

The Song Stays On The Air For A Few Weeks Affecting Almost Everyone

MARIAH

Mariah Carey is playing the stockmarket; her favourite currency: the high aspirate whisper note. Mariah first became aware of the note as a child, growing up in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. She knew from the first time she heard it that it would be *her* note. She didn't know how *the note* was produced but she felt she possessed the capacity to produce it. She performed exercises and rituals in search of *the note*, adjusting the shape and capacities of her body so as to provide *the note* with the optimum conditions for life.

She'd first heard an impression of *the note* on television in 1991 when Whitney Houston performed her version of the 'Star Spangled Banner' at the American Superbowl. Broadcast into the stadium that night was a pre-recorded version of the song, to which Houston mimed emphatically. The audience were ecstatic, so caught up in the moment that they cared little for the mechanical means through which that voice had reached them, the emotional intensity of Houston's performance designed to galvanise public opinion around the first gulf war, her final crescendo becoming a stand in for the victory of American imperialism in the Middle East, a seductive agent of war deployed to manipulate the general public into a state of passivity.

Mariah found the broadcast inspiring, powerful, moving. She hoped that someday she would be able to make others feel the way that she did now and so she set off in search of *the note*. She knew *the note* to be a free floating entity, possessing it's own internal logic and agency, and this made its conquest tricky. *The note* was elusive, sending Mariah down myriad dead ends and spiralling pathways.

To arrive at a situation where she could finally produce *the note*, Mariah's body would have to undergo significant changes: the standardisation of her body's particular functions, the standardisation of her tone, her syntax, *the note* supplanted onto her body as a kind of prosthesis, just like that of Houston's. *The note* regulates the material conditions of its own production, defining a range within which individual variability can and should be generated. *The note* becomes a stand in for the flourishing of populations at large.

The use of translation devices with which to record harmonically complex sounds, produced by the human voice, makes vocal recordings themselves hard to talk about. Machines do more than simply record or document these sounds: they also have a role in shaping our enunciations at several levels. They influence the kind of language that we choose to use, the way this language is enunciated by the vocal apparatus, the level of emotional investment with which we choose to animate our words and the means through which these voices are then distributed.

The ubiquity of recorded popular songs featuring heavily processed voices has an effect upon the ways in which we communicate in the everyday. Years of exposure to these kinds of mechanical voices results in listeners who can no longer differentiate the sounds of the flesh from the sounds of the machine. This is because no such differentiation now exists; the rhythms, patterns and 'emotions' of machines are unequivocally part of our speech, vocal expressions so often used that they can be understood without thinking and do not have to be cognitively processed to be transmitted, the values of digital data inscribed into the materiality of the voices utterance.

Mariah Carey walks into an industrial wasteland on the outskirts of Athens, Greece in the summer of 2014. There she finds Norwegian Vocalist Stine Janvin Motland recording her album 'In Labour' with a multi-directional microphone and field recorder. The two have a brief conversation about the function of singing within their lives. Stine tells Mariah about how she creates her pieces, often starting with a small fragment of text or sound, then working with this fragment exhaustively until she feels she has explored what her voice can do with it. Mariah explains that her process is different, bureaucratic, long-winded, and she finds little to sustain herself these days. Her voice is fixed and she feels anxious about her ability to reproduce it.

Stine begins to sing. Mariah is transfixed.

"In labour"

After she's finished Mariah asks Stine to tell her a little bit more about what she was doing with her voice. Stine explains that the sounds she makes are produced as a response to, and extrapolation of the ambient sounds around her. She responds with her voice to the timbre of sounds audible in both the foreground and background of this environment: the clanking, beeping of industrial machinery, the silent spaces around those sounds, the specific conditions of the time period within which her performance is taking place, as made audible by her singing body.

Motland's voice embraces the ways in which it is already commodified - and the way this might make her sound - as her aesthetic. Her enunciations: a playful mirroring of the patterns of a-semiotic data - a form of language spoken only by machines - already contained within them. The voice stretches in and out of signification, in and out of measurement, in and out of meaning, moving against the ability to be named or ascribed a value. By drawing attention to the volume of her physical body - its breath, it's labour, it's capacity and incapacities - Stine shows us how we might listen to the body differently, producing ruptures in the space of compliance present within the mechanics of this voice.

Stine asks Mariah if she wants to go back to where she's staying and continue their conversation. She's staying in a flat in the southern district of Athens, organised by the arts centre that are commissioning her to produce 'In Labour'; it's small but clean and there's plenty of snacks and tea for them both. Mariah can't face another featureless hotel, so she quickly agrees.

