Listening for Phoné

A Film by Sean M. Conrey, *Enculturation,* 2016

Abstract:

This film explores how a recovery of the Greek concept of *phoné* ("voice") can play a significant role in developing a more ecological, environment-centered rhetoric. The ancient Greeks generally, but Aristotle in particular, made a distinction between *phoné* ("voice") and *échos* ("sound"); *phoné* comes only from that which has a soul and breathes air as well as that which is accompanied by an act of imagination and is thus meaningful; everything else makes sound (*échos*). In this distinction, inanimate things, plants and even many animals are understood as voiceless, a radical departure from nonliterate cultures that are more likely to ascribe voice to most, if not all, things, beings and places. Drawing from Walter Ong's argument in *The Presence of the Word*, the film claims that the movement away from a voiced, living universe to a human voice-centered universe correlates to the advent of, and subsequent long-term exposure to, literacy. Thus the connotative gap between *phoné* and *échos* provides a site to explore ways that we can remediate *phoné* as a literate concept. Building out of recent scholarship on choric invention (Arroyo, Rickert, Hawk, Santos, et al), the film makes three assumptions: 1) that rhetoric is prior, or is at least woven into something prior, to any symbol system it participates in, 2) rhetoric is the bond between things, people and places as they respond to each other, and 3) rhetoric has a voice within the environment, even when we are not speaking of it. The central claim is made that "*phoné* is what invites us to participate in this rhetorical priority." With this claim, the theories of Diane Davis, George Kennedy, and Thomas Rickert are read as three different ways that this priority can be remediated to include *phoné* as a way of "hearing" what we already respond to (Davis), are energetically involved with (Kennedy), and suppose as the ambience of a given rhetorical situation (Rickert). In line with choric metaphors that imply that the compositional process involves nascent labor (which may provide a new way of thinking about rhetorical *delivery* as well as invention), the act of caring for how *phoné* participates in this priority is framed as a kind of rhetorical parturition, with *phoné* itself serving as a theoretical umbilicus responsively and responsibly connecting us with that of which, and those of whom, we speak and write.

Film Transcription

Introduction

[*Background video*: "winter wonderland, Part 2 early winter, nature scenes with Llewellyn relaxation music."]

[*Title*: *block quote*:] "I have been busy fragmenting the world in order to save it; busy believing it is mine to save. I am going to listen to the wind and see what it tells me, or whether it tells me anything at all" (Kingsnorth, "Confessions").

[*Title*: "Listening for Phoné"]

[*Music*: Derivative of "Syracuse Derivation No. 6: Empty" by Mercury City Suburbs (Conrey).]

Voiceover:

I have, for a long time, wondered what role the written word has played in making so many of us deaf to nonhuman voices, voices that seemed so obvious to many ancient people and *seem* obvious to so many indigenous people today. To the ancient Greeks, the voice itself was called *phoné* [*title*: phoné voice"], and the definitions of this word vary greatly. The Greeks themselves didn't generally believe that nonhuman things had a "voice," only that they made "sounds." [*title*: "*échos* sounds."] In the ancient Greek of the New Testament, however, the enigmatic voice of God was also called *phoné*. [*Foreground*: Revelation 14:2 written in Greek. *Background video*: man walking in the snow.] In the book of Revelation, in particular, we get a universe animated with divine power, whose seas, thunderclouds, and musical instruments all speak with voices rather than as sounds. My question, "what role has the written word played in making so many of us deaf to nonhuman voices?" seems grounded in this core tension, between the Greek and Judeo-Christian worldviews, but we need only *orbit* theology to get a sense of that tension.

I take no personal offense to the implications of *phoné* being the voice through which "God speaks," but for those who do, we needn't stretch very far to find a secular variant of it. All we need to do is follow in Kenneth Burke's footsteps and claim that [*passage appears as title*] "**statements that great theologians have made about the nature of 'God' might be adapted…for use as purely secular observations on the nature of *words***" (1).

Walter Ong, a Jesuit, reflects that both Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead," [*title*: "Nietzsche God is Dead"] and Buber's more subtle claim that ours is an age when God is silent, [*title*: "Buber God is Silent"] are both indicators of our inability to immediately "hear" God speaking without the intermediary of language. [*Passage appears as title. Background video*: "Chunky Move: Glow."] "**Could it be**," Ong asks, "**that God is not silent but that man is relatively deaf, his sensorium adjusted to the post-Newtonian silent universe?**" (16).

