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by Vincent Meelberg

Writing a book review is the act of voicing one’s opinion. What is crucial in such reviews is finding the right tone of voice in order to do justice to both the book under review and the opinion of the reviewer.

The above sentences might seem as a failed attempt at humour in a review of a book called Voicetracks, but instead I included these phrases to illustrate the diverse manners in which the notion of voice can be used. “Voice” can refer to so many things, ranging from phenomena related to sound, human and otherwise, to acts that involve expression. As a result, I would expect a book on voice to be extremely specific as far as the definition and conceptualisation of this term is concerned. After all, it needs to be clear what the authors means by “voice” in order to be able to properly follow and assess the arguments and analyses centered around the notion of voice in such a book.

In Voicetracks: Attuning to Voice in Media and the Arts, Norie Neumark attempts to answer the question what writing about voice can offer to new materialism “[...] and, in turn, what might new materialism offer to voice studies in the posthumanist era? And how does this matter politically?” (2) This is an intriguing question, and one that, in my opinion, would necessitate a proper conceptualisation of voice. This, however, is not an easy task, as Neumark remarks: “Even with the growing literature around voice and the emergence of the field of voice studies, it is difficult to define voice.” (8; emphasis in original) In the Introduction of the book she does attempt to describe specific qualities that the human voice has, which includes the vitality and vibrancy of the voice (3), and the fact that the human voice is both a bodily phenomenon and movement. As a result, the voice “[...] resonates with the presence/absence of the uncanny. Uncannily, voice emerges from the body also carries the body with it [...] It is haunted by the body” (9; emphasis in original). Moreover, Neumark point out that the voice “[...] works intersubjectively, relationally, and emotionally - transmitting and moving through us and between us and others. Voice, which is more than/different from the speech and the meanings it may carry, encompasses and transmits both preverbal and nonverbal vocalizations of intensities (affects) as well as expression of feeling and emotions” (7).
These characterisations do offer many opportunities for a productive conceptualisation of the human voice, but Neumark does not want the notion of voice to be limited to the human voice. Instead, she intends to listen to the voices of artworks and media. Not only “[…] the projection of ‘our’ voices onto them, to the material voices of things themselves” (13). Neumark aims to

[…] listen to media and artworks in an context, which includes the various discourses and materialities with which I wish to engage. Conversation for me is more of a methodology than, say, the exchange of human speech or the conveying of some preexisting knowledge. Conversational mode, and with it the write voice, will come close, I hope, to what Paul Carter figures as the material thinking of an art practice. (24; emphasis in original)

Neumark thus wishes to engage in a conversation with artworks and media, listening to their voices and trying to find her own voice that allows her to articulate these conversations in writing. Using the notion of voice in this sense, however, implies that many of the characteristics of the human voice that she discussed earlier may not be applicable to the voices of artworks and media.

Up until this point in the book, however, no further theorisation of voice is done beyond that of the human voice. Instead, Neumark introduces the notion of voicetrack: “One of my aims with the term ‘voicetrack’ is to play on the familiarity of ‘soundtrack’ - to hold on to the way track signals media, but to shift the emphasis specifically to voice. In that sense the term ‘voicetrack’ works, in a shorthand way, to say ‘voice in art and media.’” (25) So, “voicetrack” means “voice in art and media,” but how we should conceptualise this particular notion of voice is left unvoiced (pun intended, again….). Nevertheless, this voice appears to be distinct from the human voice: “By combining voice (which we normally associate with humans and sometimes animals) with track (which we know as an inanimate thing), ‘voicetrack’ metaphorically suggests the potential for a new materialist exploration of voice - human, animal, thing, and assemblages.” (26) As a result, Neumark suggests, “[l]iterally and metaphorically, then, voicetrack has the potential to help us think about how assemblages speak, how they voice themselves as well as enmeshing within themselves the voices of human, animals, and things, shaping and making possible these other voices” (27). According to Neumark, voicetrack thus has the potentiality to theorise the manners in which artworks and media, considered as assemblages, speak, but it remains unclear how to productively conceptualise these other voices. We still do not know what these other voices consist of, or how to distinguish them from other sounds, for instance. In her justification of the use of the notion of voice in relation to artworks and media Neumark does seem to suggest that these other voices at least are auditory phenomena: “Specifying voice rather than sound or music, then, allows a foregrounding of otherness and relationality and, with them, of ethics and politics.” (28) Voice thus appears to be the explication of the manners in which sound can be relational.

