by the technical manipulation of its operator. EVP, by contrast, produces apparent consciousness itself, because it amplifies background sounds too weak to have been produced by a proper body. The latter's greater gap to an "explicable cause" amplifies the split between body and consciousness more radically.

This séance in *Against the Day* self-evidently has a "ghost in the machine". Indeed, there is something that starts functioning as a "surplus" in this scene, and the effect certainly seems to emancipate itself from its *spectral* origin via the Auxetophone's mechanical intervention. *Against the Day*, however, goes further than the mechanical voice Dolar analyses by subverting the gothic trope of the séance. It presents the séance itself quite straightforwardly, playing down the uncanniness of speaking to a dead "operative". It is not conversing with the dead that is presented as odd here, but, rather the breaking through of the "voice of an explosion" and the appearance of the Turkish voice on the recording. This doubling up of the uncanny (a very uncanny thing to do), is also echoed by the narration.⁶³ The narrative voice introduces the strange event with a negated warning: "when without warning —" and then, "[h]ere," said Madame Eskimoff — "listen". This is, of course, precisely a double warning to inform first the narratee and then the other characters in the scene that something strange and unexpected is about to happen, or rather, is about to *be repeated*. The Freudian *unheimlich* is the inverse of what is "homely" or "comfortable", but as a result it often manifests itself as that which is uncanny or uncomfortable within a situation which is itself, more or less, "*heimlich*".⁶⁴ *Against the Day* undercuts the

⁶³ Freud's "The Uncanny" is itself, as has often been remarked, a very uncanny text, full of doublings and repetitions. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, NY: Penguin Classics, 2005, 121-159.

⁶⁴ "*Unheimlich*" is perhaps better translated by "unhomely" than

uncanniness of the séance by making it a normal, prosaic activity for the participants, “like all T.W.I.T.-sanctioned sittings”.⁶⁵ By doing this it is able to build on the base level uncanniness of a séance and then exceed it, adding the supplemental element of something that happens “without warning” to an otherwise quotidian supernatural event.

These two voices, then, the “voice of an explosion” and the “Turkish” voice provide us with additional material to try to track down the object voice. Both are generated by the intersection of machine and spectre, and, to return to Agamben’s archaeology of *zoē* and *bios*, it could be argued that the spectre here is like *bios* without *zoē*. To clarify, the spectre is a consciousness without even “bare” reproductive life, a consciousness which might even participate in the life of the *polis* with the aid of a medium, but which evidently no longer has a life capable of being either killed or sacrificed. This is an absence that makes explicit the relations of what Michel Foucault named “biopolitics”.⁶⁶ To put this in context, Agamben explains how this “new” form of politics came to be inaugurated:

According to Foucault, a society’s “threshold of biological modernity” is situated at the point at which the species and the individual as a simple living body become what is at stake in a society’s political strategies. [...] “What follows is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.”⁶⁷

“uncanny” as “*heimlich*” is rather closer to “homely” or “domesticated” than “canny”. Freud, “The Uncanny”, 124-134.

⁶⁵ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 228.

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics; Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

⁶⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3.

Somewhat counter-intuitively in this context, biopolitics is the management of *zoē*, reproductive life, rather than *bios*. It is the management of political life as biology: each life is given value, precisely as a numerical calculation, against the potential damage to other life. More than this, however, for both Foucault and Agamben biopolitics becomes a system of regulation of bodies that helps pave the way for *homo laborans* and the triumph of capitalism.⁶⁸ The argument for the conflation of the protection of life and the authorisation of a holocaust is a difficult one, which I will not address here. Agamben devotes a significant proportion of *Homo Sacer* to demonstrating that the concentration camp is the “biopolitical paradigm of the modern”.⁶⁹

The spectre demonstrates the potential for a *zoōn politikon* without *zoē*. Were this a mathematical operation this would clearly leave only the *politikon*. However, this is clearly not the case. If “voice” inhabits the boundaries between *zoē* and *bios*, as Dolar suggests, does it then disappear with the subtraction of one of its poles? The spectral voices in this the séance from *Against the Day* provide a different answer. Firstly, the “voice of an explosion” posits the explosion not as an event, but as a subject. This, to an extent, reinforces Agamben’s argument that the only politically valid life is “bare life”. The voice of the spectre is *bios* without *zoē*, so it is no longer politically valid as the “consciousness” in question is radically not self-present to itself as biological life. This then leaves the remainder, a technically reproduced spectral quasi-subject.

