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## The Figure of Speech: The Politics of Contemporary Chatter

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**The Figure of Speech:  
The Politics of Contemporary Chatter.**

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The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

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**Abstract.**

This thesis focuses on informal linguistic transactions that operate in relation to, and as part of spectacle in contemporary society. In contrast to presenting such transactions as a subordinated public, exchanging meaningless *chatter*, these communicative acts are seen to be a formalization of language revealing processes, networks, and territories that have positive possibilities for the public engaged in these communications. Using examples such as the *act* of communication evident in the recent exponential growth of web 2.0 (on-line social networking), the *sound* of language represented in the murmur of political demonstrations, and the audibility of voices on the underground *network*, this thesis builds upon and extends discussions that have asserted the political resistance inherent in rumour, gossip, idle talk, and hearsay. This specific analysis focuses upon both our physical, corporeal, and virtual relations to chatter within the developing systems of new technology that transfer the majority of today's informal exchanges—investigating the sounds, repetitions, occupation of networks, and gestures of communication rather than the exchange of specific content.

Using a methodology that acknowledges the ephemeral, transgressive and fluid nature of its subject, this project uses regular first person narrated sections supporting theoretical discussion, refuses the 'permanence' of visual illustration, and is directly informed by concerns within my art practice.

Responding to the ideas inherent to my art practice—concerning the form and presentation of information presented (by the media and political authorities) to the public from which a political cognition is constructed, both text and practice elements of this project focus on an abstract, formal reading of contemporary communication. These abstract experiences of communication and collective action are acknowledged as an integral reading of contemporary politics, and that this sphere should be activated, extended and expanded upon in order to discover the positive possibilities inherent within it.

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**Preface.**

This project has encompassed seminar presentations, published articles, journal submissions, group and solo exhibitions, performances, and conference presentations. The project consists of both practice and text elements. This text element comprises text only, with no visual illustrations. The practice element will be presented at viva examination with the exhibition of selected works alongside documentation of those works unavailable to exhibit. The methodological and conceptual relation between these elements is discussed here, in the introduction, conclusion, and appendix and further expanded in presentation at viva.

The project has been undertaken with the supervision of Dr Suhail Malik, who I would like to thank for his input, camaraderie and support.

## Introduction.

Captain Cat:

All the women are out this morning, in the sun. You can tell it's spring. There goes Mrs Cherry, you can tell her by her trotters, off she trots new as a daisy. Who's that talking by the pump? Mrs Floyd and Boyo, talking flatfish. What can you talk about flatfish? That's Mrs Dai Bread One, waltzing up the street like a jelly, every time she shakes it's slap slap slap. Who's that? Mrs Butcher Beynon with her pet black cat, there goes cat, it follows her everywhere, miaow and all. There goes Mrs Twenty-Three, important, the sun gets up and goes down in her dewlap, when she shuts her eyes, it's night. High heels now in the morning too, Mrs Rose Cottages' eldest Mae, seventeen and never been kissed ho ho, going young and milking under my window to the field with the nannygoats, she reminds me all the way. Can't hear what the women are gabbing round the pump. Same as ever. Who's having a baby, who blacked whose eye, seen Polly Garter giving her belly an airing, there should be a law, seen Mrs Beynon's new mauve jumper, it's her old grey jumper dyed, who's dead, who's dying, there's a lovely day, oh the cost of soapflakes! (Dylan Thomas, 1975 [1954], 37).

Now, I am not in a position to say with absolute certainty that Xerxes did send this message to Argos and that an Arrive delegation did go to Susa to ask Artaxerxes about their friendship... I am obliged to record the things I am told, but I am certainly not required to believe them- this remark may be taken to apply to the whole of my account (Herodotus, 1998 [425 BCE], *The Histories*, Book 7, 152).

This project started in an old barn with creaking stairs, three cats, and a thousand spiders—by the sea on the north coast of the Gower Peninsula, near Swansea,

Wales. I was on my own, looking after some animals for a few weeks while the occupants were away. During this time, I got used to a routine guided by the screamed barks of geese, scratching of cats claws on bedroom doors, swooping and cooing of doves, the high pitch squealing of foxes, and the deep, steady twit-woo of the owl. With time on my hands I would occasionally start conversation with the neighbours in the house down the field, where I found that the woman in the house, I forget the name, was a children's storybook writer. She wrote about the animals I'd been listening to, and by which I had been setting my watch. She explained their relationships and adventures and gave these abstract sounds voices that talked.

It was here, in the barn by the sea, that I came across two pieces of work that encouraged an existing interest in rumour and gossip to become what is now the text you are reading. I came across this material by chance, which seems fitting regarding a subject that has no temporal or factual stability, while browsing through books and music left around by the occupants.

One evening, I listened to an audiotope of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood: A Play for Voices*. Having read it previously in printed form, it seemed somehow more 'alive' as an audible narrated story. The voices, gossip, talk, and slander in the small village of Llareggub (set in close proximity to the old barn where I was staying) seemed to hang in the air rather than being silenced in a book and transferred to the imagination through text. This relationship between the *form of speech* in text and in sound would become a central constituent to this project. But at that point it simply ignited an interest in the voices and the orally produced social relations of a small community—played out acoustically amongst the timber beams in an old barn by the Gower estuary.

On the same shelf as the *Under Milk Wood* cassette tape, was a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus. This introduced me to the idea of the verification of events through oral testimony, and the social, historical, and political implications that resonate from the criticisms of Herodotus' work. Both of these authors position speech as the central component to understanding social relations, be it through the study of 'major' events such as The Peloponnesian War, or through the 'minor' gabbing of Mrs Willy Nelly and Captain Cat on Cockle Row in

Llareggub. Both of these works affirm the *value* of speech rather than dismissing it as ‘inaccurate’ or ‘unreliable’ chatter. Herodotus suggests (see Chapter One) that although he could not rely upon the information he obtained, or verify the authority of his informants—these recollections of events, often via second or third hand sources, were historically relevant. Dylan Thomas elevates the inconsequentialities of village talk as a language of beauty, sincerity, and an integral cohesive mechanism to a particular community.

The project extended out of the walls of the barn, and from there began by following Herodotus’ first proclamations of the resonance of the unverifiable and intangible nature of rumour. The relation between these verbal interactions and their acceptance within ‘authorities’ such as the discipline of history, in this case, but also within the academy, policing, and the law courts, affirmed my interest in the political conflict inherent to discussions concerning rumour and other oral ‘informalities’ such as gossip, idle talk and hearsay. Does rumour act as resistance to forms of oppression? Does the informal exchange of words therefore act as a political tool? This notion of a political enquiry into rumour and the positive possibilities it holds for the community that produces it was the central impulse in the early stages of the project. As we will see throughout this introduction and in Chapter 1, the process of research defined a distinct theoretical and methodological pathway, building upon existing work regarding the politicization of rumour and other informal communications such as gossip and idle talk. I want to first outline some of these specifics regarding methodology.

### **Embracing a Methodological Contradiction.**

The very existence of this thesis presents a problem. These words written here in black text can’t *keep up* with the subject it endeavors to examine for temporal, linguistic, and academic reasons. Firstly, by focusing on talk we must accept that every day that is spent thinking, reading or writing—means the subject has shifted again. Every publication, be it a novel, journal, academic study or thesis is inevitably subject to the moment of publication. When the project is dedicated to



contemporary communication, as it is here—a truly comprehensive study is inevitably elusive due to the continuing, transformative, fragmentary nature of the subject. We must therefore accept that, in these technologically revolutionized times, examples, figures, and illustrations employed to reveal these technologies, act only as these: figures from which to think more generally, rather than to present a *complete* understanding of current communication technology.

There are however significant reasons to endeavor to address informal communications such as rumour and gossip in a contemporary context. On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2008, Lehman Brothers made the largest bankruptcy filing in U.S. history, holding over \$600 billion in assets ([www.marketwatch.com](http://www.marketwatch.com)) and prompting the global economy to spiral into the most serious recession since the depression of the 1920s. Both the following recovery and the initial collapse are measured by the fall and rise of stock price. As we saw in Britain, with the bank run on Northern Rock which proceeded Lehman's demise, stock crash is largely based on hearsay, word of mouth and rumour—as stock, hedge funds, and loans are based on socially defined terms such as *trust*, *confidence* and *speculation*<sup>1</sup>. As in other areas of social life, the well being of someone or something is often constructed through the informal exchanges of those 'who know'. The acknowledgment that the very system that binds our globalized world is controlled to a great extent by the rumours that are transferred on stock market floors and then mediated through global communication and media channels, present the potential significance of 'insignificant talk'.

TV reports of any market crash present images of deflated market workers—tired and dejected, alongside footage of the mad gestural semaphore of buyers and sellers trying to make desperate deals. These frantic gestures act in a context where talk is impossible due to the noise and distance individuals communicate within and between. Yet, in truth the majority of today's talk is not localized within market floors, or spoken face-to-face, but is geographically detached and physically absent. This discussion regarding the politicization of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1999 [1841]), depicting the 'Dutch Tulip Craze', 'The Mississippi Scheme', and 'The South Sea Bubble' as three examples of how speculation and hysteria affect social, cultural and economic climate.

talk, rumour, and gossip of today demands less focus upon actual verbal talk—and instead places increased attention upon the technological networks that now circulate our informal *gabbing* and *chatter*, that have so far eluded the majority of analysis regarding the politicization of informal discourse. To endeavour to remedy this omission, the next Chapters present an analysis focused upon the exponential growth of *online* chatter and web 2.0<sup>2</sup> since the development of the Internet and web 2.0 (social networking).

### **Talk About Text About Talk.**

A potential conflict of authority arises through the apparent contradiction between the form of scholarly *research* in text (reading and writing), and the *subject* that is referred to (talk). The physical permanence of writing suggests a sense of stability and authority that speech refuses. If we are to look further into this potential ‘conflict’ we should acknowledge that this contrast is in fact, not so clear. As we shall see throughout this thesis; forms of language that have incorporated gesture, speech, printed text and illustration have all at some stage held ‘authority’ within certain historical contexts. These fluid authorities are also seen in Derrida’s analysis of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Rather than accept Plato’s Socratic suspiciousness (Derrida, 2003 [1972], 99) of writing, Derrida uses the ambiguous nature of the term *pharmakon* (which can be translated contrastingly, as both *remedy* or *poison*), to demonstrate the instabilities of both speech *and* writing. ‘The ‘essence’ of the *pharmakon* lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no ‘proper’ characteristics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance* ... It is rather the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced’ (ibid, 125/6). Following Derrida, this project is interested in identifying the *medium* within which linguistic exchange takes place rather than presenting a comparative analysis of speech and text.

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<sup>2</sup> Web 2.0 is the phenomenon of user-controlled social networking, such as Internet-based communication sites: Facebook, Myspace, Bebo etc, which grew exponentially during the decade 2000-2010 (see Chapter Two).

With this in mind we acknowledge that speech has played a crucial role throughout the process of this project. This is seen in both formal and informal conversations, peer group discussion, talk in pubs, supervisory meetings, seminar presentations and attendance of lectures and conferences. Both writing and making act in periods of social construction (dependent on speech) and autonomy (silence, absence of words), either in the practice of writing at home or in the library, or working alone in the studio. The text you read now imposes a silence in the room that you sit in, regarding a subject that *mutters*, *gabs*, and *babbles*. All this noise in the quietness of text seems appropriate when we consider the mutually dependent relationship between informal discourses such as rumour and the social and technological structures that either they resist or work within. In a sense, the formality of this thesis acts as a form within which the transient nature of speech both resides, and at the same time escapes.

The acknowledgment of *reading*— (the eventual form of reception in which this work will be perceived) as a silent practice—is appropriate to the trajectory of the project which uses the spoken, audible, word as a starting point from which to discuss how the nature of contemporary chatter has moved online in the silent processes of writing and reading. What started out as a purely orally based project, emerged into one that moves through speech, writing, reading, and gesture. Responding to this, the thesis structure acknowledges this transformation, both theoretically and acoustically; moving from Chapter One, focusing on the political potential of orally produced rumour and gossip, to the final Chapter which presents a politicized reading of the silent online virtual gestures of social networking. As the process of reading this thesis remains silent the subject it refers to slowly recedes in volume until both the *form* of reception and *content* meet somewhere towards the end.

As I have noted, the significance of rumour at both ends of the social pyramid—in both the stock market floor and across the garden fence—grows ever more complex when it becomes a subject of academic enquiry. Again, the characteristics of informal chatter oppose that which is formalized, authorized and academicized. In what tongue should one talk about talk, in an academic study? What style should one write in? Should it be *written* at all? Or spoken over the

garden fence? There is an implicit conflict between languages here—that of subject matter and of the academy. Through this project we are witnessing a constant conflict between the *action of* and *reflection upon* a given subject.

We have to realize that language originally, among primitive, non-civilized peoples was never used as a mere mirror of reflected thought. The manner in which I am using it now, in writing these words, the manner in which the author of a book, or papyrus or a hewn inscription has to use it, is a very far-fetched and derivative function of language. In this, language becomes a condensed piece of reflection, a record of fact or thought. In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection (Malinowski, 1946, 312).

Rather than endeavour to reduce these potential conflicts, this project actively seeks them out. The acknowledgement that the impermanent nature of performance (Schneider, 2002), the sub-cultural activity of popularized conspiracy (Birchall, 2006), and the value of hearsay within the gay community (Butt, 2005), are all challenged by study located at the other end of the social pyramid (the academy) is a prominent feature in the majority of recent work on the subject. As a result, methodology is required to approach the subject in an appropriate manner.<sup>3</sup>

This project is activated along the borders between authority and informality, speech and writing, developing technology and history, and through understanding a subject simultaneously as form and content. Responding to this, the text element of the thesis invites these instabilities, contradictions, and methodological imperfections as a form within which to discuss the transient nature of informal discourse. Correspondingly, the writing intersperses narrative sections that act as figures framing conceptual enquiry. This methodological

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<sup>3</sup> For Jane Gallop (2002), the presence of informal narrative within academic study became a subject itself, leading to the majority of her *Anecdotal Theory* being written as an informal recollection with accompanying ‘traditional’ theoretical contextualization (see Chapter One).

strategy aims to mirror the *action* of its subject by simultaneously acknowledging the contradictions and coherences that inevitably lie within a study of this nature. Rather than finding this a methodological conundrum, I embrace these apparent contradictions as a central component of the project.

This enquiry is also intentionally cross-disciplinary, infiltrating corners of academic and cultural work that are not restricted to a particular field<sup>4</sup>. This trans-disciplinary approach mirrors the airborne nature of descriptions of *Fama*, The Goddess of Rumour, who glides above cities, ignoring the architectural divisions of the city below, mirroring the uncontrollable flow of words that are passed across populated spaces: ‘Fama, the swiftest traveler of all the ills on earth...at night she flits midway between earth and sky...by day she is perched like a look-out either upon a roof-top or some high turret’ (Virgil, 1998, 96-97).

The cross-disciplinary networks and associations that are built up within the text element of the project, act as a theoretical map of activity that endeavours to trace the networks of its subject. Continuing the methodological reference to its subject, the decision not to use illustrations is a distinct one. This text is primarily about words—the sounds they make, the silence they induce, and the process of their construction and exchange—accordingly it seems appropriate that it is words that describe the scenes, spaces, interactions, and events that illustrate the writing. The anecdotal, narrative sections act as a voice whispered over the shoulder, illustrating the text by description rather than by visual image. This text creates a structure where words are used as tools to talk about talk. As I have noted in the preface, this project reveals itself in stages due to its practice-based research context. Artworks are seen at firsthand *after* the text element has been read. I note this transition from text to visual work by inserting an appendix that acts as a link between these two modes of reading. The appendix describes four key works and then critically positions this work in relation to the text that precedes it. This aims to assert a pre-visualization of works described through the words of someone else (in this case, the author), consistent with the collective subjectivities inherent to rumour and my artistic practice as a whole.

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended analysis about the discipline-specific debates concerning this subject, specifically in cultural studies, see Birchall (2006).

### **Materiality in Art Practice and Theory.**

In the following Chapters we will see how the writings of Paolo Virno (*The Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004), Giorgio Agamben (*Notes on Gesture*, 2000), and of Roland Barthes (*The Rustle of Language*, 1989 [1967]) seek in their own ways, to elevate (respectively) the act of speaking, the mediality of gesture, and the linguistic utopia of overheard or background voices. This text uses these central theoretical positions to ask questions directed towards emerging forms of contemporary ‘chatter’ in terms of relations between materiality, form, and content. This is seen within my practice by presenting collage, film, installation, and collaborative works that actively address the relation between the form/medium in which they are materialized, and the content that is intended to be expressed. Correspondingly, both the text and practice elements are actively searching out and revealing processes of communication, translation, and circulation. Both ‘elements’ overlap formally, as my artwork often incorporates text, and this text element utilizes anecdotal and visual description evident in works such as ‘Box with the Sound of its Own Description’ (2009), and Review (2004, 2007, 2009). The text is also informed by strategies employed within my art practice that often reveal a sense of something in *the process of being said* rather than the presentation of what *is* or *has been said*. This is often presented within a specific authoritative structure, in order to prompt the viewer into a critical reflection of the linguistic system that they are presented with. As with the text, the artwork endeavours to ‘open up’ the material processes of communication, in order to induce an informed cognitive relationship to the techniques, tricks, concealments and deviations that compose the individual’s relation to the events that surround them. Both elements prioritize the *engagement with* these systems rather than a critical condemnation of them, examples of which we will see in the following Chapters. To do this my practice incorporates handmade construction and manipulation (collage and drawing), the object’s material presence working within established systems of exhibition and presentation (conceptual projects), or the acknowledgement of the material presence of an artwork through the visibility of the medium or process (film

installation, performance). With this in mind, the theoretical work that seeks to evaluate the political possibilities through the isolation, separation, and mediality of language is of central importance here.