[*Background text*: John 1-5.] Enthralled so wholly with the written word, we tend to hold at arm's length any utterance that has not been committed to language for further study. We've become so divorced from the immediate power in these voices that musicians, athletes and dancers who interact so seamlessly with them appear to be doing something almost magical; they gracefully move in accord with the world as it unfolds instead of bookishly deliberating on what it means.

To the nature of words, then, what would it mean for rhetoric if we claimed that every single thing has a *voice*, and that we respond to something in those voices *imm*ediately, prior to any obvious *remediation* as we dwell on what's been said. This idea of remediation, [*title*: "remediation"] taken at its etymological root as "healing," [*title*: "remedy"] is worth more thought, but rather than think about it on its own terms, we might instead see what follows as a remedy of sorts for how we engage with these nonhuman voices.

And so, with this in mind, I'll make a few assumptions:

[*Background video:* "Gretna Green Starling Murmurations." *Passage appears as title*] **First Assumption: Rhetoric is prior, or is at least woven into something prior, to any symbol system it participates in.**

Saying this implies that [*Passage appears as title*: **"Second Assumption:"] Rhetoric is the umbilical bond between things, people and places as they respond to each other.** This is true whether that response happens beyond our purview… or whether, through our involvement with someone or something, a response calls for us to talk about it. Coming to terms with this call may be the birth of "responsibility," or the advent of ethics in rhetorical practice.

To say that rhetoric is "the umbilical bond between things, people and places as they respond to each other" is to imply that [*Passage appears as title*: "**Third Assumption:"] rhetoric has a voice within the environment, even when we are not speaking of it.** And to say that through our "involvement with someone or something, a response may call for us to talk about it" implies not only that rhetoric occasionally finds expression [*title:* "a particular kind of care"] in language, but that such expression calls for a particular kind of care. Namely that [*title:* "a *parturitive* kind of care"] our rhetorical theories should not undermine rhetoric's umbilical priority.

From these assumptions, I want to address how three different thinkers have responded to this priority. In general [*Passage appears as title*: "**General:"], I am exploring how these different models of rhetoric's priority to language imply different ways of comporting with the environment**, and thus, by extension, [*Passage appears as title*: "**Specific:"]how we compose differently depending on how this priority is theorized**. I am particularly interested in how these theories imply different modes of musical composition, although most of the insights have implications for written composition, as well.

Let's start, then, by saying that [*Passage appears as title*:] "***phoné* is what invites us to participate in this rhetorical priority**." It invites insofar as it provides us with a way to reach through the literate veil that encourages us to think of the people, places and things of the world as somehow separate, remote, or beyond our care. This *invitation* is to be taken at its deepest possible root [*title*: *in* toward *vita* life]; the act of caring for how *phoné* invites us to participate in this priority will be framed of as a kind of rhetorical parturition, with *phoné* as a silent umbilicus responsively and responsibly connecting us with that of which, and those of whom, we speak and write.

First Remediation: Diane Davis

[*Section title*: Phoné and Response/ Diane Davis"]

[*Background video*: Marina Abramović e Ulay - MoMA 2010."]

[*Title*: *block quote*:] "**What would it mean for rhetorical practice, theory, and analysis if we were to acknowledge that communication in the most simplistic sense – as symbolic exchange – does not first of all lead to solidarity or "community" but instead remains utterly dependent upon a sharing and a response-ability that precede it**" (Davis 2).

[*Voiceover*:] In her most recent book, *Inessential Solidarity*, Diane Davis claims that her "primary goal will be to expose a sort of commonality oblivious to borders [*title: "débordement* a commonality oblivious to borders"] that precedes and exceeds symbolic identification and therefore any prerequisite for belonging; or, put another way [*Passage appears as title*]: **the goal is to expose an originary (or preoriginary) rhetoricity – an affect*ability* or persuad*ability* – that is the condition for symbolic action**…" (2).

[*Passage appears as title*]: "**For there to be any sharing of symbolic meaning, any construction of a common enemy or collective goal, any effective use of persuasive discourse at all, a more originary rhetoricity must already be operating, a constitutive persuadability and responsivity that testifies, first of all, to a fundamental structure of exposur**e. [*End passage title, though passage continues in voiceover*] If rhetorical practices work by managing to have an effect on others, then an [*title*: *exposure*: an always prior openness to the other's affection"] always prior openness to the other's affection is its first requirement…" (3)

Davis seeks to explore what is prior to symbolic action by considering the vulnerable responsibility we contend with when we face someone other than ourselves. She focuses on notions of exposure, openness, and vulnerability as a necessary condition of communication in general and of writing in particular. Facing an other, we understand the responsibility that comes with recognizing our connections to each other. She claims that a separated self

"**would have no need or desire to write; writing, no matter what it says, testifies to** [*title*: "exposedness"] **exposedness, to** [*title*: "vulnerability"] **vulnerability – to responsivity** [*title*: "responsivity"]" (9).