However, perhaps the spectre gives us a way of linking the exceptional state of the camp to everyday life, to bare life, as it exists

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 117. To attempt to summarize the key points to this argument: once the sovereign ban (indistinction between inside and outside) takes effect on modern (bio)politics — and the “fundamental activity” of sovereign power becomes the production of bare life — the distinction between city (*polis*) and house (*domos*) no longer holds.

for the majority of subjects. The long passage quoted previously is not quite the end of the scene in *Against the Day*, and what follows allows a jump between the voice of the spectre and the spectral in the sense that Karl Marx gave to the word (at least according to Derrida):⁷⁰

“From what one gathers,” mused the Cohen, “[...] the Ottoman government’s kilometric guarantees have lately become so attractive that, as if by miracle, phantom railways are beginning to blossom out in Asia Minor [...] linking Stations for towns which do not, strictly, exist — sometimes not even in name. Which is apparently where the person speaking by way of Mahmoud was located.”⁷¹

This is the spectrality of capital at work. The spectre of demand, or perhaps the possibility of profit, generates “phantom” railways, “linking” places “which do not strictly exist”. One might say that this is the next stage on from when Marx’s table becomes a commodity, “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to start dancing of its own free will”.⁷² Pynchon goes beyond Marx’s formulation, because, rather than the object or product becoming a commodity, the desire for the commodity produces the “phantom” railways in places that do not actually exist. The spirit of the commodity becomes the prime mover in this relationship, rather than its capability to be exchanged. In the séance the commodity produces itself; it is a *technē* without *bios*, without its knowing producer, and that producer becomes part of a relationship where (un)natural *zoē* is paired with *technē*, disturbing the classical binaries at the same time as it is disrupting the traditional

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York: Routledge, 2006, 57.

⁷¹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229-230.

⁷² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, London; New York, Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981, 163–4.

concept of politics as a social contract.⁷³

Conclusion: the spectre beyond the object voice

For Lacan the *objet a*, of which the object voice is one of the most important manifestations, is the “object of objects”, which of course could be either the object (purpose) of objects or the object *par excellence*.⁷⁴ It is “this lost object from different levels of bodily experience that produces the support, the authentic substrate for every function of the cause”.⁷⁵ In this séance from *Against the Day* we can see the functioning of this “objectality”, the term Lacan uses to distinguish his thinking from the objectivity of positivism.⁷⁶ This “objectality” is made apparent in *Against the Day* by the very displacements we have seen in my attempts to track down the object voice and even the mode of its reproduction in this scene. Lacan tells us that “[t]he voice responds to what is said, but it cannot answer for it. In other words: in order for it to respond, we have to incorporate the voice as otherness of what is said”.⁷⁷ The difficulty of incorporating (rather than assimilating), this otherness is made obvious by the slight ludicrousness of the multiple displacements in the scene: the “message” goes from the spirit to the “control”, then across the divide between life and death to the “ecstatica”, then to the Auxetophone, characters and reader. This incorporation, however, when related to Agamben’s reinvigoration of the distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, shows that the incorporation of *technē* into being is not as anthropocentric as many

⁷³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 38, 106.

⁷⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire Livre X: L’angoisse*, Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 2004, 248. My translation.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 249. My translation.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 318. I have borrowed from an unpublished translation marked “for private use” here.

advocates of “technicity” suggest.⁷⁸ Arthur Bradley explains this idea in remarkably Lacanian terms, arguing that “technology is a supplement that exposes an originary *lack* within what should be the integrity or plenitude of the human being itself”.⁷⁹ This “plenitude” for our purposes can be read as *bios* or the *zoōn politikon* — that is to say, as a human fully inculcated into the *polis* rather than as bare life. The Lacanian *objet petit a* in this context is a form of originary technicity, but one that is actually less anthropocentric than the assemblages proposed in many theories of technicity.⁸⁰

In the final analysis, this séance from *Against the Day* shows — with its strange combinations of dis-embodied voices, technology and spectrality — that the *objet a* is the opening of the technological as one of the key moments in the formation of the psyche. As suggested by the title of one of Lacan’s *Écrits*, “The Subversion of the Subject”, where he first introduces “voice” as an *objet a*, this relationship does not leave traditional notions of the subject’s auto-affection untouched. Perhaps surprisingly, this has a quite concrete political dimension when related to Agamben’s “bare life” and his reworking of the Greek distinctions between *zoē* and *bios*. The psychoanalytic subject is much more akin to *zoē* than the phantasy of auto-affection that sustains cultural *bios*. We can see that the *zoōn technikon* is only a part of that assemblage, and its centre is not necessarily a knowing subject, but rather a form of *zoē* as “bare life”. This life is managed and controlled by a modern biopolitical régime, as Foucault had already established, but Agamben proposes a more radical position with regard to sovereignty: that we are all now politically valid only as “bare life”.

⁷⁸ In this I am calling upon the Derridean understanding of “originary technicity”. See Arthur Bradley, “Originary Technicity: Technology & Anthropology”, *Technicity*, Arthur Bradley and Louis Armand eds, Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006, 78-100, 78.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Bradley explains in detail why Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida’s slightly divergent readings of technicity both end up reinforcing the centrality of the modern autonomous subject.

The question of who or what takes the position of the sovereign in these modern biopolitical societies, however, is not answered by Agamben's *Homo Sacer*. The very provisional and speculative answer that this analysis derives from Pynchon is that the sovereign *par excellence* is now spectral, a form of *bios* and *technē* without *zoē*. It is no longer the case that the table evolves wooden ideas in its wooden head, but that death as “a region of metaphor” has already become the crossing point in another politics, one in which the spectre of market forces offers to give voice to an explosion.⁸¹ But, to paraphrase *Against the Day*'s Yashmeen Harcourt when talking about the wonders of British irony, perhaps “it's only combinations of letters after all, isn't it”.⁸²

⁸¹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 229.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 224.