Following the previous thoughts on methodology within this material context, it is interesting to consider ideas of *making* that bridge the project as a whole. The ‘cut’ and ‘paste’ icons that facilitate the construction of this text are virtual tools representing a material process. This intimately physical relation to the materiality of information is seen in these hand-crafted processes of collage. This temporal relation to the image becomes an extensive process where physical proximity to the material is evident within the final work as detailed, intricate layering of newspaper.<sup>5</sup>

### **Rumour: Words of Freedom?**

This thesis uses real, practical, and material examples to re-articulate specific theoretical questions that ask what is happening to talk today and how does this relate to a wider political context? How does talk function online? What do the repetitions of a mouse click activate? Can we interpret these acts politically? If we have established the potential of networks and of organization, what happens when these organizations manifest? Can we articulate a political reading of the urban demonstration—the climax to networked organization, in abstract, formal, sonorous terms rather than through analysis based on content?

In order to approach these questions this thesis presents a breadth of thinking that has engaged with the study of rumour, hearsay, gossip, and idle talk. Discussions regarding the position of these unheard, or previously unstudied voices have traversed the disciplines of history, philosophy, everyday theory, behavioral sciences, queer studies, performance studies, feminist theory, cultural studies, sociology and neo-Marxist theory. We will see that within these fields, there are those more empirically minded studies that have endeavored to categorize and define rumour and gossip either by proposing algebraic equations

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix, *In Complete Darkness*, (2007).

(Allport & Postman), or by ascertaining the differences between categories such as ‘rumour’ and ‘hearsay’ (Rosnow & Fine), presenting cultural histories of rumour (Neubauer), or social case studies of situations or events where hearsay or rumour have infiltrated particular publics or affected social action (Morin).

Responding to this work, it seems apparent that the relation between rumour, absence of information, and authority are integral. But rather than seeing these relations as oppositions in conflict, we should understand them as symbiotic—acknowledging that rumour can not function without the absence or *concealment* of some sort of authoritative voice—be it the media, a politician, a tribe leader etc. In effect, we should understand that rumour *requires* the acknowledgment that *there is* an authoritative voice, but it is *missing*.

Chapter One traverses disciplines, recounting voices such as Melanie Tebbutt’s feminist criticism of Samuel Johnson’s sexist dictionary definition of a gossip: ‘One who runs about tattling like women at a laying-in’. Tebbutt argues the positive value of the social bonds that are created through the act of talking over the garden fence (see Chapter One). Regarding a multitude of studies on rumour, gossip and idle talk, it seems clear that as the social bonds that are activated through the process of talking often act as positive political tools within repressed communities, as we see with both Tebbutt (1995), who cites the *act* and resulting bond between women as they talk together as a primary social force in a context of oppressed domestic inequality, and Turner (1993), who suggests that the rumour narratives produced by the black community during the civil rights era functioned as ‘tools of resistance’ to counter the oppression of white supremacy. Responding to this work, I propose in Chapter One that the ‘resistance’ in these contexts can be identified in more specific terms based upon social resistance formed by the *narratives* of rumour and the *acts* of gossip.

### **Talk in Technology**

The re-contextualization of a politics of talk today presents us with a question of technology. What sort of communication technology is used today to transmit the



majority of our chatter? As we shall see throughout this project, forms of talk have changed. From face-to-face oral exchanges, emphasis on gesticular communication, to writing and printed text—there is no doubt that currently, the most expansive form of chatter is now online. What marks contemporary chatter, is the network that it circulates within: the Internet, and in particular, web 2.0 or social networking. In Chapter Two we will follow the criticisms of orally produced chatter and gossip online, where contemporary condemnations charge the virtual, hyper-speed, and physically absent nature of online technologies with ‘apocalyptic’ consequences. These criticisms are most evident within the mainstream media. Reminiscent of moral panics<sup>6</sup> of the past, public fear is induced, presenting children’s vulnerability to online ‘predators’ who ‘groom’ their victims before acting out paedophilic crimes. This discussion can be traced through cultural and media studies and has its own history, but what is of note here is the presentation of a communication system as both a tool of *freedom and liberation*, and at the same time of *fear and danger*.

In the same Sunday paper that is filled with advertisements for the fastest, cheapest broadband deals and new online mobile phone technology, there is an article titled ‘Voyeur sex games spread on chat site’. The article adds to the existing coverage of the ‘unregulated’ nature of sites such as *Chatroulette* offering Internet video chats with random strangers. ‘Once they are logged in together, chatters can do anything they like: talk to each other, type messages, entertain each other – or just say goodbye, hit the ‘next’ button and move on in an attempt to find somebody more interesting’ (Johnson, 2010, 20). The article acts as another example of a generalized analysis of online communication where the *freedom* to ‘take a quick trip around that network’ is seen as positive, and the *dangers* of this ‘haven for voyeurs’ and ‘unsavory characters’ presenting ‘highly offensive’ content is seen pejoratively. This simplistic binary reading of freedom and danger reflects the central mainstream discussion relating to the politicization of online communication. These discussions omit analysis based on the *functional* nature of online communication, how it behaves as a *language*, as an *act* of communication, and as part of social *routine and repetition*. This project aims to

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed cultural analysis of moral panic see Cohen (1972).

go much further in addressing these issues, in order to understand alternative political readings associated with contemporary chatter and online communication.

The condemnation of technologized communication continues in both philosophical and cultural criticism. Following the theoretical warnings of the threat of ‘indolent chatter’ from Kierkegaard and Heidegger (see Chapter Two), and the loud sirens and ‘firefighters’ in Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Paul Virilio continues the dystopian vision of technology and its future:

...the youngest children, with their noses stuck to the screen from infants’ school onwards, are already going down with hyperactivity disorders due to a brain dysfunction which produces erratic activity, serious attention deficits and uncontrollable impulsive acts.

And with access to the information super highways set to become more commonplace, an increase in the number of armchair travelers – those distant offshoots of the silent reader – is yet to come. They alone will suffer a range of communication disturbances acquired over the recent centuries of technology.

In this field *progress* acts like a forensic scientist on us, violating each bodily orifice that is to be autopsied, as a prelude to the brutal incursions that are to follow. It does not simply *affect* individuals—it *penetrates* them. It heaps up, accumulates and condenses in each of us the full range of (visual, social, psycho-motor, affective, intellectual, sexual, etc.) detritus disorders which it has taken on with each innovation, each with their full complement of specific injuries.

Without even suspecting it, we have become the heirs and descendants of some fearsome antecedents, the prisoners of hereditary defects transmitted now not through the genes, sperm or blood, but through an *unutterable technical contamination* (Virilio, 2005 [2000], 39).

Here, Paul Virilio’s identification of the *penetrating* repetitions of impulsive acts, and violations of the body caused by the information super highway offers a

starting point to reject the ‘contamination’ supposedly produced through these acts, and rather to use the acknowledgement of these *corporeal* relations with a communication system, to argue a positive position for the online ‘silent’ exchanges that Virilio criticizes.

By identifying the ‘loss’ of speech with the emergence of typed (rather than written) text as constituent to the failings of the ‘information super highway’, Virilio leaps to a qualitative evaluation of certain forms of language over another. What Virilio fails to do, and what I endeavour to present here, is to assign significance to the corporeal relations of new technologies, and rather than condemn them, use these new emergences as an opportunity to evaluate the possible readings of such communicative relations. By asking what exactly we mean by the technological ‘penetration’ of individuals, we can begin to ascribe potential understandings that are instead *activated* by these separations, alienations and repetitions rather than ‘contaminated’ by them.

This thesis follows the work of scholars who have noted the importance of the ‘stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised’ (De Certeau, 1988, 98), those also noting the social ‘meanings’ produced through the ‘folkloric’ oral discussions of television (Fiske, 1987, 105) or the two-sided nature of communication produced through the relation between media and public (Stuart Hall and Birmingham school, see Morley and Chen, 1996), and more recently, the network centric common power of the multitude (Hart & Negri, 2006, see Chapter Two). These ideas of a positive subversion coming from within the system itself, form the trajectory from which the project positions itself. More precisely, following Jacques Ranciere (2005), it does not follow the possibility of capital creating its ‘own gravediggers, according to the Marxist schema’ (Ranciere, 2006) and therefore being replaced by another ‘revolutionary’ system. Rather it is argued that the process of liberation from the ‘police order’<sup>7</sup> is determined by a kind of *universal equality*

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<sup>7</sup> Ranciere does not see ‘police order’ as a specific institution such as The Police (force), rather as a what we might normally understand as politics—the process of social order that presents us with our reality and our sensibility, it is the ‘distribution of what is given to our experience, of what we can do’ (Ranciere, 2006).

where all voices are visible<sup>8</sup>, and those who are heard in the background are pushed to perform on the same stage as those who already dominate the theatre of politics. Ranciere sees potential liberation from this order through the identification of spaces of expression where the freedom of speech is not expected. The identification of these ‘spaces’ is a significant constituent to the discussions regarding the politics of contemporary chatter in of the following Chapters.

### **Network Politics.**

The use of mobile video footage uploaded in real-time on to servers such as Facebook and twitter during the media censored violence, inflicted by Iranian authorities against protesters ([www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog)) or the use of text and picture messaging to present a collective representation of active hotspots during disaster situations<sup>9</sup> such as the Haitian Earthquake of 2010, demonstrate the direct strategic political power that the network offers. As well as those ‘from below’ making their public struggle visible online, there are examples of the political agency offered to mainstream political organizations such as Barak Obama’s (2008) successful utilization of the online networks managed by political strategist, David Poufs.<sup>10</sup>

Two decades after the public introduction of the Internet, we are presented with both ‘oppressive’ and ‘expressive’ readings of online communication networks. Today, users have the power to manage individual online identities

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<sup>8</sup> We should note the re-emergence of interest in community heritage schemes and oral history (see Chapter One), as well as the recent (c2005-2010) interest in oral, speech-based performance in contemporary art.

<sup>9</sup> Ushahidi acts as a live filter of information sent by members of the public on the ground as they experience incidents in real time. The results of these activities are presented online and can be used for military, humanitarian and political responses to specific disaster situations (see [haiti.ushahidi.com/](http://haiti.ushahidi.com/)).

<sup>10</sup> In more strategically offensive uses of network power by the State, there have been accusations that Estonia’s susceptibility to cyber attack in 2007, which temporarily crippled their economic system, was orchestrated by individuals working with the Russian government following Russian protests about the removal of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn from the centre square of Estonia’s capital.

autonomously outside the ‘control’ of administrators (social networking), and the mobility of communication (mobile online access), while at the same time the individual user is susceptible to State surveillance, consumer monitoring, and Internet dependence. Chapter Two presents the discussions concerning the social relations of online chatter as a starting point to investigate more precisely the political potential of contemporary communication *networks* in terms of an understanding of *language* rather than these broadly qualitative presentations of today’s technologized communications.

These mainstream discussions<sup>11</sup>, based upon a generalized social survey of events and statistics, are crucial to a wider understanding of communication and its political context, but are limited if we are to think about a political reading of the individual, everyday conversations that constitute the majority of online activity. This focus is often addressed in terms of the emergence of an active *live* network, but rarely in terms of questions regarding what is actually happening to our *relationship to language* characterized by *formalized acts* of exchange, repetition, lag, and virtual gesture. Throughout Chapter Two, I present this discussion as a starting point in order to think about how a ‘subordinated’ public (Debord, (1994 [1973]) acts within the networked system it occupies. Using examples of alienation (the commuter tube journey), I look at how these separations can be seen as a ‘positive possibility’ (Agamben), in order to begin a conversation that re-appraises contemporary online chatter in *terms of language* rather than the strategic political actions that manifest on the streets in Iran, or through the online strategies of mainstream politics such as Obama’s campaign of 2008.

Following criticisms of both face-to-face idle talk, and chatter in a technologized context<sup>12</sup>, we begin to see a template of criticism stimulated by historical contexts of cultural and technological transformation. Within the contemporary context of transformation, we should re-pose questions such as does this public act either passively or actively within these networks? And, how

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<sup>11</sup> See ‘Homo Interneticus?’ Episode 4/4 of *The Virtual Revolution*, BBC2, broadcast 03/03/10. Presented by Dr Aleks Krotoski for a popularized representation of the subject.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Kierkegaard’s 19<sup>th</sup> century suggestion of a ‘leveled’ public and Guy Debord’s notion of spectacle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

can we evaluate this participation? In Chapter Two, I use the re-occupation of the underground commute to work in London after the 2005 terror attacks, articulated in the media, as an act of ‘resistance’, to propose that rather than look upon these networks in terms of a symbolic political gesture, we should rather think about how language acts *within* these systems and networks. How does the volume of our voices relate to the sound of the networks we occupy? Does the decrease in the volume of speech represent a failure of collective expression? Or do the networked *tappings* and *murmurs* of online discourse offer another sort of linguistic expression? I isolate the *form* of activity within a network (following Hardt and Negri’s work in *Multitude*, 2006), in order to understand a potential for resistance. And, I identify the importance of a *network* as a communicative framework or map, on which to place the responses to Kierkegaard’s dismissal of chatter and idle talk.

### **Corporeality of Dissent.**

Rather than focusing on the form of communication between individual speakers within a virtual network, Chapter Three presents a reading of the real-time, live political proclamations that take place as a *result* of the organizational potentials of these networks. This Chapter deliberately acts as a rupture within a discussion based around virtual, contemporary chatter in order to reposition the physical politicized encounter between individuals in the same way that I discuss rumour and gossip in Chapter One. As I identify both the communicative *act* (form) and symbolic *narrative* (content) as positive resistant forces of gossip and rumour respectively in Chapter One—in Chapter Three, I present a political reading *sonorous* form of the protest march rather than its symbolic content (slogans, placards, banners). In the same way that Rimbaud used words like *Bourdonner*<sup>13</sup>, or *buzzing*<sup>14</sup>, to metaphorically refer to the background sound of the crowd during

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<sup>13</sup> *Bourdonner*—from *Bourdon*, etymologically a musical term, but also an insect in the Bee family; the name of the Bee is the same as the musical term.

<sup>14</sup> For an in depth biological investigation into the social function of the Honey Bee, see Karl von Frisch (1967) *The Dance Language and Orientation of Bees*. p58. The author

the Paris Commune, I take this ‘rustling’ and ‘deep twitching’ (Rimbaud, 1962 [1871]) of voices declaring a political intention as an opportunity to ask what the political identity of this public becomes when its symbolic identity—its *meaning* is ‘denatured’ (Barthes, 1989, [1967] 77) and we are left with the *buzzing* of voices in the street.

Following Goodman (2010), Chapter Three presents and builds upon examples of acoustic forms of State control or *Sonic Warfare*, such as the deployment of Long Range Acoustic Devices to police protests, *sonic booms* employed by the Israeli Military over the Gaza Strip, and the use of high-frequency sound to repel teenagers at malls in order to contextualize the temporal encounter with the sound of demonstration. Chapter Three acknowledges Goodman’s presentation of the ‘Throbbing Crowd’ (Goodman, 2010, 109), following Turetsky (2004), and Deleuze (2001 [1968]), as an event with its own duration, and then evaluates this in terms of the concealment of symbolic meaning in the muffled calls of protest. I ask how the *mumble* of collective voices can act as a political or liberating vehicle outside the confines of symbolic meaning defined by placards and banners.

To approach this question Chapter Three follows the notion of linguistic utopia supported by both Roland Barthes and Michel de Certeau. Here, we can isolate an idea of *linguistic freedom* in both the *Rustle* and *Glossalalia* (respectively) of language. These are the occasions when language is used but does not produce meaning—Barthes (1989 [1967]) uses the sound of overheard conversations, and De Certeau (1996, [1980]) the child like games such as ‘eenie meenie miney mo’, neologisms and alliterations. Both cite the ‘utopic’ potential for the language of the individual to exist outside an understanding dominated by *meaning*.