During the walk home the pair happen upon a very small retrospective of the work of Danish sound artist Lily Greenham at an artist run space in an abandoned district of the city. Stine is aware of Greenham's work and Mariah is curious, so they decide to pop inside. One of Greenham's works is playing in the main space of the gallery. It's her 1975 piece "Traffic"

"Traffic"

Available at the front desk is a set of programme notes, printed on speckled newsprint. They both pick up a copy so as to orient themselves to what they are hearing. They read:

"Greenham relocated to London in 1974 with her husband Peter Greenaway. It was here that she produced "Traffic". The piece was recorded at the BBC Radiophonic Sound Workshop where Greenham worked extensively for several years. Here she began to work with tape loops, layering and editing her recorded voice. She was interested in the new readings it was possible to extrapolate from her voice by listening to it repetitively. This innovation was given the name "Lingual Music."

As the voice judders around the galley space Mariah thinks about what it means for this piece to be playing now, in this city. Stine's eyes avert back to the programme notes:

Greenhams voice articulates the ushering in of a new dawn of politics: the increasingly bureaucratic nature of everyday life, the rise of individualism and the speed of acceleration towards capitalism's complete proliferation. The editing techniques used on "Traffic" highlight the ways in which new technologies standardise the voice, creating a feedback loop in which the norm reproduces itself as normal. As Greenham repeats words like 'latest', 'overtake', 'following' and 'think', we are left considering how repetition and biopolitical administration controls and standardises behaviour within a given society, producing compliance amongst it's citizens.

Both Stine and Mariah hear the feedback loop present within the mechanics of this voice: the decimation of left-wing political urgencies, the re-establishment of a neoliberal regime, the continual emergence and destruction of new political energies and movements, the continual emergence and destruction of Greenaway's voice, subsumed by its own potency.

Sometimes when Mariah listens to works of this kind she feels her competitive streak emerge. She's aware that no one could ever mistake her music for revolutionary poetry, but she is interested in whether it's possible for pop music to possess a critical capacity. She tries to imagine how modernist aesthetics could be adapted within the formal qualities of a song.

The song is a paradoxical form of self expressivity designed to placate us. The commodification of fleeting sensations - of joy, sorrow, power and ecstasy - just enough to satisfy our desire to feel. The song is a container for compressions of climax and repetition. The graphical swell to our ostinato. The song is a construct, designed to have the appearance of subjectivity. The automated impression of a longing voice that cares, or fears, or weeps or appears eager to see us do well. Surging, fleeting, building, exploding, sustaining, bursting, drawing out and fading.

Back at the apartment Stine asks Mariah if she wants to play a game; Mariah agrees.

Stine challenges Mariah to estimate how many different sounds she can make with her voice and demonstrate them. Mariah says she's not sure.

Mariah says she feels like her voice changed when she first started working intensely in recording studios. The act of singing into a microphone on headphones for several hours day after day forced her into experiencing her voice as if cut off from the rest of her body. She'd spend hours analysing it, it's shapes, rhythms, intonations; any small irregularity that she felt didn't conform to her sense of what her voice should sound like was quickly removed. This process of self-editing gave her records a particular feel, and meant that whenever she would perform live vocally, or was interviewed, she felt she had to re-perform the same affectations over and over again.

Stine says that whenever she records herself singing she sets up the recorder at least a couple of feet away from her. She says she feels it's important to capture the ambience of the space that she's recording in, as it gives things a more improvised, informal quality. It's easier to find a way to exceed expectations if you don't feel self conscious, she says.

Stine asks Mariah to describe her live show.

Mariah says she recognises how impotent these performances have become - these days her dancers literally have to place her limbs in the right position for her. Where the move from the middle eight into the final chorus of a particular song used to fill her with anticipation, these days the songs just seem to complete themselves all too quickly, all potential subsumed into repetitive and predictable cadence, the fantasy of movement replaced by reiteration and stasis.

Stine indicates some remorse in regards to Mariah's feelings of disappointment. She says she can't imagine what it feels like to perform in front of that many people. To know that thousands, on a daily basis, make your voice the ambient soundtrack to their day, people everywhere living to the climax and repetition of your voices patterning. Stine says she can't really imagine people doing that with her music.

The fantasy of movement replaced by reiteration and stasis.

The song is an object, a commodity with a physical form. The song is not an object, not a commodity with a physical form. The song should not be trusted. The song should be afforded a highly revered status, used to treat physical and emotional pain. There are some societies in the world where the song is used in this way.

Stine asks Mariah to describe the last time she listened to a song that she felt had provided her with some kind of catharsis. Mariah says that she once had that feeling listening to Nicki Minaj. Stine gets out her laptop and the two of them listen to the "Boss Ass Bitch" featuring P.T.A.F for a while.