She draws heavily on Levinas for this notion of responsivity, taking his notion of the face as the site where we admit the vulnerability and exposedness that allows for communication. She states:

"According to [Levinas], this response-ability is not only what brings an existent into being; it *is* the [*remaining passage appears as title*:] ***clinemen*, the inclination toward the other**" (14).

[*Title:* "the vulnerable and responsible inclination"] This vulnerable and responsible inclination, I would say, is [*title:* "the rhetorical element within *phonê*"] the rhetorical element within *phoné* that allows us to hear what [*title:* "the umbilical element within *phonê*"] others are saying as well as to "hear" what they are doing.

[*Video with music*: Marina Abramović facing Ulay]

[*Fade*]

[*Video with Music*: Stefon Harris, *There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand*]

But to face the other needn't be a literal act. Musicians do it all the time, as well, often with their eyes closed. To explore what this responsibility and openness may mean in musical composition, jazz xylophonist Stefon Harris discusses what it means to face his band and compose according in his 2011 TED talk, *There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand*.

[Video: *There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand*]

[Transcription of Harris speaking:] "There are so many decisions being made when you walk on the bandstand. We had no idea what key we were going to play in. In the middle we sort of made our way into a song called "Titi Boom," but that could've happened, maybe, maybe not. Everyone's listening, we're responding. You have no time for projected ideas.

[*improvisational jazz music plays in background*]

"But the best way for me to do it is to listen. This is a science of listening. It has far more to do with what I can perceive than what I can do…So if I want the music to get to a certain level of intensity, the first step for me is to be patient, to listen to what's going on, and pull from something else that's going on around me. When you do that, you engage and inspire the other musicians and they give you more and you gradually build…It's much more organic, much more nuanced. It's not about bullying my vision or anything like that. It's about being here in the moment, accepting one another, and allowing the creativity to flow."

[*Voiceover*:] Davis's model gives us a way of thinking of rhetoric's priority to language, but her emphasis on Levinas's ethical project makes her model mostly useful for thinking of hearing *phoné* from person-to-person. To turn our ear to the non-human world, we must find a way of thinking

through rhetoric's priority to language that opens our responsibility to a wider range of voices. The environmental implications of this will remain unsaid, but will nonetheless be evident as we continue.

Second Remediation: George Kennedy

[*Section title*: Phoné and Energy/ George Kennedy"]

[*Background video*: "Alaska's Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge."]

[*Music*: Adams' "Meadowdance"]

[*Title*: *block quote*:] "**Rhetoric in the most general sense may perhaps be identified with the energy inherent in communication: the emotional energy that impels the speaker to speak, the physical energy expended in the utterance, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy experienced by the recipient in decoding the message**" (2).

[*Voiceover*:] To consider how rhetoric's priority to language affects how we hear the voices of the animal world, we can turn to George Kennedy's famous essay "A Hoot in the Dark." His concern is to find something primal in rhetoric, something driving us to respond, an energy. His concerns go beyond the animal, but we will focus on his exploration of this aspect.

Kennedy lays out a series of theses intending to establish the logical priorities of how rhetoric participates in communication, and particularly where it derives its energy.

[*Passage appears as title*]: "**It seems clear that rhetorical energy is not found only in language. It is present also in physical actions, facial expressions, gestures, and signs generally. The axiom that rhetoric is a form of energy leads to the first of several theses about rhetoric**" (3-4).

His first thesis, then is: [*title*:] "**Rhetoric is prior to speech**" (4).

Not only is rhetoric prior to speech, but he defines it as [*passage appears as title:* "rhetoric:"] "**an energy existing in life."** and goes on to say, "But energy exists apart from living organisms and the energy of the life force, and thus rhetoric is perhaps a special case of the energy of all physics as known from subatomic particles" (13). So rhetoric is a peculiar energy that runs through living and non-living things, but that finds its most obvious expression in living beings.