Our words tend to shift in and out of readable and unreadable contexts. If we are to think about the sound of conversations in a café, as we move through the space we can identify parts of conversation amidst the unidentifiable babble or rustle. According to De Certeau this is like the flow of individuals flowing in and

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refers to the performative ‘waggle-dance’ and ‘buzzing sound’ produced in the process of communicating the location of good sources of nectar to the rest of the Honey Bee community.

out of these ‘garden[s] of rich sounds’ (De Certeau, 1996 [1980], 42) as we naturally encounter and re-encounter systems of semantic order. Acknowledging the relation between these utopic rustles and glossalalias and the system from which they depart is integral in understanding the political potential of ‘contentless’ voices. As with rumour’s symbiotic relationship with the voice of authority, there is a complicit dependence between this idea of a utopic potential for collective language and a semantic order or system. As Jacques Ranciere remarks in a 2006 interview ‘What I consider to be the real emergence of free speech occurs precisely in places that were not supposed to be places for free speech. It always happens in the form of transgression’ ([www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com)).

As the policing of urban demonstrations in the UK and globally has become more focused on containment, since urban riots such as the Poll Tax protests in London in 1990, geographic restriction and containment of territory has become part of regular policing. Strategies such as the territorial occupation of ‘kettling’ confines dissent to fragmented spaces in order to restrict it. In a sense the site of direct, verbal proclamations of resistance are more choreographed and controlled by the police than ever. At this point we should begin to think of other ways in which one can *speak* in the places that are not designed to be spoken in, or rather we should think of a freedom of speech in a *form* that we are not expected to speak in.

We are at a pivotal moment where established economic powers such as the UK, mainland Europe, North America and Russia are being joined by emerging industrialized and technologized economies such as South Korea, China and India. An integral constituent to this development is the advancement in communication technologies—terminal access, network breadth and efficiency, fibre optic cabling etc—and it is these technological and economic practicalities that have restricted the growth of communication networks within poorer economies such as Africa, central Asia and parts of South America. These economies, traditionally identified by western states as ‘developing’ nations, are now beginning to resemble the technologized features of ‘development’.

Here, we are offered an opportunity to think about the coalition between what we might refer to as traditional, tribal, communication primarily based upon



physical contact and face-to-face communication in *collaboration with* rather than *juxtaposed to* new forms of modern communication which are predominantly carried out in physical absence and via ‘virtual’ tools. The recognition that we are at a time where two social and economic communities, traditionally separated by the legacies of European Colonialism, may share the same communicative network in the near future<sup>15</sup> provides a poignant context from which to investigate the relationship between the primacy of communicative contact based on *presence*, and a virtual networked system based on *absence*.

### **Gestures of Communication.**

In the technological transition from ‘the mouse’ to the computer touch pad, and then to the swipe controls of the iPhone, it is evident that our gestures are becoming very much part of the functionality of contemporary communication technologies. These corporeal utterances act as a starting point to propose questions of the role of gesture in these communication systems—not simply as functionality but as an action of performative *mediality*. Chapter Four uses the figure of the poke function in Facebook as a key concept in understanding the political possibilities associated with the repetitions, sounds, and inter-subjectivities produced through new communication technology as we exchange our ‘meaningless chatter’. Following Giorgio Agamben (2000), Chapter Four focuses on gesture as the process of exhibiting *the means* of addressing a certain goal rather than the completion of one. This goal is ‘to communicate’, ‘to send’, ‘to receive’, ‘to exchange’. Let us pause somewhere half way through these communicative exchanges, and think about something in transition, something in the *process of being* expressed, of *being* communicated, of *being* sent, of *being* exchanged. This exhibition, or acting out of a non-verbal mediality (the acknowledgment of a message passing through something, a material, a language,

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<sup>15</sup> As Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of Wikipedia remarked on BBC Radio 4, the next important phase of the development of the Internet is identified by the *new users* who are about to come online, rather than with those who are already there. *The Today Programme*, BBC Radio 4. Broadcast: 13/11/09.

a technological process) is identified through the poke function in Facebook, and offers a possibility to expand upon Agamben's work by specifically addressing these ideas in a contemporary context.

Since McLuhan (1967), we understand the natural shape of society formed more 'by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication' (McLuhan, 2001 [1967], 8). McLuhan's observations of 'electric technology' (ibid, 67) are broadly based around the materiality of the technologies of the time, primarily television and visual communications. McLuhan lays a stage, presenting the constituency of 'medium' as an integral component to any discussion upon mass communications in order for us to engage with an investigation which charts the formal elements of communication in a contemporary context—one that is primarily concerned with broadband speed and fibre-optic cables rather than radios and television aerials.

In Chapter Four, I present a genealogy of gesture in relation to the evolving forms of communication following McLuhan's methodology, in order to then present a conceptual and political understanding of the rhythms, pauses and repetitions of virtual gesture. Looking at the transforming authority and 'materiality' of gesture in Chapter Four, I look at examples such as Classical sculpture of *The Orator* as a physically static representation of rhetoric, and *The Sachsenspiegel* as an early example of the use of illustrations of gesture as authoritative legal document. Referring to these references, I then contextualize contemporary examples of gesture embedded with *specific political intent* such as the ultimate political corporality of the suicide bomber, and the raised fists of Tommy Smith and John Carlo in the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City. Further to this, I present topical examples of the photographed handshake as the symbolic representation of gesture used to illustrate political discussion, and propose an approach to thinking about this in terms of a *mediation of mediality*.

Using these examples as a contextual starting point, I aim to distinguish the separations, temporal lags, and distance inherent in contemporary online chatter, as a way of providing a 'consciousness as nothing else does' (Ong, 1983, 82). Thinking in terms of a positive potential of linguistic consciousness (Ong, ibid), and the mediality of Gesture (Agamben, 2000), we begin to see how

features such as the Poke in Facebook can be seen in far more favourable light than the condemnations of Kierkegaard (1940 [1846]), Debord (1994 [1973]), and then Virilio (2005, [2000]).

Looking at the social, bodily rhythms (Lefebvre, 2004) of the ‘poke back’ function, acting as a relation of repetitive communicative acts without content, I isolate three features of the poke inherent to its positive potential: Firstly, as with rumour, it acts in *relation to* authority—within the system of the spectacle. Secondly, the specific nature of the poke acts as a clarified example of a ‘contentless’ act not simply demonstrating a ‘leveled’ (Kierkegaard) mass, but rather a pure inter-subjective mediality (Agamben). And thirdly, the absence (physical), distance (virtual) and separation (linguistic) that are inherent in contemporary technologized communications do not necessarily act as an ‘*unutterable technical contamination*’ (Virilio, 2005, [2000], 39) but rather as an alienation which reveals the form of language, often controlled by external power (State, capital, media, the police) while simultaneously igniting an individual linguistic consciousness (Ong, 1983). This inter-subjective deictic gesture at distance alludes to another narrative where both ‘speakers’ are present. The poke proposes the possibility of an inhabited, shared space, but crucially does not actualize it; it is a *means* to proximity.

Chapter 4 closes online—in verbal silence, whilst simultaneously referring to a *clatter* of communicative repetitions and proclamations of ‘I am here’, ‘we are here’. These existential acknowledgments are stimulated from the same place that provokes polite questions regarding the weather, or ‘how are you’ spoken over the garden fence. These audible vocalized sounds that constitute rumour and gossip are where we begin a story built as a sequence of written words upon a white page.

## CHAPTER 1.

**The Power of ‘Cheap Talk’.***Rumour and Gossip as Positive Politics.*

Certainly, talk does promote a sense of liberation on a valuable level. Where talk feels subversive, empowering—a very vital criteria it is. (Salamensky, 2001, 30)

As I write today, both the front and back pages of newspapers are reporting on the ‘transgression’ of golfer, Tiger Woods. It is unclear how or why he crashed his SUV into a tree, self-inflicting minor injuries, but it has been suggested that the accident came as Woods was fleeing from his wife as she attacked the vehicle with a golf club after an argument regarding an extra-marital affair. There is ‘no comment’ as to whether this information is true or not, and consequently the subject is ignited. Tomorrow, this story will be yesterday’s news and yesterday’s rumour but today it is unverified rumour. In fact, by the time I come to re-edit this writing, the story will have vanished and another arrived. The account of this particular rumour acts as a chronological documentation of the authorship of this writing. During this research I have looked into rumour after rumour, been sent references by friends regarding rumours all over the world, read about inconsequential rumours and rumours that hold ‘great magnitude’. We all hold examples of these in our heads and for that reason I do not feel it necessary to present a list of these stories at this moment. I do however want to present questions to begin to understand rumour and gossip within a contemporary context: how it is activated, where does it flourish, and to what benefit does it function to the public that circulates it?

One of the intriguing elements of research regarding the subject of rumour is its topicality. Its ephemeral and temporal relationship to the media in which it is

circulated, the event it endeavors to represent, and the participants in its production are integral to its constituency. This chapter aims to present and extend upon notable, existing studies of rumour—both negative and positive in order to set up a critical framework of which I will then prescribe forms of communication which we could typically describe as ‘non-verbal’ later in this thesis. In this first Chapter I will present an insight into the discourses surrounding the study of rumour and gossip via the disciplines of History, Philosophy, Everyday Theory, Behavioral Sciences, Queer Studies, Performance Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies, Sociology and Neo-Marxist Theory in order to present a theoretical genealogy based on the positive potential of a previously condemned communicative exchange.

### **Rumour: What is it?**

$$R = i \times a$$

The above algebraic equation represents the ideal circumstances for orally produced rumour to prosper according to Gordon Allport and Leo Postman in their study *The Psychology of Rumor* (1948). In one of the first sociological studies dedicated entirely to the subject, Allport and Postman proposed ‘laws’ which signified the relationship between information available to a community and the relevance of this information to the individual (when R= rumour, i= importance to speaker, a= ambiguity). This equation suggests that situations of imminent danger, or of collective interest, that simultaneously occur in a context of an information vacuum or absence of authoritative information often lead to rumour. We only have to look at examples stretching through history from Nero’s ‘burning’ of Rome in AD 64<sup>16</sup>, the collective ‘vision’ of the Crusaders during the

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<sup>16</sup> See Allport & Postman (1948) *The Psychology of Rumor*, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 160. ‘The incident of the Burning of Rome in A.D. 64 furnishes an interesting example. According to Chadwick’s analysis of the evidence, the distressed populace accepted and spread the story that Nero, a none to popular sovereign, if he did not

Siege of Jerusalem<sup>17</sup>, or the racially segregated rumours that proliferated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina<sup>18</sup> of 2007 in New Orleans (which we will pursue further later in this chapter), to accept that this assertion seems accurate. For the same reason that Tiger Woods' infidelity has become a subject for discussion, any issue, individual, or event that has a relevance to the lives of a public where there is limited 'official' information can become a 'victim' of rumour and gossip. The televised image of President Roosevelt sitting, assuredly by the fireside on February 23, 1942 in order to repudiate the rumours exaggerating the losses of the US military at Pearl Harbor, acts as a defiant gesture to curtail spiralling stories. And more recently, Barak Obama's 'A More Perfect Union' speech at the Convention Centre, Philadelphia on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2008 showed not only oratory ability, but also an awareness of the necessity to stop discussion and deliberation of a potentially damaging subject spiraling out of his control. This speech dampened the flames of racial tension amongst his potential electorate in relation to the comments of Reverend Jeremiah Wright Jr, and was a turning point in his campaign, ultimately leading to his election as The President of the United States of America.

There are those who confront the 'problems' or 'dangers' of uncontrolled talk in order to establish clearly defined perspectives in relation to a public, and there are those who endeavor to study these circulating words themselves. We shall see throughout this Chapter, that those who attempt to define, study, catalogue or interpret a subject of such vast ephemeral intangibility, encounter

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actually start the conflagration himself, at least revealed in the barbaric beauty of the flames and composed an ode in their honor. That the rumor was without foundation did not help Nero. In self-defense he himself started a counter rumor to the effect that the Christians, who were even more disliked than he, had set fire to the city. This version proved to be an even better fit to the current prejudices and fears. It would be "just like" the despised Christians to do such a thing, and so upon these convenient scapegoats the mob vented its fury, forgetting for the time being its hostility toward Nero.'

<sup>17</sup> See Gustav Jung (1958, 2002, 2) for further examples of 'visionary rumours'.

<sup>18</sup> See Michelle Miles and Duke W. Austin. (2007) 'The Color(s) of Crisis'. In Potter, H., ed. *Racing the Storm: Racial Implications and Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books 2007. p34. 'Almost every interviewee cited rumours they have heard, and in most cases, (a) the rumor influenced decision-making and (b) race played a part in how the rumor was received. During and after Katrina, blacks and whites experienced two different realities in large part due to their differing negotiation of rumor—and the mass media played to and exploited this.'

complex subject-led and self-reflexive questions. The ‘slippery’ nature of a subject such as rumour has, particularly in the latter part of the last century, led to discussions that perforate a wide sector of disciplines. For the purposes of this project, the Allport & Postman equation represents not simply a mathematical solution to the question of rumour, but marks the beginning of serious academic enquiry into a previously depreciated or ignored form of communication.

The title of Allport and Postman’s seminal study places the term of rumour as the central subject of investigation. Yet, other terms such as gossip, chatter, hearsay, and idle talk accompany Rumour as collections of letters intent on representing the ephemeral, porous, fleeting, circulatory, unidentifiable, transmission of words between individuals. These terms stand as words depicting themselves, words that mean words, or more accurately words that endeavor to define the transmission of words. Patricia Turner (1993) articulates rumour as ‘short, non-narrative expressions of belief’ (Turner, 1993, 5), while Allport & Postman describe the process as ‘a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present’ (Allport & Postman, 1948, ix). Rosnow & Fine (1976) present *The Corpus Juris Secundum* definition of Rumour as ‘Common talk; current story passing from one person to another without any known authority for the truth of it; flying or popular report; general public report of certain things, without any certainty as to their truth’ (Rosnow & Fine, 1976, xiii). Rosnow & Fine continue to propose the contrasting functions of informal communicative transactions such as rumour and gossip based on the substantiation of the information shared, and upon whose interests the information interaction will benefit.

‘Rumor is information, neither substantiated nor refuted; gossip is small talk with or without a known basis in fact... rumors seem most often fuelled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure; gossip seems motivated primarily by ego and status needs’ (Rosnow & Fine, 1976, 4).

The acknowledgement of ego and status as a motivating feature and the presumed detrimental effect of gossip aimed at an absent character is echoed by Patricia Spacks: ‘Always it (gossip) involves talk about one or more absent figures; always such talk occurs in a relatively small group. As a group expands, the level of gossip usually deteriorates: no more than two or possibly three at a time can engage in what I call “serious” gossip’ (Spacks, 1985, 7). Gossip also seems relatively intimate in its jurisdiction in comparison to rumour. Rather than citing the contrasts between the terminologies of rumour, gossip, hearsay etc, Hans-Joachim Neubauer notes the symbiotic relationship between them—rumour acting within the *medium* of hearsay: ‘a rumour is also an up-to-date piece of information that circulates in a group in the medium of hearsay or some other, related [informal rather than formal] form of communication’ (Neubauer, 1999, 3).

It is evident that the attempts to define transactions of informal discourse have occupied those who have approached the subject, but I am less concerned with focusing on a project which intends to further *classify* what rumour, gossip, hearsay and idle talk may or may not be, rather I see the importance of using these previous attempts of classification to acknowledge its discursive background. As I have remarked in the introduction, the crucial distinguishing feature of my interests here are determined by the shift of focus from the subject of rumour to that of idle talk and then non-verbal acts. Idle talk is seen very much in close relation to gossip rather than rumour and so as this thesis progresses, the focus will shift from rumour to idle talk and then crucially to interactions of ‘phatic’ communication which do not use words explicitly. There are, however elements that arise within earlier attempts to classify rumour, that are directly relevant to other key aspects of my project.

Allport & Postman’s categorization of rumour is based on a set of information transmissions that *demand* information that is never obtained. The process of ‘needing’ or ‘being in need’ of clarification of a subject while speaking about it frames the process of rumour. When the required information is obtained (which *does not* need to be ‘truth’ or ‘fact’, but *does* need to be authored by a source of relative *authority* to that public), rumour ceases to be. In the equation



above, Allport & Postman describe this desire as the *goal gradient* that has the tendency to increase dependent on levels of expectancy. Rumour is therefore determined by a vacuum of *information*, but also by a vacuum of *authority*. The stasis described by the *goal gradient* is, in effect, a period where an authoritative voice is missing. It is important to recognize that the advocacies for gossip and rumour that we will see following *depend* upon this dynamic. Rather than seeing the relation between the *informal* voices of the public circulating the rumour and the *formal* voice of authority as a *conflict*, we should instead see them as *complicit* to processes of exchange, argued to ‘function as tools of resistance for many of the folk that share them’ (Turner, 1993, xvi). We will see that this positive position, argued for informal communications such as rumour depend upon the *presence* of an oppressing authority (occupation, spectacle, war-time adversary, dictatorship etc) and an *absence* of authoritative information. One of the first philosophical confrontations surrounding rumour was based on the validity or authority of the spoken word as a historical document.