In Chapter 2, “Animal Tracks: Affect, Aesthetics, Ethics,” she applies this notion of voice to the sounds animals make, and the ways in which these sounds are incorporated in artworks, whereas Chapter 3, “Ears to the Ground: Voicing Place,” focuses on the voices of spaces and places. In both chapters it did not become clear to me how to imagine voice apart from being sounds that are interpreted by listeners (or at least by the author as listener) as expressive. This is particularly apparent in her discussion of Henry David Thoreau’s and Douglas Kahn’s texts on the sound of
spaces. She concludes that “[w]hile Thoreau and Kahn are more directly concerned here with sound than with voice, the figure of conversing speaks of voice to me, as the bells and the atmosphere and the woods converse on their way to Thoreau’s listening ears.” (65; emphasis in original) This quote implies that it is indeed the listener who interprets certain sounds as being expressive, or instigating a conversation as Neumark calls it. Yet, again, the specificity of voice here is lost to me. Instead, it seems that this notion of conversation is very similar to Mieke Bal’s concept of the object that “speaks back” (Bal 2002): objects that are under analysis never remain mute, but explicate the limitations of the analytical tools that are used and provoke revision and adaptation of these tools. Unfortunately, however, no actual revision or adaptation of theories happens in the first chapters of *Voicetracks*.

Chapter 4, “Technology and Machines Speak (for) themselves,” discusses the manners in which machines voice themselves, by focussing on “[...] mechanical and technological voices speaking (for) themselves - rather than mediating or carrying voices of others, in the way in which we typically listen to them” (91). In other words: in this chapter Neumark explores how listeners can hear the medium itself when listening to recordings made by microphones, recorded on tape or digital media using particular codecs, and played back through loudspeakers: “I listen here to loudspeakers and microphones that no longer humbly and quietly enable or transmit other voices, but voice themselves at the same time.” (92) Again, as a metaphor it is clear how the notion of voice is used here, but it does not seem to add anything substantial from a theoretical, analytical or interpretative point of view. In this case, for instance, the concept of hypermediality - a style of representation that reminds the observer of the medium itself (Bolter & Grusin 1999) - would be more productive as a concept.

Chapter 5, “Unvoice in Media and the Arts: Voice Going off the Rails,” introduces the concept of unvoice: “In this chapter I want to work with the figure unvoice to listen to works where the usual relationship between soundtrack and image track is disturbed and disturbing [...] As unvoicing breaks the usual synchronization and hierarchy of image over sound - so that they speak to each other and speak of each other in strange ways - their very relationship comes to the fore, becomes audible.” (123; emphasis in original) Unvoicing thus is the act of foregrounding the relation between sound and image in artworks and media by problematising this relationship.

In Chapter 6, “Tracking Back,” Neumark discusses some of her own works and reiterates the main aim of the book: “With this strategy of bringing voice studies into conversation with new materialism through my own engaged encounters with media and artworks, I hope, too, that I have provoked new ways of thinking about and experiencing both voice and new materialism.” (157) I am afraid that, for this particular reader, Neumark has not completely succeeded in doing so, and I cannot deny that I was a tad disappointed after reading the book. As may be clear by now, this is mainly because of the way voice is used as a concept without a precise definition or specification. Instead, voice is used here in such a way that it is more or less equal to expression, minimising the potential theoretical and analytical productivity of the concept of voice. But, be that as it may, at the same time *Voicetracks* contains many interesting observations, such as the notion of unvoice and the wedding of new materialism and sound studies. Moreover, it introduced me to many fascinating artworks I was not yet familiar with. Neumark even succeeded in letting some of them speak to me, but in what voice, I am not completely sure.
References