This energy that does its work prior to speaking, delivery and writing is another way of theorizing the rhetorical element within *phoné* that allows us to hear what nonhuman beings are saying – [*passage appears as title*:] **it comports us toward something prior** to bird songs and animal calls, [*title*: "connecting through the umbilicus"] connecting us like an umbilicus to what we hear.

To explore the implications of Kennedy's version of this priority, let's turn to the composer John Luther Adams, whose work is tied intimately to the nonhuman world. His album *songbirdsongs*, in particular, provides a glimpse into composing in a way that treats rhetoric's energetic priority as what allows him to ***translate*** and ***evoke*** the songs of birds rather than ***imitate*** them. The liner notes to the album provide insight into Adams composition techniques. In them Adams states, [*passage appears as title*:] "**This music is not literal transcription. It is translation. Not imitation, but evocation**." The root of *evoke*, of course, would mean [*title*: "evoke:"] "**from the call**," which is very much in line with Kennedy. And David Shimoni claims that Adams asks through his work, [*passage appears as title*:] "**Instead of making music *from* nature – in which nature is treated as a resource – can we**

make music *with* nature, in such a way that humans (composers and performers) and the rest of the natural world alike retain a sense of autonomy and creativity in the process."

To do this, Adams composes the pieces so that the musicians respond to each other and to various aural conditions. Rather than performing the pieces in a predictable linear sequence, "Adams' score communicates their elements and the parameters of their delivery."

[*Music plays*: Adams' "August Voices"]

Shimoni goes on to add that [*passage appears as title*:] "**Whereas many pieces that incorporate the sounds of nature merely remind us of our estrangement from the non-human natural world, *songbirdsongs* reintroduces listeners and performers alike to the biosphere around them and invites them to ponder and emulate interaction with its other inhabitants**."

[*Music plays*: Adams' "Mourning Dove"]

[Transcription of Adams speaking from *Meet the Composer*:] "I'm not interested in accuracy…because if I were, I'd just make a recording and play the recording. I'm interested in what gets lost in translation…because after all this is music, this is perhaps a language we will never understand."

Third Remediation: Thomas Rickert

[*Section title*: Phoné and Ambience/ Thomas Rickert"]

[*Background video*: "Grinding Transfer Case or Transmission 10.8.2014."]

[*Title*: *block quote*:] "Rhetoric in this sense is ambient. It surrounds; it is of the earth, both in the most mundane of senses and in the Heideggerian idiom, as that which withdraws from meaning and relationality..." (*x*).

[*Background video*: "San Francisco- Summer of Love, 1967."]

[*Music*: Grateful Dead "Dark Star" live, Winterland, San Franscisco, 1974.]

[*Voiceover*:] In his preface to *Ambient Rhetoric,* Thomas Rickert states that "Rhetoric accomplishes its work by inducing us to shift, at least potentially, how we dwell or see ourselves dwelling in the world. [*Title*: "rhetoric transforms our disposition"] Rhetoric does not just change subjective states of mind; it transforms our fundamental disposition concerning how we are in the world, [*title*: "disposition: how we dwell"] how we dwell" (*xiii*). In his book he explores ways to attune to how we dwell, [*title*: "a disposition of ambient dwelling"] specifically how we may affect a change in disposition in ourselves and others that calls for action. [*Title*: "attunement."]

We could say that this change of disposition toward the ambient is likely always taking place culturally, but that sometime these movements are less well-known or widespread and therefore have a lesser affect. The psychedelic movement of the 1960s was a time when the ambient disposition came to the fore and brought about significant social and cultural change [*title*: "attunement is both psychological and sociological action"], and this provides an interesting case study. It was not simply an altered state of mind, but a complete change in how we attune to our environment. It is no mistake that Timothy Leary's call to [*passage appears as title*:] "**turn on, *tune in* and drop out**" has [*title*: "attune"] reattunement as its second priority.

[*Background video*: ""Grinding Transfer Case or Transmission 10.8.2014."]

Consider, for example, this passage from [*title*: "Dennis McNally *A Long Strange Trip*"] Dennis McNalley's history of the Grateful Dead, *A Long Strange Trip*:

[*Passage appears as title with highlights for emphasis*:] **Saturday, October 30, was a beautiful day**, as Indian Summer days in San Francisco tend to be, and the **Warlocks went off to Marin County**, just north of the city, **to drop acid** and enjoy themselves. **On the road to Fairfax**, a little town on the border between eastern, urbanized Marin and its rural western reaches, **they fell in behind a gasoline tank truck** with a damaged transmission that mad**e the most remarkable sound**. Lesh was in good form that day, and the sound sang to him. "It was in phase," he said, "**the real sound, and I fell in love with a broken transmission**." He was riding shotgun in the front car, owned by Sue Swanson and nicknamed George, and leaned out of the car window **listening to the sound modulate his brain waves**, pointing at the truck and generally being transfixed. "**There's more going on than we even suspected**," they thought, even in truck transmissions. It was, Garcia said later, **the first psychedelic music** he'd heard, even if **it was not precisely music** (96).