### **The Father of History.**

Herodotus, known as ‘The Father of History’ finished his ‘Histories’ in 425 BC in the early years of the Peloponnesian War; this work describes the growth of the Persian Empire and its unexpected defeat by Greece in 481-479 BC. His writing includes much of what he witnessed himself and of what he heard from others. Living in a society based on oral communication, Herodotus used hearsay and second-hand information to construct ‘a huge road map of the known human world, past and present, in which everything is linked through story to everything else’ (Dewald, 1998, xvi). Herodotus traveled extensively, and based his history of the Peloponnesian war on material he collected while interacting with a wide variety of individuals. It is not known if he used a translator, or how much of his conversations he himself remembered fully. His writings include stories ‘told from the imagined points of view of their actors. Vivid details are supplied that are almost certainly the product of someone’s invention rather than of actual

memory' (Dewald, 1998, xvi). Herodotus creates a bibliography of individually constructed subjective accounts, placing the reader in the position to construct his/her own perception of that particular event—pre-figuring contemporary collective online archives such as *wikipedia*. Herodotus himself acknowledges in Book 7 [152] that his work has its limitations, 'Now, I am not in a position to say with absolute certainty that Xerxes did send this message to Argos and that an Argive delegation did go to Susa to ask Artaxerxes about their friendship. [Yet he stipulates that this is most likely]' (Herodotus, 1998, 547). He goes on to explain his general methodology: 'I am obliged to record the things I am told, but I am certainly not required to believe them- this remark may be taken to apply to the whole of my account' (Herodotus, *ibid*). Crucially, Herodotus includes material, which is passed on regardless of its accuracy, and in so doing he privileges the moment of communication between the individual and 'historian', and the recollections induced by this encounter rather than 'accuracies' of past events.

'[This testimonial] discourse mentions both the act of the informant and the speech of the writer who refers to it. This shifter therefore designates all the mention of sources, of testimony, all reference to a listening of the historian, collecting an elsewhere of his discourse and speaking it. Explicit listening is a choice, for it is possible not to refer to it; it relates the historian to the ethnologist who mentions his informant; we therefore this shifter of listening abundant in such historian-ethnologists as Herodotus' (Barthes, 1989, 128).

Later, the Greek historian, Thucydides (460 BC – 395 BC) questioned Herodotus' 'shifter of listening'; asking whether factual data could be presented as 'History' as the material was more likened to stories rather than fact. Responding to Herodotus, Thucydides and other narrative based historians such as Tacitus and Gibbon imposed editorial accountability to their work, deconstructing their informant's reports into 'data' and producing their own, 'authoritative' formulation of results. '[Thucydides'] project of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is an attempt to take the realm of wild stories, of ever repeating myths and

vagabond rumours, the uncertain ocean of myth, and give it a secure foundation: the continent of history' (Neubauer, 1999, 26). Not until E.P Thompson's 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class*, had the forgotten histories 'from below' been documented as authoritative social history.<sup>19</sup> This conflict between the informal and unofficial words from below and the formalized authority attributed to the words of historical and philosophical academia has a significant history.

### **A Philosophical Ear.**

The philosophical depreciation of informal communication is largely aimed towards gossip and idle talk. This has often emerged from the authoritative position attributed to the language of philosophical and religious practice in contrast to the informal language of the masses. Questions regarding idle talk are among the most substantial and elusive of modern philosophical thought, formalized for the first time by Soren Kierkegaard (*The Present Age*, 1846) using the term chatter, and then taken up in the twentieth century by thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Walter Benjamin. Although a critic of the 'lesser' everyday talk of the masses, Kierkegaard also held disdain for the all encompassing language and thought of Hegelian philosophy, preferring to follow the Socratic approach of irony, silence, modesty and fragmented dialogue. Kierkegaard depreciated the 'leveling' effect of idle talk in his present age of industrialization.

Following Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein opposed the 'multiplicity of kinds of word and sentence', while Heidegger draws a distinction *between* a speaking which reveals what is spoken of, and idle talk which covers it up. Heidegger (*Being and Time*, 1962), saw idle talk as a separation of language from the individual. 'Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own. Idle talk is something which anyone can

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<sup>19</sup> The re-emergence of the vitality of the oral document is seen in the proliferation of community heritage charities such as EastSide's *Hidden Histories* in London ([www.hidden-histories.org.uk/](http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk/)).

take up.’ Thus he proposed a qualitative categorization of language. Heidegger uses the term *Gerede*<sup>20</sup> in *Being and Time* as our inauthentic, everyday use of speech or “idle talk”, proposing that this mode of communication is a simulation where there is nothing ‘essential’, effectively breaking any possibility of a ‘Being-in-the-world’:

Discourse, which belongs to the essential state of Dasein’s Being and has a share in constituting Dasein’s disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk. And when it does so, it serves not so much to keep Being-in-the-world open for us in an articulated understanding, as rather to close it off, and cover up the entities within-the-world (Heidegger, 1962, 213).

Responses to Heidegger and Kierkegaard’s criticisms include Paolo Virno, (*A Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004,) and Peter Fenves (*Chatter*, 1996) respectively (explored further, later in the Chapter). Fenves acknowledges chatter as ‘pure language, purified of meaning as well as intentionality—expressionless to the point of standing in for “inwardness” itself’ (Fenves, 1996, 233). This notion of ‘pure language’ liberated from content is where Roland Barthes (*The Rustle of Language*, 1989) sees the ‘utopic’ potential of language free from ‘symbolic aggressors’, using examples of overheard foreign conversations where language is present but not *understood*. This presents the *abstract* nature of rumour as a site of investigation, as it singles out the experience of listening to the *sound* of informal, unverifiable conversations rather than the content upon which rumour relies for its transmission. I will explore this further in this Chapter Three.

### **Formal / Informalities.**

Studies such as Rosnow & Fine (*Rumour and Gossip*, 1976) from the social sciences followed the early philosophical depreciations of gossip and rumour,

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<sup>20</sup> Stanley Cavell (1984, xi-xii) notes the etymological link between the Yiddish *Schmooz* or *Schmus*, a word for ‘things heard’ leading to the word *Gerede*.

contextualizing their work alongside contemporary examples including The Watergate scandal, Kennedy's assassination, Tri-Star Jet rumours, and race riots. Rosnow & Fine approached rumour and gossip with an empirical approach, intending to 'identify, order and categorize thematic elements in rumor and gossip as a way to construct a unified interpretation' (Rosnow & Fine, 1976, 4). Whereas Tamotsu Shibutani's (*Improvised News*, 1966) sociological analysis of the relation between rumour and the media is predominantly a resource of detailed case studies without a direct conclusive agenda, Rosnow and Fine's categorization of gossip and rumour is specifically directed to inform the *control* of this *dangerous* form of communication. This is illustrated by the appendix which presents recommended standards for the operation of *Rumour Control Centres*, offering detailed practical advice on how to control unauthorized information exchange. Conversely, collections of essays such as Emler and Ben Ze'ev's *Good Gossip* (1995), presents a selection positive interpretations of all forms of informal discourse (see Emler, 1995).

Specifically focusing on the power relations between authorized/unauthorized and official/unofficial information, Clare Birchall (*Knowledge Goes Pop*, 2006) analyses the struggle between 'popular' knowledges (such as gossip and conspiracy) and 'legitimate' knowledge (the university, government, the law). In order to acknowledge and depart from Foucault's understanding of power relations determined by knowledge, Birchall asserts her interest in the 'relations between knowledges in terms of power' (Birchall, 2006, xi) and 'knowledge believed in, rather than those who believe' (Ibid, xii). Birchall also refers directly to the relationship between the discipline within which she works (cultural studies) and the subject itself. 'For cultural studies' relatively marginal position, its status as the university's whipping boy (as evidenced by all the references to cultural studies as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject, for example, or lambasted as having no legitimate methodology) means that it shares at least some of the cultural value ascribed to popular knowledge' (Birchall, 2006, 156).

This acknowledgement of the friction between the study of a subject that could be seen to undermine the legitimacy and authority attributed to scholarly

activity such as the PhD thesis, in which I write now<sup>21</sup>, is an important note to make in any response to rumour. As I discussed in the introduction, the use of footnotes, bibliography, introduction, conclusion, and chapters seems to simultaneously confine the subject that lies between the pages of this study (and Birchall's) while at the same time acknowledging its ephemerality. Birchall's approach seems to be presented as a paean or a task 'to do justice to' popular knowledges. I do not share this responsibility, because I do not see that its affirmation is dependent on its academic acceptance. The affirmation of rumour should rather be evaluated in terms of its relation to the public that circulates it.

### **Rumour and Gossip as Resistance.**

In presenting past scholarship that has noted the resistant potential of both rumour and gossip, it becomes clear that although there are a number of shared features that act to strengthen the collective identity of a given public, there is a binary shift of focus between resistance based on the *content* or *narrative* passed (rumour) and the resistance produced through the social *act* of the transaction (gossip). This is not an algebraic rule (as with Allport & Postman), but it does seem that the primary function of the resistant potential of gossip and rumour are based around these terms. Let us first look at rumour and narrative:

There were two babies who had their throats slit. The seven-year-old girl who was raped and murdered in the Superdome. And the corpses laid out amid the excrement in the convention centre... "Katrina's winds have left behind an information vacuum. And that vacuum has been filled by rumour. "There is nothing to correct wild reports that armed gangs have taken over the convention centre," wrote Associated Press writer, Allen Breed. (Younge, 2005).

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<sup>21</sup> For further reading regarding the practice-based PhD, see Macleod Kathy & Lyn Holdridge (2006). *Thinking Through Art: Reflection on Art as Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

As we have seen, information vacuum provides fertile ground for rumour and in today's technologized society it takes a Category Five hurricane to destroy the communication networks that we rely upon to access both 'trivial' and official information. Katrina's whirlwind produced a vacuum, in turn stimulating narratives that proliferated within two distinct cultural, racial and economic communities. These rumours not only influenced the practical responses of individuals responding to the catastrophe, but also on a wider level, underlined how race division dictated how rumour was received. 'During and after Katrina, blacks and whites experienced two different realities in large part due to their differing negotiation of rumor—and the mass media played to and exploited this' (Miles & Austin, 2007, 34). It is impossible to say for sure if there really were cases of 'marauding gangs', 'child rape' and 'corpses left in dustbins' but no evidence appeared to substantiate these claims.

'And while many claim they happened, no witnesses, survivors or survivors' relatives have come forward. Nor has the source for the story of the murdered babies, or indeed their bodies, been found. And while the floor of the convention centre toilets were indeed covered in excrement, the Guardian found no corpses' (Younge, 2005).

Since Emile Durkheim's work at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century we are aware of the social bonds produced by the mutual moral indignation of social deviance.

Crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them. We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has just been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk of the event and to wax indignant in common (Durkheim, 1960 [1893], 102).

Yet a century later, in the aftermath of Katrina, we can see that these social relations are often formed within strict racially segregated communities. The (never verified) rumours of child rape and murder were circulated around the

world by the (predominantly white middle class) national and international media networks. This circulation of information reached millions as its social network is global. In contrast, the rumours that were circulating within the black community, were similarly unsubstantiated, but were crucially *contained within* that community, as the network did not extend externally. These rumours mirrored those of the mainstream media, as it demonized the opposing racial community, and placed responsibility of the situation upon the other. One of the main rumours circulating was that the (predominantly white) authorities did not prioritize the restructuring of the Levees after the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and Hurricane Betsy in 1965—which would have protected the most vulnerable (predominantly black working class) community of the Lower Ninth Ward, which was completely submerged when the levees broke. The rumours suggested that this was a conceived strategy by the authorities to clear away communities such as that of the Lower Ninth in order to rebuild on the land. Both communities used rumour to paint the other as the villain and as a character of danger. These racially specific circulations of rumour have a history that goes further than Katrina, through the Civil Rights period and back all the way to slavery, to the first meetings between Indigenous African and White Europeans. Rumours have acted as a source of resistance for both communities in the desire to strengthen the demonization of the other.

‘Hence, in pondering the meanings and functions of these rumors and contemporary legends, I defend the somewhat controversial position that they do not necessarily reflect pathological preoccupations among African-Americans. Rather, I make the case that these rumors and contemporary legends often function as tools of resistance for many of the folk that share them.’ (Turner, 1993, xvi)

Patricia Turner’s sociological investigation approaches the subject of ‘folklorist’ material, rumour and conspiracy related to the struggle of African Americans in the Southern States of The United States of America as a medium of cultural resistance and empowerment. Central to Turner’s argument, which asserts the



resistant potential of rumour and contemporary legend, is the notion of *difference*. The definition of ‘the other’ in opposition to oneself is crucial to understanding the defensive potential of rumour—in this case through the eyes of a repressed African American community. Turner looks at the first encounter between the white European and black sub-Saharan Africans as the first of a long series of ‘mutual misunderstandings’ which have had permanent repercussions. As each group gazed upon the other in disbelief, one group clothed, one fully undressed there was a necessity to understand the other (a crucial factor in any process of rumour construction). In the process of trying to assimilate each other into their own ‘world view’ both came to the same conclusion: the other was a cannibal. At the time of European colonialism, and to this day cannibalism has been associated with ‘gruesome’<sup>22</sup> and uncivilized behavior, it is important to highlight that cannibalism was as much a taboo for the enslaved as it was for the slavers. Being eaten by the other was the worst conceivable fate and this fear consolidated each community’s identity further from the other. Turner links these first ‘misunderstandings’ during the colonial period, to a more contemporary context of the oppressed black Americans during the civil rights era. Some of the rumours circulating within black communities during this period include:

Text 1: Church’s [fast food chicken franchise] is owned by the Ku Klux Klan [KKK], and they put something in it to make black men sterile.

Text 2: I remember hearing that the killings [of twenty-eight African-Americans in Atlanta] were related to genocide of the black race. The FBI was responsible and using the bodies for interferon research.

Text 5: Reebok is made in South Africa. All of the money they make off of those shoes goes to support whites in South Africa.

(Turner, 1993, 2)

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<sup>22</sup> See Armin Meiwes, Germany’s first citizen convicted of cannibalism. Although Meiwes’ victim consented to his own death, media reports termed the act as ‘gruesome’. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3286721.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3286721.stm) 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2003.

The consolidation of an identity based on fear of the other whilst a community is being oppressed, is an integral feature of resistance. It is a basic premise to any sociological discussion regarding nationalism, immigration, sub-culture, or migration. On a basic level, it produces an atmosphere of urgency, fight, determination and affirms who 'we' are in relation to 'them' (the opposition). This induces the collective acknowledgment of a movement that identifies inequality, and desires an alternative. As a result, rumour is closely entwined with political propaganda.<sup>23</sup>

Other repressed communities that have re-articulated the role of rumour and gossip in relation to their struggles include those acting within the politics of Gender and Sexuality. As we have seen, gossip's reviled relation to empirical and verifiable factualities has traditionally led to it being 'disparaged as an inferior form of conversation' (Melanie Tebbutt *Women's Talk*, 1995), and 'moralized as reprehensible activity' (Irit Rogoff, *Gossip as Testimony: A Post-Modern Signature*, 1996). Such characterizations have historically been heavily gendered. For example, Samuel Johnson's negative and sexist dictionary definition of a gossip as 'One who runs about tattling like women at a laying-in.' Scholarly approaches which have 'anthropologized', 'moralized', and suggested gossip as a by-product of celebrity culture, which have aimed to 'cleanse' gossip from its tarnished (and feminized) position have failed to identify, as Rogoff suggests, gossip's potential as a 'radical model of post-modern knowledge.' Such 'knowledge can be charted historically, by examining the transforming meaning of gossip over the centuries from positive associations of birth, and familial support.

Recent feminist scholarship, such as Melanie Tebbutt's *Women's Talk* (1995), explores the strengths and limitations of the role of gossip for working class women at the turn of the nineteenth century in the North of England. This period of industrial, economic and social change transformed familial social

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<sup>23</sup> For an interesting extended sociological study of rumours accusing six Jewish boutiques in Orleans, France, in 1969 of the abduction and disappearance of local girls, building on existing, socially embedded racial stereotypes see Morin, Edgar (1971). *Rumour in Orleans*. London: Blond.

structures and transformed the role of talk. In this case, male absence from the home induced *empowerment* in the form of strengthened female social networks, a support system, and an arena providing a vehicle of expression, as well as *control* through the moral codes imposed through peer pressures. Where Tebbutt looks at the socio-political consequences of the circulation of female *chatter* and anecdote in the domestic environment, academics such as Jane Gallop (*Anecdotal Theory*, 2002) and Nancy Miller (*Getting Personal*, 1991), legitimize the use of anecdotal and personal experience in the male dominated arena of theory. Moving from the largely theoretical essay 'Autobiography as Cultural Criticism' to an almost entirely personal history narrative 'My Father's Penis' Miller uses anecdote as a tool from which to 'read' theoretical possibilities. Jane Gallop goes further in this self-reflexive methodology by playing out her 'rather insistently sexual' anecdote regarding her being accused of sexual harassment in the classroom. Both these approaches, offering their different intensities of personal revelation propose a response to the 'ugliness' of 'unliterary theory' in order to produce a 'more literary theory' (Gallop, 2002, 2).

