

“I Sing the Body Electric”

Editorial

The natural perfect and varied attitudes... the bent head, the curved neck, the counting:
Such-like I love... I loosen myself and pass freely...
and am at the mother's breast with the little child,
And swim with the swimmer, and wrestle with wrestlers,
and march in line with the firemen, and pause and listen and count. [...]
I do not ask any more delight... I swim in it as in a sea.
There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,
All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

—Walt Whitman, “I Sing the Body Electric”, 1855¹

In his controversial poem “I Sing the Body Electric”, Walt Whitman glorified the human body in all its forms. The world according to Whitman is physical and sensual. Bodies are our fundamental way of being – being in the here and now, being in time and space. Bodies we have and bodies we are are as much sensed, felt, experienced, seen, or heard as they are material objects.² As bodies, we are in space, and through our bodies, their processes, their practices, their skills, we leave traces in space and time and extend ourselves in space. Bodies that extend and reach out and communicate through voice, as well as how voice materialises the immaterial, was the topic of a colloquium, “I Sing the Body Electric”, held at the University of Hull, United Kingdom, in 2014, which in turn inspired the following special issue of the Journal for Religion, Film and Media (JRFM).

Following on from the colloquium's inspiration, this JRFM issue is dedicated to the interrelation between religion, body, technology, and voice and its analysis from an interdisciplinary perspective using approaches from musicology, philosophy, and religious studies. The underlying idea of this issue – and thus a common thread throughout the articles it contains – is that the body and being embodied are fundamental modes of our existence. We rely, as Walt Whitman expressed poetically, on the body to interact with each other and our environment through material practices, sensu-

1 Whitman 2010, 225–227.

2 See Ornella/Knauss/Höpflinger 2014.

al interactions, corporal language, or sensations. These material bodily interactions often give rise, however, to phenomena that are ephemeral and are thus perceived as immaterial or even as transcending the body. Yet, these ephemeral or immaterial practices and phenomena must be seen as rooted in the body and bodily practices, or, in other words, they always return to the body.

Our voice is a prime example for such an immaterial yet deeply embodied phenomenon. As bodies, we often communicate with our voice – or the lack thereof. Although ephemeral and “immaterial”, voice relies on the body and the materiality and weight of air. Voice extends the body; it represents a human being outside his/her body, for example by being recorded on a storage device. As embodied beings, we can use technology to extend the reach of our voice beyond time and space. The technological extension of the voice can therefore be seen as an extension of the body and, following Marshall McLuhan, as a bodily medium.³ Technology does more, however: it separates voice from bodily organs and bodily practices of production, and in doing so it replaces the body; it takes the body’s place; it becomes – in a way – disembodied. This separation raises anthropological questions: Which anthropological ideas are informed by such a separation of body and voice? Is a voice without a human body still part of a person? How does it influence anthropological concepts if the original producer of the voice is technology rather than a human body?

We can illustrate these complex questions with the recent French science fiction film *LUCY* (Luc Besson, FR 2014). *Lucy*, a young woman played by Scarlett Johansson, gains supernatural cognitive and physical abilities through strong bodily contact with a nootropic drug, which was implanted into her abdomen. At the end of the film she transforms herself into a supercomputer (fig. 1, 2) and saves all her vast knowledge on a memory stick. *Lucy* becomes disembodied and disappears into a spacetime continuum. Besides her clothes and the memory stick, only her voice remains. The last



Fig. 1: At the end of the film, Lucy transforms herself into a black supercomputer. *LUCY* (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:26:00.

3 McLuhan 1964.



Fig. 2: Only her clothes, a memory stick and her voice remain. LUCY (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:26:45.

shot of the film shows an overhead perspective; we hear Lucy's voice: "La vie nous a été donnée il y a un milliard d'années. Maintenant, vous savez quoi en faire" (Life was given to us a billion years ago. Now you know what to do with it).

Another example is the science fiction film HER (Spike Jonze, USA 2013), again with actor Scarlett Johansson. In HER we never get to see Johansson; we only hear her voice coming out of a computer, a mobile phone, or headphones. Her is disembodied, yet, because of her voice and the way she talks, she has a strong bodily presence, a bodily presence we cannot see on a visual level but nonetheless see, feel, hear, and experience with our other senses.

In both films, the main themes of our special issue are interrelated. In LUCY, through a bodily intervention via a drug, the protagonist becomes a supernatural being. While in the first stage of this transformation she uses technology as a tool for communication and as proof of her superhuman capabilities, in the end she merges with technology (the supercomputer) and transcends her physical existence, leaving behind only



Fig. 3: Lucy's answer to the question „Where is she?“ on a mobile phone. LUCY (Luc Besson, Fr 2014), 1:27:52.

her knowledge and her voice (fig. 3). As a transcendental being Lucy is technology and voice – the biblical reference of the latter is very clear here. On the visual level of the film, this religious connection is made through the reception of religious images such as Michelangelo’s fresco *The Creation of Adam*. In *HER*, Her enjoys a strong bodily presence despite her bodily absence; in fact, we could argue that Her’s body is not absent at all, but is embodied because of her voice.

As both films illustrate, the interrelation of body, voice, anthropological thoughts, and technology can integrate questions regarding religion. Belief is a bodily and sensual phenomenon: as David Morgan argues, the religious person “says he believes, but what he really does is feel, smell, hear, and see”.⁴ On different levels religion is therefore also intertwined with technologies and techniques of body and voice. In fact, we can argue that religion is technology and that religion is technological practice. Religious practices rely on material and technological practices to induce visions and sounds of the divine, as the film *Lucy* illustrates. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, the voice of God is often thought of as rumbling like thunder. The rumbling of thunder can be a natural phenomenon, but it can also be produced through cultural or artificial means. The bodily aspect of voice is also a key idea in Christianity. Incarnation or, better, becoming incarnate, the becoming body of the Word of God, Jesus, has performative qualities: not only does the Word become body, but through the Word all things (and bodies) were made.