[*Fade*]

[*Video*: "Crossroads 1986 (Train Talk)."]

[*Voiceover*:] In this famous scene from the 1986 film *Crossroads,* we see an older disposition for how to listen to the environment, one shaped by southern African American culture and the mythos of the blues.

[Transcription of *Crossroads*:]

Willie: Hey, look at that train there!

[Plays harmonica like the train]

[Eugene plays guitar like train]

Willie: You ain't never gonna get that lost song if you can't make the train talk. The way you playin', 'it's gonna take you ten years.

[*Voiceover*:] The role of the train in blues music goes back to its earliest days, but "making the train talk" for the white middle class musicians that made up the bulk of the 60s San Francisco scene requ ired them to take their new disposition and apply it to an old motif.

[*Passage appears as title with highlights for emphasis*:] **The In Room was located quite near the railroad tracks** that run up the peninsula to San Francisco, and as **the band grew more and more attuned** to the schedule, **they learned to play with, instead of against, the sound of the trains** as they rumbled by. One day, [*sound effect*: radio dial changing] going from somewhere to somewhere, they heard the Them song [*music*: "Mystic Eyes"] "**Mystic Eyes**" on the car radio, and a fragment germinated in their minds. Eventually **they locked it into the sound of the trains**, and [*music*: "Caution: Do Not Step on the Tracks" live, 2/25/66 Ivar Theater, Los Angeles fades in] "**Caution: Do Not Step on the Tracks**" was born. [*Video* fade in: "Grateful Dead (-Caution- 2.0 circa 1965)."] It was a long, modal ramble, really only an excuse to jam, with a fragmentary, half-improvised lyric by Pigpen about "the gypsy woman." **It was not In Room material** (92). [*Video* fade in: "Union Pacific and Amtrak Train Action Oakland, CA [HD]."]

Conclusion

[*Title*: *block quote*:] "Today, humanity is up to its neck in denial about what it has built, what it has become — and what it is in for. Ecological and economic collapse unfold before us and, if we acknowledge them at all, we act as if this were a temporary problem, a technical glitch. Centuries of hubris block our ears like wax plugs; we cannot hear the message which reality is screaming at us. -- The Dark Mountain Manifesto" (Kingsnorth & Hine).

[*Background video*: "The silent flight of an owl - Natural World- Super Powered Owls Preview - BBC Two."]

[*Music*: audio track from Stefon Harris, *There Are No Mistakes on the Bandstand*.]

[*Voiceover*:] Most of us know, at least intuitively, that we've become deaf to so much of the living world and that we suffer greater and more catastrophic consequences every day for continuing to live this way. Many people are looking for a remedy, and we'd be wise to allow the greatest diversity of voices to be heard. [*Passage appears as title*:] **Granting that rhetoric participates in something prior to language is the beginning of a remedy**, and I believe that coming to terms with and exploring the ways that [*title*: "*phoné* is imbued with some sense of this priority"] *phoné* is imbued with some sense of this priority allows us to remediate some of these consequences.

Whether we frame this priority as [*passage appears as title*:] **a response and responsibility to the other (Davis)**, as [*passage appears as title*:] **an energy that pervades everything (Kennedy)** and occasionally finds expression through living voices, or as [*passage appears as title*:] **the ambient background in which we dwell (Rickert)**, one thing is clear: we need to hear things differently, and we need to reframe our rhetorical theories to make way for these voices that speak without us.

We can't escape the fact that we've woven our words into everything we know, but we should at least be able to say "do you hear that?" and trust that we have some sense of what that means.

That doesn't seem too much to ask.

[*End Title*: "listening for phoné: a film by sean m. conrey, 2015"]

[*Three Background Videos, L to R*:]

- "Bobo Stenson Trio - Una muy bonita [2009]"
- "Murmuration (Official Video) by Sophie Windsor Clive & Liberty Smith"
- "Rivers and Tides 3.flv"

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