Within the discipline of Queer Studies, using both the habitual perceptions of homosexuality seen 'outside' circuits of critical exchange and gossip as a "low" discursive practice, Gavin Butt (2005) confronts traditional values of "proper" history in relation to rumour and gossip. Where Henry Abelove (*Deep Gossip*) sees gossip's immutable potential as an 'indisputable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered' (Abelove, 2003, xii) following his interpretation of Allan Ginsberg's poetic elegy to the late Frank O'Hara, Butt suggests that further than this, gossip holds significance as a discourse of Art History, or, as 'the Hardcore of Art History', first suggested by John Giorno. Focusing specifically on informal exchanges regarding the New York Art world of the late 1960s and 1970s Butt acknowledges gossip as a valuable *historical* resource, capable of representing "lesser" modes of communicative activity such as discussions of homosexuality, (within the discourses of American Art of 1960s and 1970s) providing a theoretical framework where the unheard can be heard with authority. The relationship between 'low' modes of communicative activity such as gossip (as a subject) and the contrasting authorities of language in the

academy provides Butt with the opportunity not simply to acknowledge these possible conflicts, but to form a methodology consistent with these juxtapositions.

**The Ephemeral Nature of talk.  
Power, Performance, Act, and Gesture.**

The ephemeral nature of talk is political. Even today, the dyadic, face-to-face conversation is still rarely documented. Where email, text messaging, and phone conversations are produced in relation to a network and a console, susceptible to surveillance, monitoring<sup>24</sup> or documentation—talk largely disappears after each word. Its archive is managed through the individual processes of *Levelling*, *Sharpening* and *Assimilation*<sup>25</sup> and is dependent on subjective memory. The performative instability of talk seems to contrast greatly with the established forms of archive founded in western historicism.

Largely concerned with the ephemeral nature of the life of performance and its relation to documentation and the archive, scholars such as Peggy Phelan (*Unmasked*, 1993) and Rebecca Schneider (*Performance Remains*, 2002) have questioned our usual emphasis on visibility, representation, reproduction, and history in order to consider that of the invisible, non-documentable, non-reproductive, trace of activity. Further to this position of performance as a process of disappearance and ‘vanishment’, Schneider asks if ‘this antithesis of saving’ limits ourselves to an understanding of performance ‘predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural) logic of the archive?’ (Schneider, 2001, 100). Schneider proposes that history should be seen as a repeated site of knowing, be that through performance, speech, or through reading and that this resituates the site of knowing as body-to-body

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed, recent study of the history of technological developments in the recording of sound and voice, please see *An Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* by Jonatahan Sterne (2003).

<sup>25</sup> ‘As rumour travels, it tends to grow shorter, more concise, more easily grasped and told. In successive versions fewer words are used and fewer details are mentioned’ (Allport & Postman, 1948, 75). According to Allport & Postman, this shortening is due to a process of *levelling* (information loss), and *sharpening* (emphasis / exaggeration of information that remains), and *assimilation* (subjective memory of information).

transmission. Phelan states that performance ‘becomes itself through disappearance’ (Phelan, 1993, 146). This claims authoritative status for the invisible performative acts of idle talk regardless of their immaterial (traditionally non-archived or archival) status. The dangers of promoting the potential capabilities of idle talk as a generalized theme is again noted by Phelan and Salamensky—where Phelan suggests that simply making the marginalized and unheard *visible* is not enough to enhance their political power, Salamensky (*Talk, Talk, Talk*, 2001) acknowledges the dangers of considering all talk as ‘free expression’. Phelan suggests that it is rather a case of who is “Visible to whom? Who is looking and who is seen?” and for Salamensky the positives of everyday talk ‘in fact may merely stand as one part of our constitution-by-and-in-language—our thrown-into-language in which being and talking, identity and otherness, are inextricably interwoven’ (Salamensky, 2001, 31/32).

The acknowledgement of the positive potential of the act of being and talking, awakening an awareness of an otherwise repressed presence is central to recent Italian Marxist thought concentrated on the importance of the worker, or individual, *asserting* his/her own voice, *within* the present period of vast economic, industrial, and technological transformation, as a form of resistance against ‘imperialist’ network power. Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri (*Multitude*, 2005) isolate the occupation of the appropriate medium of resistance as an integral tool to an oppressed community confronting an imposing authority. This form is a mirror of what it opposes: *networks* of contemporary communication. While Hardt & Negri highlight the resistant capabilities of the *structures*, which facilitate the encounters, and exchanges of contemporary discourses, Paolo Virno (*A Grammar of the Multitude*, 2004) isolates the actual role of speech as a site of linguistic identity and collectivity. Virno notes an increasingly mobile and versatile, post-Fordist labour force that has re-introduced language into the work place—inducing collective solutions to practical problems, flexible social bonds and pooling of experience and knowledge. Virno challenges Heidegger’s depreciation of idle talk (Heidegger, 1962, 213) and claims it not only directly concerns labour and social production but also makes the worker visible through speech— represented by the *presence* of his/her discourse in the work place. The

relationship between the speaker, his/her expressive capacity and the oppression imposed by cultural / political forms of language is further formalized by Giorgio Agamben's work (*Means Without Ends*, 2000) following Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, 1973. Here, the previously considered oppressive alienation of language through the spectacle is seen to have 'positive possibilities' creating a linguistic separation, where singular authorities and specific contents fail while the *act* and *process* of communication are revealed. The isolation of these formal capacities of *Networks* of resistance (Hardt and Negri), individual visibility through speech (Virno), and the separation of linguistic content from form (Agamben) provides theoretical material to suggest possibilities in reading popular, contemporary language as an abstract *form*. To familiarize ourselves with both the presence and absence of these words occupying networks, we should first travel below and follow the rumblings underground.

## CHAPTER 2.

**Voices in Tunnels.**

*Action in silence and the resistance of networks.*

*There are no words spoken in the carriage. The tube is numbed with the sound of movement and metal—materials collide, propelling this group of individuals who face and ignore each other through the darkness. We share this deep underground space, dug a hundred years ago, and as I stand and look down the carriage, the majority sit hiding from each other, with newspapers pulled to their faces. This collective gesture forms symmetrical newspaper screens either side of the walkway which act like temporary hoarding sites— tessellating images and bold text that mirror and repeat and double and triplicate across the walkway. Celebrity faces replace the busts of the seated readers as they sway in motion to the mechanical rattle of wheels and long lines of steel. These pixellated faces look across at repeated images of themselves and watch as their smiles deform in fingered folds and newspaper wrinkles.*

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The political implications of the physical *occupation* of the modern tube network offers an invitation to discuss the collective voice of a public as they occupy the systems which are presented as forms of *freedom* in the present Neo-Liberal Democracy. How do the individual actions within systems of transportation, economics and communications act as liberated or subordinated experiences— and how is this represented in the presence and absence of informal communication?

To approach these questions, this chapter will focus on examples of contemporary communication, notably *chatter* and *idle talk*. I will first look in further detail at the value judgements used to condemn idle talk and chatter in the work of Soren Kierkegaard to demonstrate criticism of informal discourse, and

then compare this critique with Guy Debord's work on the spectacle. The spectacle presents the individual's alienation from language as a central theme—this separation has been noted by both Giorgio Agamben, who reveals that this separation exposes the *form* of language as a 'positive possibility' and Paulo Virno who notes the performative act of communication as a potentially productive outcome of *chatter* in the work-place. I will use both these approaches as examples of the possible positive responses to Kierkegaard's original criticisms of chatter. I then outline the use of contemporary communication networks as a site of resistance and how this might relate to the recent exponential growth of on-line communication evident in web 2.0.

The chapter identifies the materialization of talk separated from content, and presents the formalization of chatter as an abstract function. The occupation of these systems of communication and movement is my starting point.

### **A Sound from the Depths.**

The London tube network covers 620 square miles and uses 254 miles of railway. It runs deep underground—a human vessel contributing to the circulatory system of the city's subterranea. This network of conduit weaves electricity cables, gas pipes, communication lines, sewers and water ducts alongside the passage of people through tunnels in the darkness. Here, individuals sit in carriages in silence, adjacent to coaxial cables that transfer the words of those above. As passengers in the rush hour sit without words, the conduit through which they travel screams and shouts—constantly pulsating and moving with loudness and shunts and bangs. This sound of the machine tearing through the veins of the city drowns all else, and as the network circulates at dizzying speeds, in a multiplicity of depths, the voices of those that the system transports are lost. There is no speech on the underground, no talk during the commuter rush hour. We are both together and very much alone.

Following the events at rush hour on the 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005, the London Underground commute represents a site of potential terror. Directly after the



attacks—the occupation of this system became a political act. Londoners’ resolute ‘Blitz Mentality’ was hailed worldwide as they stoically re-occupied the transport system. This act of defiance, represented through the continuation of the daily commute to work, became the immediate site of defence against an enemy with no obvious geographical location against which to retaliate. As with the attacks of 9/11, the atrocities are marked by their dates and immediately reprised by the re-occupation of the system under threat—desks are occupied, telephones are used, and computer keyboards are tapped and prodded.

In London, this show of national strength is represented by a collective silence in the carriages of the tube system. There are no raised voices of anger here. The continued working of the machine, and the deafening noise of its function mark this response.

This site, where the public now sit in silence and deferred fear was once a place of chatter and refuge. During both the First and Second World Wars, the London Underground was used as shelter from German bombers intent on destroying the capital. During the Blitz in World War II, the underground provided sanctuary for great numbers of people. As a result of Governmental failures to disseminate effective practical information on the construction of domestic bomb shelters, the public turned to their local underground system for safety and protection. They entered the tunnels that had been forbidden by the authorities, and occupied the platforms as the trains continued; James Richards describes ([www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history)) how the Government was forced to respond to this pressure and provided bunk beds and toilets for the tube dwellers. Although the conditions were extremely basic—the ‘stench of urine was noticeable, as well as human smells’ (Ackroyd 2000, 565) there were also accounts, such as that of the Mayers family who describe ‘...a very warm community atmosphere and a sense of camaraderie’ ([www.bbc.co.uk/ww2r](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2r)). The tunnels became places of communal activity, ‘Evening classes were held in some tube shelters; and at Bethnal Green station, a special branch of the public library was opened, with 4000 books for the shelterers to borrow’ (Palmer, 2000, 144). This activity and discussion produced chatter and noise that even led to regular periods of song

(Palmer, 2000, 141). This activated community could be heard from the streets above and this noise had the power to worry the authorities above ground.

...the experience of living underground encouraged an anti-authoritarian and egalitarian spirit, as if the conditions above the ground could be reversed. Here, out of sight, radicalism might flourish... So those under the ground instilled an element of fear in those who remained above it; it resembles the ancient superstitious fear of the miner, as an emblem of the dark world in which he works. It is the fear of the depths' (Ackroyd, 2000, 565).

The 'Underground' is a term inevitably linked with resistance, mostly as a result of the idea of an activity being hidden from the authority above ground. In The United States, the Underground Railroad, which was used by slaves to escape to more liberal minded states in the US, Canada and Mexico during the first half of the nineteenth century, was in fact an invisible network of transportation routes above ground, using a secret infrastructure of rail road, trains, and safe houses often administered by the Abolitionists. The underground resistance movements such as the French resistance during the second World War were rarely literally *underground*—more unseen. Whereas those involved in the many WWII prisoner of war tunnel escapes, as well as the Sarajevo Tunnel (1992-1995) used to gain access to supplies from the UN controlled Sarajevo Airport during the 'Sarajevo Siege', literally occupied the space in the darkness to pursue the possibility of freedom. 'Swampy', the nick- name given to Daniel Hooper of Newbury Berkshire, demonstrated the political function of the occupation of an underground network by digging tunnels in the path of the proposed A30 extension in Fairmile, Devon in 1997.

### **The Sparkle of white teeth in the darkness.**

Since the collapse of the UK mining industry, the majority of today's subterranean tunnels are occupied by workers who follow pathways through the

‘dark world’ to get to their desks. As commuters fill the tunnels during rush hour, it is their mysterious autonomous silence that characterises their collective identity. These same tunnels are now occupied by the rhythm of mechanical noise—wheels against steel track, carriage against carriage, *creaks* and *cracks* that echo along the tunnels they move through. This is the rhythmic sound of the medium through which they travel, and this audibility of the *form* of transportation is the ambient sound that accompanies the silent consumption of celebrity smiles, with their shining white teeth.

The smiles are all the same—identical in fact. As many consumers of the news have moved online, newspapers have seen a decrease in sales resulting in falling advertising revenue. The resulting increase in newspaper prices coincided with the introduction of free newspaper tabloids produced by Associated Newspapers (*London Lite* and *Metro*), and News International (*thelondonpaper*). As these papers trade in the subjects of celebrity gossip and sport they often use the same images; these celebrity faces are all over the transport system, looking out from rubbish bins, and peering up on seats and from the floor.

As *London Lite* and *thelondonpaper* (both 2006-2009), have now disappeared, *Metro* and *The Evening Standard* currently cater for the daytime and evening (respectively) commuter readership. *Metro* was the first free daily and witnessed a rapidly growing readership of one million in 2005. It now prints a million copies a day but has a readership of 1.7m. This increased readership in relation to copies produced is due to the fact that issues are recycled. One of the key features in the success of free newspapers is determined by the public transport system that circulates them. These papers are found in metropolitan areas throughout Britain, not simply because their readership is restricted to urban areas, but because this particular media depends on a *network* for distribution. The average reader spends between 18- 22 minutes engaged with the *Metro* newspaper ([www.rrs.co.uk/top\\_line\\_readership](http://www.rrs.co.uk/top_line_readership)), which is an average tube journey of 6-10 stops. This minimal reading period requires simple storylines and related imagery—the content of the newspapers are produced in relation to the form of the network. The quick celebrity gossip stories become an accepted narrative that accompanies the subterranean tube journey. In the silence of the passengers—it is

these stories of celebrity, un-trustworthy politicians, and heroic sportsmen that occupy the minds of the passengers as they move through the network. Are these individuals passively consuming an imposed narrative external to their own? How can we determine the political implications of this silent act of consumption, which at first seems complicit and subordinated? What is the resonance of the *occupation* of the networks that constructs the capitalist economic system that we inhabit, and to what extent does the presence or absence of our own voices within this system affect a political currency of communication? To approach these questions I want to specifically look at language—using the underground as a metaphor for a politicized network where the relationship between the sound of voices, subordination, complicity and resistance are played out.

As we have seen, the resolute occupation of the underground after the attacks of July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 represented an act of defiance. Its power determined by authority—the media and the government—that declared its value as a political gesture. Yet, this act is more a gesture of *compliance* than of *resistance*, as it contributes to the language of the *spectacle*, as we shall investigate further later. The example of Bethnal Green during the Second World War demonstrates an occupation of the same system but in opposition to the orders of authority, and is characterised by noise, chatter, activity, song and laughter. These actions in silence and in sound can be seen to represent binary, collective means of communication, producing opposite political results, which we could generalise as one *subordinated* by authority and one *confronting* authority. I am interested in another reading which sits somewhere between the two, and is crucial in interpreting contemporary forms of mass communications. Before I arrive at this I want to look at a brief, recent genealogy of the relationship between a public, communication, and *noise*.

### **Quiet Crowds.**

The public occupation of the underground stations during WWII orchestrated by the individuals themselves against the will of the authorities resonated in a

collective sound. The murmur of discussion, cackles of laughter, cries of tears and song until late at night competed with the rattle of the machines which carried passengers through the tunnels of London throughout the Blitz. This noise was being produced at a time of potential invasion, when collective spirit is often enhanced. Yet, historically we have become quieter in public. Although information, communication, advertising and commerce has been played out orally in public throughout history, descriptions during the eighteenth century present illustrations of the sound of information exchanges before the age of mechanical reproduction.

The streets held far more noise than this generation has known. Craftsmen worked in open shops or sheds. There was hammering and planing, sawing and grinding. Women did their needlework at the door, and cried gossip across the street. Apprentices bawled “What d’ye lack?” and cried their particular goods. Trumpets blared, and musicians played against each other. There was the thunder of iron wheels on stone, the clatter of horses, the crying of the ballad-singer and the hawker, the wailing of the beggar, the back-chat of the quarrelsome, the turmoil made by drovers with their flocks and herds, the insults of carters, the lashing of whips, and, on a dozen occasions of the day, the ringing of bells (Burke, 1940, 3).

Today, in technologized parts of the world, face-to-face talk is becoming more rare, as social and economic networks are stretched around the globe and developments in education have led to relatively high levels of literacy. Advances in communication technology have led to an exponential use of text-based communication systems such as text messaging, email and social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and Myspace. This communication—based on reading and writing is a relatively recent innovation in the genealogy of human tools of communication, and has led to relatively antisocial forms of communication (Emler, 1995, 123). As these technologies grow—what were once seen as specialised, occasional activities are becoming the dominant form of communication. These technological advancements increase our socialisation, as

they increase the speed and breadth of the networks in which we communicate, whilst the tools that facilitate this network, often simultaneously physically separate individuals from one another. This experience is a kind of schizophrenic oxymoron: a solitary socialization.