Religious imagination also expresses the intersection of humans, bodies, technology, and transcendental realms, often with the help of technology and in metaphors of sound and voice. “To sing is to pray twice” is an old saying suggesting that singing expresses bodily joy or sorrow. Religious practices and spiritual feelings often resonate with and emerge out of bodily sensations and experiences. Most importantly, however, technologies of voice and technology of bodily pain often mark transcendent spaces in religious imaginations and artwork, as Jörg Berns proposes in his book on heavenly and hellish technologies.⁵

We therefore argue that voice, even though ephemeral, ties us back to our material bodily existence. Yet, voice also stands for our longing for otherworldly realms, for our longing to leave behind and come back. It is questions like these, questions of the *conditio humana*, questions of embodiment, technology, and the transcendent, that the articles in this issue tackle.

In addition to more focused papers that have taken their inspiration from the “I Sing the Body Electric” colloquium, this journal also features two “open session” contributions. With their focus on the formation of expectations about the body and social coexistence through medial communication such as newspapers or film, they, too, are related to the overarching theme of this special issue.

4 Morgan 2010, 5.

5 Berns 2007.

In “The Pedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media: Grasping Extramedial MeaningsPedigree of Dualistic and Non-Dualistic Media”, Stefan Sorgner starts with the observation that human reasoning often makes stark distinctions between the material and the immaterial and that these distinctions often come with moral ideas and ascriptions of good and evil. In his discussion, he locates the roots of these dualities and of dualistic thinking in the philosophy, arts, and architecture of antiquity, in particular ancient Greece. He identifies the birth of ancient Greek drama with its theatre buildings and its separation of actors and audience as one source that paved the way for dualistic thinking. As such, Sorgner shows how media and artistic practices, including the roles they introduce, their material objects, and the architectural practices and spaces they give rise to, shape our thinking about the world.

In her article “The Body and Voice of God in the Hebrew Bible”, Johanna Stiebert explores the bodiliness of God in biblical scripture. Drawing on a rich variety of scriptural sources, she focuses on how the ephemerality of God’s voice can be seen as a form of divine embodiment. Stiebert thus offers us an exegetical reading of bodily and anthropomorphic images the Hebrew Bible uses to refer to God, God’s kingship, and God’s relationship to God’s people. She shows that the biblical authors use the divine voice as a medium that expresses and communicates ideas of divine power and reflects God and God’s likeness.

Claudia Setzer’s article “ ‘This Voice Has Come for Your Sake’: Seeing and Hearing in John’s Gospel” offers a fascinating approach to reading transhumanism in light of John’s gospel or, in other words, to reading John’s gospel through a transhumanist perspective. Her article is grounded in a detailed exegesis of John and his treatment of our human experience of our finite bodies. She particularly focuses on the role the human senses play in John’s thinking. The ability to hear God’s voice is not only an act of faith but also closely related to the ability to “see” God, as Setzer argues. John’s emphasis on the senses offers Setzer a link to transhumanism. She argues that our sense of self, our self-hood, “is bound to voice” and links this recognition to transhumanist ideas of enhancement. Aware of the ethical issues that come with transhumanism, Setzer invites us to think about John’s emphasis on human senses and the implications of the enhancement of our senses for self-hood in a transhumanist context.

In his article “Voicing the Technological Body: Some Musicological Reflections on Combinations of Voice and Technology in Popular Music”, Florian Heesch looks, at the combination of voice and technology in popular music from a musicological perspective. He starts with the observation that recorded popular music is characterised by the (important) presence of a voice, but also by the simultaneous absence of a human body. He then looks at microphones, which can intensify this presence of the voice in a new way, and technological apparatuses such as the vocoder that can significantly

change the human voice into something “unnatural” – or even supernatural. Based on these observations, Heesch asks what implications such technological changes in popular culture might have for anthropological questions: Is a vocoderized recorded voice still “human” and how do such popular cultural processes transform the idea of the human?

Milja Radovic explores “film as a socio-political and artistic-transformative cultural practice” in her article “Activist Citizenship, Film and Peacebuilding: Acts and Transformative Practices”. Looking at films by Serbian director Srđan Golubovic (*CIRCLES* [2013]) and Saudi Arabian director Haifaa al-Mansour (*WADJDA* [2013]), she argues that the medium of film itself and the practice of film making can be forms of social activism. Both explore Otherness and question political practice from within rather than as a Western hegemonic imposition. Religion is present in the article (and the films) largely on an implicit level, in identity negotiations, as symbolic fragments. But it is this very lack of religion that makes these films, as Radovic argues, very religious.

In her article “Images of the Muslim Woman and the Construction of Muslim Identity: The Essentialist Paradigm”, Elham Manea critically engages the argument, that a Muslim woman who chooses to wear the veil is exercising her religious freedom and that the veil can function – at least in the West – as form of female empowerment. She further argues that the notion that the veil does not conceal, but reveal authentic religious identity, is also a construction of the Muslim Woman that hides actual Muslim women and their experiences. Most importantly, Manea suggests that any discussion around the veil and female empowerment or oppression must take into account the role that fundamentalist Islam plays “in mainstreaming the idea that the veil is part of Islamic religious identity and in constructing the Muslim Woman and that it is her obligation and/or right to wear the veil”.

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