"Boss Ass Bitch"

In the comments section of the YouTube video is a link to an academic article titled "The Many Voices of Nicki Minaj's Pussy". Stine clicks on the link. She scans down the page, until these words appear visible:

Nicki Minaj subverts neo-liberal culture, which puts models of desire into circulation and imposes models of subjection - models of the mother, the child, the father - upon its citizens. Nicki Minaj is your leader, but she is also your father, your mother, your boss and your lover, an anarchist pop star reconfiguring the female body as an industrial war machine. Nicki Minaj is a brand, a data figure, an enterprise. Nicki Minaj shows us how we must resist the ways in which our bodies are governed, disciplined to conform to the supposedly 'natural' laws of sexed and gendered bodies.

Mariah chimes in: I like how many different voices she seems to have on one track. She raps, she sings, in a multitude of different registers - machine-like, aspirate, dissonant - voicing many opposing identities. She exposes her own complicity in those networks too: how Nicki Minaj functions as brand, to sell goods and reinforce normative behaviours. But, still, her voice is different on every track, and her body is too overwhelming to be completely subsumed within the music.

The fantasy of movement replaced by reiteration and stasis.

The charm of a song always wears off. The song is produced by a machine, and so can only ever reflect a consciousness that is machine-like. The song is an authentic expression of subjectivity. The song is not an authentic expression of subjectivity. The song is a construct, designed to have the appearance of subjectivity. This illusory subject is used to sell goods and promote further exchanges of money. This illusory subject can promote widespread political change.

Nicki Minaj is not present within this particular time zone.

This illusory subject can promote widespread political change.

As Stine flicks through YouTube videos looking for what to listen to next, Mariah notices a link titled “Stine Janvin Motland’s ‘Vocal Resistance’ a playlist and interview”

“Oh god this is embarrassing” decries Stina...”Let’s not listen to that.”

Mariah giggles and clicks on the video link. The video plays.

The interviewer introduces Motland and asks her to discuss the first track she’s chosen. It’s “Portrait of Linda in Three Colours, All Black” from the album “Black Woman” by Linda and her then partner Sonny Sharrock.

I’m a big fan of Sharrocks work Stine admits, I’ve been listening to her for years and she’s had quite a strong impact on me in terms of how I think about using my voice.

The interviewer asks Stine to describe what she hears in Sharrock’s voice on that track and whether she considers her practice to be equivalent to an act of ‘political resistance’ or not.

Hesitantly, Stine responds. I wouldn’t want to speculate on Linda’s intentions in that song, but I can talk a little bit about how I hear it and how I think it might relate to the political context of the US at that time. I guess in 1969 the civil rights movement was in full swing and I believe Linda was an active part of that.

That said, I can hear in Sharrock’s voice an attempt to claim civil rights by claiming the possibilities present within the materiality of her own voice. The Gospel sound we hear at the start of the track becomes more disrupted and punctuated with these extended moments of rupture - screams and cries - as the track progresses. I feel like I can hear an attempt to break free from habits, traditions, an opening up of the field of political possibilities present within the voice, a gesture towards claiming rights by re-claiming the particularities of her own enunciations. I feel like maybe singing allowed her to move outside of herself too, offering a certain liberation from her own individuation.

The interviewer then asks Stine to comment on the playing of the band as a whole.

The collaborative playing is interesting; I hear a certain complicity across the instruments, the way the guitar mirrors the voice at several points, each instrument unravelling what has been heard before in a fresh way. The power dynamic, responsibility and sensation of producing the music feels shared, a collective tone maintained throughout as the attention shifts away from individual gestures towards the sound of the band as a whole.

Finally the interviewer asks: “What do you think it means to use your voice in a way that could be described as a form of ‘political resistance’ now and what does this voice sound like?”

Stine responds. I think it’s probably very different for young musicians now, so caught up in the unavoidable pathology of individuality that they can’t hear the kind of liberation-from-the-self as practiced by the likes of Sharrock and others as a politicising practice. The mechanisms of the popular music

industry seek to render the material qualities of all voices equivalent - universal, smoothed out, digitised - equal, when really this is far from the case. So undoing some of that feels important.

Humanist discourse wants us to believe that all vocal expressions should be afforded an equal status globally, despite the fact that the real power dynamics around those inter-continental relationships are far from equal. So, rather than obscuring the point with idealism, I think we should prioritise the way a specific piece of music or vocalisation takes on a particular meaning within a specific context, and outside of that context it takes on a radically different meaning because of the nature of commercial distribution.

The reproducibility of the voice means that there is always going to be a lack of control in terms of how that voice is used and circulated, but perhaps we could start to infect our voices with a different logic so as to subvert this process. Perhaps we could move away from the simplistic reproduction of a digital neoliberal self towards something more complex, layered, disrupted.

Suddenly the conversation cuts off. Mariah Carey is sent back to the 9th of June 1990, the day she released her first US single; Stine goes back to the industrial wasteland, Athens, 2014; Lily Greenham to London 1974; Linda Sharrock to 1969; Whitney Houston to the Superbowl; and Nicki Minaj to the studio where she recorded "Boss Ass Bitch" in December 2013. All records of these events remain online, archived, dispersed and distributed.