As with the underground rattle of wheels on steel, the sound that accompanies the majority of our communication is one related to the machines that transfer our words. The tap of the keys as I write now, form a splattering of light *patter* that meets and weaves with other words produced by fingers in the library in which I write. The *beep* sound of incorrect spelling, constructed in software to guide our language and the ‘personalised’ *buzzes* that announce text messages, telephone calls and email arrivals identify the *action* of communication as our *content* becomes ever more quiet. We don’t hear the words or content—we hear the symbol that announces a communicative act has taken place.

Throughout history communication has been accompanied by its own announcement; from gestures in talk, the scratches of pen on paper, envelopes and letter boxes, telephone rings and type-writer clatterings, but today these forms of announcement are growing so exponentially they are becoming very much a *part of language*. Today, we often *read* the communicative content in silence and *hear* the sound that represents the act. Does the disappearance of the sound of content mark its absence? And if so is this a problem? If we acknowledge the quietness of our collective chatter and the silent complicity of everyday media consumption on the tube commute, does this collective silence represent a failure of collective expression?

An answer has been proposed by the introduction of the communication ‘revolution’ known as web 2.0. This recent change in on-line activity is described by wikipedia as ‘a social phenomenon embracing an approach to generating and distributing Web content itself, characterized by open communication, decentralization of authority, freedom to share and re-use, and the market as a conversation’ ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_2.0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0)). The movement between web 1.0 and web 2.0 has been discussed in political terms. This transition was characterized by handing the control and function of websites from the market to the user. The first generation of web activity was associated with the dot.com

boom of the 1990s and then its resulting bust. Web 1.0 offered a new location for companies to trade, and was controlled by the companies themselves. Web 2.0 is characterized by the user's ability to construct and personalize his/her own identity as homepages or profiles, and to share this information over the Internet. Face book is the most vivid example of this, attracting 200,000 new members per day, allowing mass communication and the ability to upload images across the globe.

Crucially, social networking presents a binary political potential, of logistics and language. Firstly, Web 2.0 offers a communication infrastructure that creates unparalleled access to disseminate information and to contact individuals at relatively low costs—facilitating a variety of functions that have political significance. As we shall see, this practical infrastructure has enabled both individuals and political organisations to act in increasingly informed, economic and effective forms. Yet, the majority of communication taking place on social networking sites is the talk itself—the seemingly insignificant words that are exchanged every day. This chatter can also be interpreted in political terms, and to do so we should look further at the political agency of web 2.0.

### **The Politics of web 2.0.**

Before focussing on chatter present in web 2.0, let us look at the logistical potential of Internet-based communication technologies and their direct political affects:

Current Technology gives politicians campaigning tools they never had before: witness the 62,000 Barack Obama supporters gathered on Facebook without the candidate lifting a finger... Organising is swifter and easier: electronic mobilisation is said to have swung elections in Spain, South Korea and the Philippines. In the US, the Howard Dean Presidential campaign of 2004 saw the birth of “net roots” activism, collecting enough

donations from individuals to match the megabucks of big corporate givers and lobby groups' (Freedland, 2007, 27).

Not only are candidates campaigning for positions of authority such as the President of the United States benefiting from web 2.0. So too are smaller groups with less popularised causes 'such as Avaaz or the Genocide Intervention Network, which focuses on Darfur and began with a student site' (Freedland, 2007, *ibid*).

Social Network sites also have political agency in times of an information vacuum. This is evident when the media is strictly controlled by the State as with China, Iran (Rahimi, 2008) and Burma<sup>26</sup> or due to the lack of a functioning national media structure as with present day Iraq. In these territories of restricted information, the Internet and social networking sites allow users to access information regarding situations that arise, but that were not being represented in the media<sup>27</sup>. There is also a plethora of political online forums both inside and outside social network sites connecting individuals who wish to discuss issues.

Yet, the primary form of online dialogue present in social networking sites are the informal greetings and comments such as 'what happened last night', 'can't wait 'till my holiday', 'what are you doing at the weekend?' These are quick, sharp verbal deposits—there is no time to linger on a subject. Crucially, social networking sites are based upon the construction of 'profiles'; these types of functions represent the idea of a 'user controlled' network facilitating individual 'freedom'—very much compatible with the Neo-Liberal system from which the Internet blossomed. There is value attached to a user's social profile, as it acts as a currency of comparison between members; numbers of friends, message activity on a user's 'wall', uploaded images of holidays, weddings, babies etc, all comprise an illustration of social activity and economic status. The majority of this text-based communication takes the form of quick, anecdotal

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<sup>26</sup> Two recent examples of the isolationist policy of the Burmese government are relevant here. Firstly, accounts of the violence used against Burmese Monks demonstrating in March 2008, and then again months later, in May 2008, the Burmese government refused foreign aid following hurricane Nargis (Denby, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> See [www.usahidi.com/](http://www.usahidi.com/).



references to recent or future social events. This content is not a specialised language restricted to the Internet—it is an integral characteristic of face-to-face informal discourse or gossip, the major difference being the temporal lag (see Crystal, 2001 and Chapter Four) imposed online.

Some of the first work on the categories and function of informal talk was conducted by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Working from case studies in the Tobriand Islands of North East Guinea, he proposed that speech could be separated into two distinct forms determined by mode of action. Firstly there is talk directly related to a task: language that acts as a collective tool of instruction to achieve a certain aim— fishing in groups, for example. Secondly, there is communication without intent or specific aim:

A mere phrase of politeness, in use as much among savage tribes as in a European drawing-room, fulfils a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant. Inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things—all such are exchanged, not in order to inform, not in this case to connect people in action, certainly not in order to express any thought (Malinowski, 1946, 314).

Malinowski terms this communication as *Phatic Communion*—talk that does not convey meaning or ‘express thought.’ For Malinowski, Phatic communion produces ‘sociability’, creating ‘the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other’ (Malinowski, 1946, 314) acting ‘not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action.’ (Malinowski, Ibid). This division mirrors the distinction between the logistical function (Obama, Petitions, donations etc) and the sociable function of web 2.0. (Everyday *chatter*).

In his essay *Gossip, Reputation, Adaptation*, Nicholas Emler (1996) states that 80 to 90 percent of the content of face-to-face conversation focuses on the social world inhabited by us and the people we know, rather than external matters such as world events, politics, religion, ideas etc. About two thirds of this person-specific content was termed ‘self disclosure’ (Jourard and Lasakow, 1958, 56) the

majority of which referred to what the speaker or known others were doing or had been doing. The activities on Facebook seem to correspond directly to this description of gossip. There is very little transfer of external or “cosmopolite” content—the majority being “localite”.

Jonathan Freedland does not focus on the localite communicative exchanges that make up a large proportion of Internet communication. Instead, he focuses on the Internet as a formal device of organisation (as do Hardt and Negri, in *Multitude*, 2005, who we shall look at later on in this chapter). Freedland points to a revolutionary change in ‘the very meaning of politics’. But it is important to note that he links meaning with *organisation*, not with informal, *phatic* communication. The examples that he uses such as online support to a candidacy, petitions, or donations do not constitute a communicative exchange—as they are singular acts of allegiance or support represented by a *click* on a mouse. The function here is to mark ones presence in relation to an idea, movement or concept but not necessarily to discuss it. I want to respond to Freedland’s premise that ‘The Internet will revolutionize the very meaning of politics’ in relation to the localite exchanges that are occurring rather than the organisational tools that are offered. To do this we must look at possible readings of *chatter*.

### **‘Indolent chatter’.**

During a period of late romanticism Soren Kierkegaard’s writings confronted some of the social problems he saw resulting from technological changes associated with the Industrial Revolution. One of the symptoms of this technologically transforming age according to Kierkegaard, was a ‘levelling’ of society, illustrated most profoundly by *chatter*. As opposed to an age of revolution, his *Present Age* was one, which produced a detrimental levelling of a public with no individual voices— simply a chattering, apathetic mass. Kierkegaard wrote his critique ‘*Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age, A Literary Review*’ in 1846 yet many of his claims are relevant to discussion concerning technology, politics and communication today.

Half a century after the French Revolution, Kierkegaard laments the apathy of an ‘abstract’ public which is dominated by the media and stripped of all ‘passion’. ‘A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertising and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere. In the present age a rebellion is of all things, the most unthinkable.’ (Kierkegaard, 1940 [1846], 6). Kierkegaard deplors ‘levelling’, as it produces an inert mass with no polarised reaction to anything—either ‘good’ or ‘evil’, and as a result, according to Kierkegaard, this public relaxes in indolence. Kierkegaard’s writings on chatter focus on an evaluative comparison with ‘essential speech’, which is characterised by ‘inwardness’. As Kierkegaard declares that ‘silence is inwardness’, he proposes silent, inward thought and communication as ‘essential’ and chatter as a product of ‘levelling’ and a representation of the nullifying *Present Age*. Kierkegaard sees chattering as an interruption of ‘essential speech’. The individual that can avoid talk and chatter will not have an abundance of things to talk about but instead, will have just one thing of magnitude. It seems apparent that as a Christian, Kierkegaard is referring to speech that is essential in its silence—an intensity of inwardness that is more representative of prayer.

When individuals are not turned inward in quiet contentment, in inner satisfaction, in religious sensitiveness, but in relation of reflection and orientated to externalities and to each other, when no important event ties the loose threads together in the unanimity of a crucial change—then chattering begins (Kierkegaard, 2000 [1843], 91).

Here, he proposes that the events that hold resonance for a public and ignite discussion, talk, and chatter only act as subjects which reveal chatter’s emptiness when they are no longer relevant. Kierkegaard accepts that a public can be grabbed by an event of collective interest, but when these significant events are over, chatter remains, and this is its failure. There is no collective consciousness to distinguish between what is ‘important’ and what is not.

Kierkegaard’s criticism of chatter is largely directed towards the society that produces the levelling—a society, dominated by the press which induces

indecisive deliberation, reflection, and individual decadence. For Kierkegaard, the present age that he lived in produced a structure, which levelled everything, including language into an inert community.

Formally the ruler, the man of excellence, the men of prominence all had his own view; the others were so settled and unquestioning that they did not dare or could not have an opinion. Now everyone can have an opinion, but there must be a lumping together numerically in order to have it. Twenty-five signatures to the silliest notion is an opinion. The most cogent opinion of the most eminent mind is a paradox. Public opinion is an inorganic something, an abstraction (Kierkegaard, 1846, 99).

Kierkegaard suggests—as with the online political function of social networking used to facilitate polls, public backing, petitions and funding—that the systems presented to ‘revolutionise’ (Freedland, 2007, 27) politics and society as a whole, can in fact restrain individual subjectivities by grouping opinion together. To counter this, Kierkegaard sees the individual as the true site of ‘cogent opinion’.<sup>28</sup> The emphasis for Kierkegaard is on the individual, as it is manifested in the moment of prayer and the fear of the indolence of the levelled public.

The advantage of the human being over the animal is the ability to speak, but in relation to God, wanting to speak can easily become the corruption of the human being, who is able to speak. God is in heaven and the human being is on earth and therefore can hardly converse. God is infinite wisdom; what the human being knows is idle chatter; therefore they can hardly converse (Kierkegaard, 1849, 334).

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note Kierkegaard’s deliberately contradictory position. He does not conform to an all-encompassing understanding of anything as he moves between many assertive pronouncements. One moment he declares the importance of a qualitative judgment of communication (chatter versus prayer) the next he devalues the authority of the philosopher himself to the extent that he disguises his own authorship through the use of pseudonyms. This approach owes much to his following of Socrates and is highly appropriate to a study of informal language such as gossip and rumour which has no empirical authority—often contradicting itself repeatedly.

Kierkegaard asserts that the *Present Age* produces chatter—pulling the individual away from ‘essential’ speech, and in so doing constructing an indolent, subordinated and impotent public. The subordination of a public in relation to technological advancements has also been described more contemporaneously in terms of *spectacle*.

### **The Subordination of the Spectacle.**

Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973) is the central thesis concerning the idea of spectacle, offering an account of the oppressive relationship that is constructed between the public, communication technologies and politics. Jonathan Crary proposes the re-articulation of spectacle in relation to evolving contemporary contexts as ‘an indispensable means of revealing as related what would otherwise appear as disparate and unconnected phenomena’ (Crary, 1989, 97).

The idea of spectacle is indispensable to my work here as it attaches a political reading to transforming means of communication. In this case, two decades on from Crary, rather than assessing spectacle in relation to communicative forms in the late 1980s (Crary). I want to look 20 years later, at current forms of ‘everyday’ speech, such as web 2.0 and the Internet in terms of the linguistic alienation inherent to spectacle.

Crary notes the absence of a specific genealogy of the spectacle in Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, and points to Debord’s own declaration in 1967 that ‘the spectacle was barely forty years old’ (Crary, 1989, 100) in order to trace its conception to the late 1920s. Crary points out the potential significance of this date as ‘the year 1927 saw the technological perfection of television’ (Crary, *ibid*). At the same time as Vladimir Zworikin was putting the final touches to a new model of transmission and circulation in the United States, Nazi Germany had researched the effectiveness of using television as a tool of propaganda.

Guy Debord states that the spectacle is not a separate subordinating power, which restricts individual expression, but it actually *becomes* individual

expression—the language of the individual is colonized by the spectacle. Debord proposes the spectacle as a system of domination, which does not subordinate by replacing a *public* voice with the voice of *the media* (Bourdieu, 1998) but states that this domination is so because it *becomes* the language of the public.

The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: “Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.” The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances (Debord, 1994 [1973]), 15).

Debord suggests that the spectacle actively separates language from the masses as language becomes defined, controlled and produced through the ‘appearance’ of the spectacle. The hijacking of the language of the individual by the spectacle leaves a separation between self and language which leaves language as a *form* of communicativity rather than a vessel in which to carry direct meaning, content, or intent. If we are subjected to, and controlled by the spectacle then this separation is driven by the technologies we use to communicate. Through the interaction with these technologies, not only has the spectacle isolated the individual from ‘inner’ subjective means of expression but it has also isolated the individual from an ‘outer’ social space of physical interaction. This presents the ultimate possibility of a complete isolation.

THE REIGNING ECONOMIC system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn; all goods proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of the ‘lonely crowd.’ The spectacle is continually rediscovering its own basic assumptions – and each time in a more concrete manner (Debord, 1994 [1973], 22).

By looking at Kierkegaard and Debord we have seen two accounts of a ‘levelled’ and ‘isolated’ public—distanced from its own linguistic expression. Kierkegaard signals this process of levelling, as an abstracted form of individual ‘cogent opinion’. For Debord, this abstraction creates isolation through the spectacle. Both Kierkegaard and Debord present these abstractions and separations in language as desperate situations, yet these formal distances which separate language from the individual can be seen to produce other possible readings which are not necessarily restricted to a negative account.

### **The Possibility in Separation.**

Giorgio Agamben sees Debord’s spectacle as ‘the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery of a society that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet’ (Agamben, 2000, 73). Although Agamben acknowledges that the language of spectacle produced by capitalism<sup>29</sup> is ‘the very communicativity and linguistic being of humans’ (Agamben, 2000, 82) he asserts that ‘the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility’ (Agamben, 2000, 83). This possibility, which can be used to confront the apparent oppression of the spectacle in Debord’s terms, is based on the principle of a linguistic *alienation* produced by spectacle.<sup>30</sup> This alienation creates a linguistic separation where singular authorities and specific contents fail, while the *act* and *process* of communication are revealed. ‘The age in which we live in is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence—to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language itself, as well as the very fact of speaking’ (Agamben, 2000, 85). This *fact* of speaking is a consequence of what Agamben suggests is

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<sup>29</sup> Agamben cites the importance of dominance rather than an analysis of the term ‘capitalism’ by suggesting any word defining social domination will do: ‘or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today’ (Agamben, 2000, 82).

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that I am focussing on a *linguistic* alienation informed by the work of Italian post-Marxist thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben and Paulo Virno who have discussed alienation from *language and speech* as well as traditional Marxist ideas concerned with alienation from production and surplus.

the oppressive driving force of all nations on Earth—‘the alienation of linguistic being’.

As the spectacle becomes the author of the words spoken by the individual, the words themselves stop *belonging* to the speaker. Although this constructs an empty vessel of speech, it also means that the speaker is only engaged in an *act* of speaking, not the construction which may be bound to a specific content or truth. This abstract notion suggests that language as a form of communication begins to emerge in its most essential state when the speaker is not using it to convey a specific meaning. What is important here is the relationship between content and speaker. In this case, the speaker is alienated from the language he or she is using and this distance allows the speaker to experience the *act* of language, its sounds, words and its grammar—not necessarily its content. The revelation of *form* as a positive and potentially liberatory vehicle of communication— free from symbolic aggressors<sup>31</sup> of specific content and action, further implicates the role of idle talk or chatter on web 2.0.

Although web 2.0 offers a territory that acts as an alternative site of mass communication that is being monopolised by the media (Bourdieu, 1998), the subject matter seems to be the function of communication itself, not its content. Social networking sites such as Facebook formalises communication in two ways. Firstly, through features such as ‘The Poke’ (see Chapter Four), where a virtual physical presence is acknowledged, and secondly, through the presence of posts and comments that respond to the last post or comment made by other users. Here the act of response seems more important than the discussion of the particularities of the post, or comment. These actions prioritise the act of communication over the exchange of specific material. This absence of detailed, subject specific information would at first suggest a lack of political currency, but does this non-transfer or contentless communication represent a political void?

Peter Fenves, in his book *Chatter: Kierkegaard, language and history* acknowledges this form of communication as ‘utterances [that] are neither garbled nor indecipherable nor meaningless; rather, they have become, for all their clarity,

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<sup>31</sup> A term used by Roland Barthes to describe the uncontrollable subjective interpretation of any word or sentence uttered; see *The Rustle of Language*, 1975, 76-83, which I will focus on in detail in Chapter Three.



idle vehicles, vehicles without content, vehicles in which “nothing” is said.’ Fenves’ response to Kierkegaard’s writing on chatter, defines communication as a form; as language that exists separately from meaning:

The vehicles of communication [that] carry nothing of *weight*. Communication continues to take place, and its pace may very well accelerate, but everything is still somehow idle. In such non-movement- or incessant movement at a standstill- empty and idle talk finds its point of departure: the vehicle of communication, language as structure and act, remains in operation, but it no longer *works*, for whatever it carries is somehow “nothing” (Fenves, 1993, 2).

Fenves uses ‘weight’ as a qualitative term in relation to Kierkegaard’s portrayal of a levelled public exchanging worthless babble—chatter is light and ‘cogent opinion’ is heavy. This materialized interpretation of meaning is again consistent with Fama the goddess of rumour as the winged creature, who glides in the wind above roof-tops and streets spreading gossip and rumour. For Fenves, this lightweight chatter reveals ‘language as structure and act’ void of *heavy* content. Yet, what is the *weight* of the form of language, or to pose a question paraphrasing Fenves’ words: what is the *weight* of the *vehicle* of communication?

This division between content and form has potentially different political readings. It could be argued that by assuming language’s autonomous existence as a form distinct from what is being said, one is disassociating ownership of the content from its speaker—that chatter, idle talk and gossip construct a language that is something other than the speakers’ speech—a form of speech other than ‘speech over which they could claim ownership and whose results could justly be called their own work’ (Fenves, 1993, 2). Thereby disempowering the individual’s facility of mass expression and communication. Yet, contrary to this approach, this lack of ‘meaning’ does not affect the identity of the community that talks and gossips. In fact it activates a territorial occupation of communication regardless of what it is transferring. Furthermore, as we have discussed with Agamben, this

removal of content reveals language more than any subjective mantra, ideal or philosophy as it reveals the *form* of language it self.

“Chatter” is pure language. Purified of meaning as well as intentionality, expressionless to the point of standing in for “inwardness” itself, “chatter” is precisely the defilement of the difference through which Kierkegaard sought to secure communication from the threat of making the exceptional and the unique into the common (Fenves, 1993, 233).

### ***Good Gossip.***

Both Fenves and Agamben point to means of communication as a significant factor in questioning the restricted voice of the public proposed by Kierkegaard and Debord. What at first seems like apocalyptic treatises on the state of the present age can be re-articulated into sites of potentially positive acts of communication. The revelation of the *form* of communication allows Fenves to isolate chatter as a ‘pure language’ whereby its lack of expression ‘stands in’ for the inwardness that Kierkegaard cherishes. For Agamben the linguistic alienation produced by the spectacle allows speech to be *itself*. In turn he proposes the possibility of ‘a community with neither presuppositions nor a State’, the citizens of which, ‘will enter the paradise of language and will come out of it uninjured’ (Agamben, 2000, 85). Agamben sees this paradise as a new territory, not unlike Jonathan Freedland’s notion of an online, borderless electorate where a territory of networks is constructed through quick informal acts of online communication, chatter and gossip.

Let us look at Debord’s depiction of the ‘oppressor’. ‘THE SPECTACLE IS NOT a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord, 1994 [1973], 12). If the spectacle is the social relationship that is mediated by images, then we can presume that an example of this could be seen in the consumption of celebrity gossip on the London underground that we saw at the beginning of this Chapter. According to

Debord, the omniscience of the spectacle does not lie with the images themselves (of Kate Moss or Brittany Spears), but with the interaction between the people *through* celebrity. Moral, ethical and ‘political’ issues are played out *through* the narratives being consumed (Fiske, 1987 and Morley, 1996). These exchanges, although stimulated by the images of the spectacle, assert a network of communication. This allows the gossip itself—or the act of communication—to become the subject not the image (Britney, Big Brother etc) that stimulates it. Patricia Spacks confirms this territory in her writing on Gossip and literature in *Gossip* (1985):

Gossip creates its own territory [...] using materials from the world at large to construct a new oral artefact. Its special value as a resource for the oppressed or dispossessed derives partly from this fact. The remaking that takes place as gossipers pool and interpret their observations expresses a world view (Spacks, 1985, 15).

The ‘silent’ consumption of the free newspapers allows the readers to follow the narratives that are played out in a social group. We follow marriages, split-ups, divorce settlements, adultery, forgiveness, arguments, friendships, parties, substance abuse, social abuse, family break-ups etc. As the readers follow the stories of celebrities they are simultaneously escaping their own, whilst occupying the stories of others. There is a safe deferral of moral responsibility that allows the reader to judge their own actions, in contrast to those illustrated by others. The informal conversations regarding the alleged adulterous affairs of footballer Ashley Cole (2009) for example, create moral positions in the natural process of discussion. This forms an inter-subjectivity (which I will discuss further in Chapter 4) where the very act of dialogue, allows for a production of meaning that may be separate from the content itself. The celebrity narrative forms a material to be used in further, informal exchanges. The gossip that surrounds these stories, is in effect, the material itself, and this subjective participation with a story creates its own territory.

Focussing specifically on talk taking place between workers, Paolo Virno challenges Heidegger's (*Being and Time*, 1927) depreciation of gossip, idle talk and curiosity in *The Grammar of the Multitude* (2004) and proposes that in fact, 'not only is idle talk not a poor experience and one to be depreciated, but it directly concerns labour, and social production' (Virno, 2004, 90). Virno argues that the presence of language in the workplace is now a vital part of Post-Fordist production. 'Chatter' was absent from the work floor, confined to bus journeys when workers left the gates of the factory, until Post-Fordism 'placed language in to the workplace' (ibid, 91). The presence of informal talk in the workplace, according to Virno, allows workers to address practical problems collectively, forming flexible social bonds—pooling experience and knowledge. For Virno it is of less importance what is said, what is significant, is 'the ability to say':

A certain number of standard utterances is not what is required of the worker; rather, an informal act of communication is required, one which is flexible, capable of confronting the most diverse possibilities (along with a good dose of *opportunism*, however). Using terms from the philosophy of language, I would say it is not the *parole* but the *langue* which is mobilized, the very faculty of language, not any of its specific applications. This faculty, which is the generic power of articulating every sort of utterance, takes on an empirical importance precisely in computer language. There, in fact, it is not so much "what is said," as much as the pure and simple "ability to say" that counts (Virno, 2004, 91).

Using Saussure's definition of *langue* as the system of language within which *parole* or speech is utilized, Virno isolates the structure or form of language (*langue*), as the site of mobilization rather than the specific content of the individual utterances (*parole*).

It is this mobilization of the 'very faculty of language' exhibited by the presence of the act of communicativity that interests both Fenves and Agamben. This has particular significance for Virno in relation to the *visibility* of the worker, represented by the *presence* of his discourse in the work place. Virno uses the

image of the “Silence, men at work” signs that were commonplace on the Fordist work floor, as an indication of the linguistic subordination previously imposed upon the individual worker.

Where Virno points firstly to the presence of talk in the workplace as an action of linguistic identity and collectivity, he then points out the positive attributes of the *performative* action of idle talk.<sup>32</sup> Far from being an “unauthentic” (Heidegger, 1927) experience where the individual is distanced from any depth, or *weight* of communication—the act of speaking on the contrary, asserts his / her presence. It matters less what is asserted in the performance, for it is the *performative act*, which asserts an authentic being—‘I speak’, ‘I am here’. These linguistic, performative acts, exchanges and communications, exercising the power to speak have been seen (Hardt and Negri 2006, 2001) as a production of *the common*, demonstrating a *shared* language, the collective act of speech, and the production of common relations through speech. This *common* relationship between language and networks characterises central concepts of Hardt and Negri’s *Multitude* (2005).

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Emler (1995) notes that according to studies carried out during the post-Fordist period (see Burns, 1954), the percentage of the working day spent in conversation related to their status within the company, as white collar workers. They saw their talk as work, those heading large companies spent seventy eight percent of their time talking. The traditional class divide creates an interesting set of contrasts in terms of the value of the role of talk in relation to work. Where we see white collar workers involved in formal meetings and planning conversations we are also reminded, following Emler (1995, 126), that progression within a company is also dependent to a certain extent on informal talk and general sociability. So, within a white collar workforce, both informal and formalized talk is directly related to work. Whereas traditional blue collar, working class and manual labourers would be seen to be talking to escape or distract from work as Walter Benjamin describes eloquently in his essay ‘The Storyteller’ (Benjamin, 1999, 83-107).

What Virno and then Emler do not describe is how these classifications of talk relate to the present globalized labour system which does not rely upon such a clear distinction of blue/white collar separation. As our traditional understanding of the industrialized ‘shop floor’ has re-located from western industrialized nations to the new industries of China and India it might be argued that this blue/white collar relationship with talk now has geographic rather than class divisions.

### Seizing a System.

I have talked about the possible values associated with the separation of language into formal and content-based actions of chatter and idle talk. If we are to reveal the formal structure of communication and the political potentials of this *chatter*, illustrated by web 2.0, we must also look at the networks that this language occupies.

Hardt and Negri identify the emergence of *network power* (Hardt and Negri, 2005, xii) as a new form of 'imperial' sovereignty. This new imperialism functions through the *relations between* powerful 'nodes', such as multinational companies, media institutions and governments. To confront this power, social networks and communication technologies are being activated by the public to produce 'the possibility of democracy on a global scale' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, xi). I want to focus on the potential 'political force' of the *networks* of contemporary communication, which supply Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* (2005) with the apparatus to construct their new 'resistance'.

Hardt and Negri isolate the occupation of the appropriate medium of resistance as an integral tool to an oppressed community confronting an imposing authority. Hardt and Negri chart the historical relationship between the changing forms of organization adopted by State power and responding guerrilla resistance. On a relatively recent global level, the transformation of conflict from the *Cold War* to the *War on Terror* demonstrates a transition between *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* warfare. *Symmetrical* conflict represents two sides where both opponents (The United States and The Soviet Union during the Cold War) had equivalent military capacity. At present, we have a superpower, which finds its combatants (*The War on Terror*) in those few who do not share the same material tools. As a result are not affected by traditional socio-political and economic forms of conflict. Those who act within the auspices of 'Islamic Terrorism', and are willing to fight the domination by a single superpower, do so by turning their bodies into warheads. The suicide bomber is the essential symbol of a guerrilla conflict and acts *asymmetrically* to its enemy, as both sides do not share the same approaches, techniques or tools (Hardt and Negri, 2006, 51). This reveals the body

as weapon and tool of destruction, but further and more importantly here, it reveals the power of the network of communication which constructs, plans, and organises the events such as those of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London. In recent history—it is clear that this *asymmetric* resistance has had success in producing the most intense *image* of resistance in recent times.

Hardt and Negri propose the significance of isolating the *form* of activity in understanding the potential for resistance. The network centric mode of resistance has been identified by the military as the system to counter, and as a result the systems of defense are transforming correspondingly. These network structures of fluidity, spontaneity and collaboration have led the United States military to adopt similar forms of organization in order to create an appropriate de-centralized force of defense.

How do you rethink the primary mission of the Pentagon, which has historically used force as the primary vehicle for defeating an enemy, principally another nation-state, and convert it to use other means—such as economic, medical, cultural, and educational inducements to transform adversaries who increasingly are not nation-states, but networked, “asymmetric” opponents? (Clippinger, 2007, 5).

This ‘war on a network’ (Clippinger, 2007, 5) has led to the introduction of the term *Network-Centric Warfare* that ‘broadly describes the combination of emerging tactics, techniques and procedures that a fully or even partially networked force can employ to create decisive war fighting advantage.’ (Clippinger, 2007, 2). The priority that the US government has placed on networks demonstrates firstly, the significance they hold for resistance movements historically and secondly, how new technologies affect the political potentials of these networks. One of the examples Hart and Negri use to represent the changing form of guerrilla structures is the Palestinian Intafada. Here, both the traditional ‘vertical’ system of resistance and the transforming ‘horizontal’ networks co-exist. The ‘frontline’ activity of stone-throwing and direct conflict with the Israeli authorities is *internal, autonomous* and *distributed*. These are actions carried out

by the younger generation who act *spontaneously* and *sporadically* and communicate with new technologies such as mobile phones. The traditional resistance operates alongside the stone throwing and is one of a more conventional system of authority organized externally (many older generation are in exile) by a centralized vertical structure of authority. Although this political movement represents the transition from a vertical to a horizontal structure or network that mirrors that of the United States MOD, it is the Zapatistas (Juris. S Jeffrey 2002; Castells 1997; Cleaver 1995, 1999; Olesen 2002; Ronfeldt et al. 1998) that Hardt and Negri pose as the political group who have most effectively located themselves within a networked communication structure.

The Zapatistas, which were born and primarily remain a peasant and indigenous movement, use the Internet and communication technologies not only as a means of distributing their communiqués to the outside world but also, at least to some extent, as a structural element inside their organisation, especially as it extends beyond southern Mexico to the national and global levels. Communication is central to the Zapatistas' notion of revolution, and they continually emphasise the need to create horizontal network organisations rather than vertical centralised structures (Hardt and Negri, 2006, 85).

Critiques of Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* from the Left despair at the apparent lack of conflict that the multitude proposes, and by asserting a new sovereignty without a centre, it ignores the implicit domination that is demonstrated by US foreign policy following the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> (Mouffe, 2005). What is proposed as a 'new possibility of global democracy' (Hardt and Negri, 2005, xi) is seen to fail: 'Far from empowering us, it contributes to reinforcing the current incapacity to think and act politically' (Mouffe, 2005, 107). These two starkly opposing positions reveal methodological tensions of resistance—one acting within a system of authority and another determined to act against it to produce another alternative. I do not want to explore these at length here, but what is important, is to note certain points specifically concerning the multitude. Firstly,



Hardt and Negri propose the political significance of acting in a form that mirrors that of the oppressor, in this case 'network power', and secondly this form of interaction, these social relations and technological communications produce a resistant power. 'What is most important for our argument here, however, is the *form* of the movements. These movements constitute the most developed example to date of the network model of organization' (Hardt and Negri, 2006, 87, [my italics]). For Hardt and Negri, these relations are intrinsically linked to the organization of resistance, of anti WTO demonstrations for example. Unfortunately these networked movements have failed to cause notable impact upon the institutions that they confront, leaving Hardt and Negri's proposal of a new possibility of global democracy seeming a little optimistic. What *Multitude* achieves is the recognition that the networks which we occupy, on a day-to-day basis have a political potential where individuals *relate* together through communicative forms that directly mirror those of 'network power' or *spectacle*.

I want to identify the importance of the *network* defined by Hardt and Negri as a communicative map, on which to place the responses to Kierkegaard's dismissal of chatter and idle talk. As we have seen, there are positive values in both the performative act of communication and the separation of content and form in language. These readings propose an alternative, positive function for the abstracted forms of communication such as contemporary chatter evident on social networking sites, in direct relation to the transforming genealogy of spectacle. We have seen how technology affects the *form* of language and how this separation created by the spectacle also *reveals* language as an abstracted material form. By looking at this materiality in relation to its formal construction situated within the bio-political framework of the networks of *the common* we have seen that through both linguistic form and its network form, contemporary chatter can be seen to hold positive readings for what has previously been regarded as an example of a levelled or subordinated society. This *map* acts as a foundation in setting out the terms and conditions of the materialization of language, and forms a base from which to investigate more specific examples in further detail.

## CHAPTER 3.

**Noise of Placards.***The Proximity of Protest.*

The overlap between touch and hearing suggests that... hearing may actually be more earthly and materialistic than vision. At least it seems obvious that light is less solid, less grossly real, than sound – that it has ‘less being’, as Aristotle would have it, or is ‘less substantial’ (Aristotle, *Problemata XI 904b*). There is an effortless superiority about the way light travels – silently, instantaneously and in perfect straight lines... sound in contrast, is sluggish and laborious: it moves much slower drifting aimlessly and letting itself get carried away by the wind (Ree, 1999, 37/38).

In the last Chapter we have looked at the invisible and abstract political potential of networks and organization created and produced predominantly in the physical absence of one another. These communicative webs mediate language with the accompanying sound of the clatter of computer keys and mouse clicks, yet there is relatively little sound produced from the human voice box. The organizational capabilities of these networks can be seen to manifest in the collective meeting of individuals that share a certain political goal—at this moment they physically exist together side by side, in order to confront the opposition. What happens at this moment? Do they shout and hurl stones? Carry placards and banners? What does this look like? Or maybe we should ask—what does this *sound* like?

The demonstration is a politicized meeting; its oppositional context (the enemy, and the identification of a ‘we’) can be decoded courtesy of printed ephemera—text on pamphlets, posters, and deciphered from the shouts through megaphones. The political context, its aims and desires can be evaluated in relation to these signposts.

We have already evaluated informal discourse such as gossip and rumour, as well as contemporary networks of communication in terms of form, in order to propose a politicized reading. Now we will look at the demonstration, as an example of an overtly symbolic political event and focus again upon abstract, formal, and performative elements rather than the specific words that are uttered. These moments when the megaphone crackles and a word crumples into an amplified *rasp*, or when we hear the rhythm of a whistle in the distance, or the murmur of a thousand voices from the streets ahead?

Pantheistic ideas of the unity of creation find a perfect illustration in communal singing: Morike heard his chorus of nightingales singing with ‘one voice’, and for Schlegel, the whole is but a single choir, many a song from but one mouth’. There is nothing like a whole crowd raising a concerted sound to symbolize unity of purpose, as the political, military and religious uses of sounds gives them a capacity for concord and disharmony which the world of colour could never possibly match (Ree, 1999, 33).

As we listen to the concerted sound of a multitude of voices, this ‘sense of unity’ is rarely expressed through the coherence of specific words; instead this single choir often produces an abstract distant *hum*, or a *rasping* indecipherable call. Building upon the politicized reading of the formal, abstract elements of informal discourse in Chapter Two, I want to now turn to the moment when an overtly political language is abstracted through its *own proclamation*. Rather than merely acknowledging a collective ‘sense of purpose’, following Ree, I wish to examine these politicized choirs further, in order to establish a subtle but equally poignant interpretation—specifically in terms of *proximity* and *language*.

This chapter takes a walk<sup>33</sup> through a politicized sonorous landscape to analyze the blurred sound of protest aimed against globalization amidst a

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<sup>33</sup> While using the figure of a walk in central London, I acknowledge the earlier philosophical, lyrical, and visual observations made of another European capital city: Paris. These include the ‘intoxications’ of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1983), Walter Benjamin’s unfinished Parisian reflections in the *Arcades project* (2002), and more notably, Arthur Rimbaud’s poetry in relation to the transformation of social space during

background of active consumerism. Using a temporal, physical, and geographically shifting figure such as a walk, I aim to identify varying stages of proximity relating to the words that are shouted or sung by a protesting crowd, and particularly how these proximities affect the symbolic identity of these words of protest.

### **The Noise of Territory.**

*The same underground system that drowns speech with the sound of its mechanical function down below in the network of tunnels brings me out in daylight, at a tube station in central London. It is cold, and many shoppers walk between coffee shops, bus stops, train stations, and restaurants holding square, shiny bags. Think for a second of the sound here in this busy street. Think of the traffic first—buses with diesel engines, and purring cars waiting at lights—a deep, heavy background sound. And then, the sounds that are closer, like the scrape of a shoe heel on an uneven paving slab a metre in front, the single drum beat of a dropped bin being emptied, or the reversing, metronomic bleeping of a nearby van. Think of those small bits of sound even quieter and closer—when you catch someone’s conversation over their shoulder, waiting to cross the road—that rare moment when strangers stand close and still. In all this noise, resounding from a multitude of distances, there is a single whistle. And at this moment, standing with the buses, and the bins, and the shoppers with glossy square box bags—two worlds collide. Two groups of people merge sonorously—shoppers and demonstrators.*

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the Paris Commune. Rimbaud uses the site of political resistance as source for his work, utilizing poetic metaphor to refer to the sound of the vibrating ‘swarm’ of an agitated urban crowd. See Ross, Kirstin (1988), *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

Today, our sight has dimmed; it no longer sees our future, having constructed a present made of abstraction, nonsense, and silence. Now we must judge a society more by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, than by its statistics (Attali, 1977, 3).

Amidst this site of consumerism and protest, it is possible to dim our sight and close one's eyes, in order to think through sound. Instead of the advertising bill-boards, traffic lights, neon shop names, newspaper front pages, and backlit window displays let us for a moment explore this fleeting juxtaposition between collective consumption and politicized dissent through *noise* rather than words.

What is this noise that always seems to exist around us, noise that, since John Cage, presents itself even in silence? This noise that cannot be switched on or off and plays itself without our consent. Jacques Attali classifies *noise* as *disordered* sound, its inevitable *organization*, by instruments and scores, as *music*. Following Attali, the *organization* of sound is directly linked to its commoditization made possible by developing industrial techniques of sound reproduction during the growth of industrialized Western societies in the past century. The commercial potential of sound also saw its separation from being *part of* everyday actions, rituals, and celebrations to becoming an artistic form with its own high cultural status and inevitable economic value. Attali's work is predominantly focused on the power values surrounding music and noise, and the relation to both economic and geographical territorial occupation.

All music, any organization of sound is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power centre to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form. Among birds a tool for marking territorial boundaries, noise is inscribed from the start with the panoply of power. Equivalent to the articulation of space, it indicates the limits of a territory and the way to make oneself heard within it, how to

survive by drawing one's sustenance from it. And since noise is the source of power, power has always listened to it with fascination (Attali, 1977, 6).

Let us think of *noise* in terms of *territory*—As Jonathan Ree noted Morike's reference to nightingales, we too can hear these calls, in the dawn chorus out of open bedroom windows, marking the transition between dark and light during the months of spring. This song represents the mating season, and crucially following Attali, scores an invisible, audible composition intent on marking out territorial boundaries. As with other methods of territorial notation used by animals such as the smell of urine, these bodily projections provide a vast tapestry of territorial mapping. Defined not by 5 metre high concrete walls or barbed wire but by the impermanent and transient language of sound and smell that drift like the descriptions of Fama in Chapter Two<sup>34</sup>.

Back on the busy streets of London, when the first whistle is heard from the demonstrators adjacent to consumers, two sonorous territories collide. The collective murmurings represent opposing voices with their own distinct political identities and ideological territory—of those *participating* in a globalized system and those *protesting against* it. Similar to birdsong, the protesters announce their territorial occupation amidst an established landscape or (economic) system. This is not simply a call of presence—this territorial occupation *defines* the success or failure of any protest.

Since the poll tax riots in London in 1990 the police have endeavored to change strategy to avoid the loss of territorial control of the city centre (Campbell, 2009). Since then, both at the May Day riot in 1990, and the G20 protests in the City of London in 2009, the strategy of 'kettling' has been imposed. This method of physical containment aims to trap and contain protestors in splintered groups, isolated from each other for many hours, to restrict the impact of a large physical mass and eventually wear down momentum. The method is similar to the tactics imposed for policing supporters at football matches. What is consistent between both contained groups, is the use of the voice to perforate the enforced physical

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<sup>34</sup> See description of *Fama* the goddess of rumour as the winged creature, which glides in the wind above rooftops and streets spreading gossip and rumour (Chapter Two).

boundaries. The songs of away fans waiting for hours in stadia, at train stations, or outside the ground and the shouts and chants of ‘kettled’ protestors, not only proclaim a collective identity but also, importantly, occupy territory inaccessible by foot. The immateriality of sound functions as an appropriate medium of action, perforating solid borders and reacting to an imposed physical segregation.

In contrast to ‘kettling’, the protest I follow, flows with the conventional snake-like slowness of a regular demonstration. *This* audible territorial conflict is marked by the ongoing nature of the sound of the city, traffic, and shoppers in the background and the temporary presence of the protestors. Rather than analyze these voices on territorial terms alone, I want to ask *how* we see, or rather *hear* these collective acts through the *noise* that they produce, rather than the specific symbolic messages that they support and carry. So, let us not think of the glare of mass-produced illuminated words and images adorning shops, spelling out brands, discounts and sales. Or for that matter the hastily printed monochrome leaflets spilled on the floor and pressed into protestors palms promoting the next rally. Let us close our eyes to these semantic utterances and rather, face the sensory receptor that we can’t close our eyes to—sound.

**Noise of dissent, Noise of control.**  
*Pots & Pans, Keys, and Muzak.*

The sound of keys is a common, natural curiosity for a young child. There is a simple, physical relationship with the movement of the hand and the sound that is produced. This individual corporeal relationship between the body and sound is intensified collectively if we think of the events leading to the Velvet revolution in Wenceslas Square, in Prague in November 1989. As Alexander Dubcek was brought out of hiding, Vaclav Havel spoke to the people of Czechoslovakia. Soviet rule was broken and the crowds of thousands rattled key chains and tiny bells in the central square. This jangling of keys symbolized the opening of previously locked doors ([www.nytimes.com/1989/12/12/world](http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/12/world)) and had become a common act in the wave of protests in the crumbling Soviet states of Eastern Europe. The symbolic relation between instrument and political desire, is again

illustrated by the protests on the streets of Buenos Aires that took place in December 2002. As the economic collapse took place in Argentina and the government announced a state of emergency, a cross-class mass of a million people took to the streets, converging on the presidential palace and banging pots and pans (Adamovsky, 2003). The protest was known as *Cacerolazo* (saucepans) and therefore was identified by the instrument that produced the sound, rather than a metaphorical meaning being signified through the jangle of keys in Wenceslas Square.

These abstracted sonorous displays are produced by a specific gestural, performative act and are conceived through the combination of a symbolic reference (pots, pans, keys) and the noisiness of the action. In these circumstances, the noise produced holds a symbolic value, as it is produced in relation to a specific political context. Simultaneously it resonates as an abstract noise. Conversely, if we return to the streets of London, the sound of chanting from afar does not indicate a specific demand (keys to locked doors) or identify the specific protest (*Cacerolazo*). This sound signifies that there is a large group of individuals protesting, but it is not possible to understand *what* that particular context of protest is. So here, in London, with the sound of slogans from a distance, the words that position the specific political aims and goals are *muffled*. They no longer symbolically refer to a specific political context and in turn, the rumbling sound becomes a truly abstracted noise of protest.

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*Following the direction of the whistle on foot brings more whistles and less traffic. These high-pitched sounds—expelled air from the lungs of bodies in the street begin to engulf the humming puffs of diesel exhaust pipes. And then half way down a narrow alley, I stop and listen to the indecipherable merger between the low vocal hum ahead, and the mechanical rumbling from the road behind—almost indistinguishable they form a huge heavy blanket of sound perforated by these tiny sharp whistles. Walking towards the hum in front, the sound begins to*



*break up softly, from a blanket into a number of overlaid patches. With a sporadic rhythm the sound starts to roll like a waterfall.*

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Sound is also used on the other side of the barricade in order to control and combat those who demonstrate. The megaphone is understood to be the archetypal tool to verbally direct individuals to conform to a specified system of order using directive language. But what of the controlling nature of more abstract sound when the amplified words that order ‘move’, ‘turn’, ‘believe’, ‘trust’, ‘vote’ are absent?

The use of background music or *muzak* in shopping centres—the heart of capitalist consumerism—was introduced in order to go un-noticed. It exists as the closest form of music to ‘sound’, following Attali, as its *organization* in effect renders it to the periphery of the listener’s consciousness. On the 10<sup>th</sup> February 2009, Muzak Holdings LLC filed for bankruptcy, after more than 70 years providing consumer outlets, shopping malls, grocers and lifts with music aimed to soothe and manipulate the actions of consumers. During the 1940s, the company had conducted research into the effects of music on labour production in factories revealing that subliminal volume levels and alternation with periods of silence increased factory production.<sup>35</sup> This technique known as ‘Stimulus Progression’, is as evident in present shopping stores today as it was half a century ago. While through the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, music was used to soothe the shopper in order to make them feel comfortable, today’s shopping malls are designed to ‘reach out’ to specific consumers, invariably marrying popular music with target groups on the High street. Here, volume is often increased rather than decreased. This increased audibility of music does not necessarily place it in the foreground as that space is colonized by consumer activities, loud music exists in the background in much the same way as Muzak and so their differentiation is lost.

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<sup>35</sup> For further discussion relating to sound and talk on the (Fordist / post- Fordist) shop floor see Virno, 2005 and Chapter One.

Where these encounters with background sound in shopping stores appear to create an (unconscious) atmosphere in the shared presence of customer, product and salesman/woman—today music is often played in the physical absence of all. As call centres and telephonic economic exchange colonizes consumer experience, music is often played in the ‘gaps’ when the sales person is absent (not speaking), or whilst the consumer awaits a response. Here ‘comforting’ music is played in the physical absence of both the assistant and the product: ‘Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security’ (Attali, 1985, 3).

Sonorous ‘security’ does not solely refer to psychological relations to consumerism—sound can also be used by the State as a means to control protesters such as those who demonstrate against globalization and consumerist inequality in the capitalist market in a very physical manner.

Humans can be physically affected by certain sounds or noises: very high frequencies or very loud sounds measured can damage hearing. Very low frequencies affect other areas of the body, and have commonly been used in torture—digestive systems can be disturbed, the functioning of the heart disrupted. Many types of sound can be mentally disturbing. To think of these effects is only to begin to see how noise works, and the element that links all noise, all judgments that noise is happening, is that noise is something that one is subject, submitted or subjected to (Hegarty, 2007, 4).

As well as being used as an interrogation technique such as ‘noise bombardment’ used against terrorist suspects at Guantanamo, Cuba (Back, 2007, 1) sound continues to be used as a policing tool in urban areas. Following the 2009 London Summit in the UK, the Pittsburgh Summit held in the US, only six months later presented examples of the use of sound as a public control device. On September 24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> 2009, the Long Range Acoustic Device was used for the first time in the USA against its own citizens. The LRAD is a crowd controlling device emitting a high frequency sound beam capable of damaging the eardrum and causing permanent damage. The LRAD has been used around the world on war ships and

in Iraq. It was at hand at the Republican National Convention in New York City 2004, and used against opposition protesters in Tbilisi, Georgia by Russian forces as well as privately by the Luxury cruise ship, *Seaborne Spirit*, to defend against Somali Pirates in November 2005. The device can be used both as a physical deterrent causing pain or imbalance, or alternatively, as an incredibly precise megaphone able to reach long distances and very specific targets. Interestingly, the same device has also been used in shopping malls ([www.thefreelibrary.com](http://www.thefreelibrary.com)) to ‘aim’ specific offers to customers at particular geographic locations within the shop or supermarket<sup>36</sup>. The LRAD acts then as an advanced form of sonorous control—both as a tool to project words of consumer encouragement, or to fire sound capable of disabling those who protest against global consumerism. The Mosquito Anti-Social Device (M.A.D) emits a high frequency (16-20 kilohertz) sound only perceptible to the ears of those less than twenty-five years old. Goodman (2010, 183) explains how this ‘unsound’ can be used to selectively deter groups of teenagers from shopping centres and street corners where they are not wanted.

We have seen how abstract sound can be used to control the public by the State and commercial enterprises. Now let us see how noise is qualitatively differentiated from noise(s), sound, and music.

### **Negative Noise?**

The word *noise* comes from the Latin ‘Nausea’. This etymology immediately points to its viscerally uncomfortable nature. As music is associated with leisure, noise is associated with nuisance. Today the economic value of noise is based on its presence or absence: noise devalues property price due to factors such as

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<sup>36</sup> This is consistent with existing methods identified by consumer outlets as vehicles for manipulation and persuasion, such as the natural colour and form of fruit and vegetables as the first product encountered by the supermarket shopper, or the infusion of baking smells into the supermarket. The relaying of consumer specific information dependent on proximity to the product that the LRAD device transmits could present the possibility that audio advertising space could be sold to travel agents or airlines in the supermarket aisle where sun lotion is located?

traffic, flight paths, and ‘anti-social’ neighbours. This economic *clatter* then returns when a stock market crash takes hold of the language of the finance system, evident in the frenzy of activity on market floors.<sup>37</sup>

Paul Hegarty (2007, 3) suggests that *noise* only becomes itself when it is qualified as such—sound remains as sound until it is perceived negatively (unpleasant, loud etc), at which point it becomes *noise*. For Hegarty this (negative) judgment is important in understanding noise as it is culturally *produced* by a specific ‘hearing machine’—in this case the human ear. ‘Noise is not only a judgment on noises, it is a negative reaction, and then, usually, a negative response to a sound or set of sounds’ (Hegarty, 2007, 3). The same noise will not therefore, be considered so at different geographic or cultural locations. The sounds of car horns represent the unwanted noise of traffic. This sound also has a function—as well as a sign of frustration and annoyance, in my experience, the horns act as a warning of impending collision in the UK, mainland Europe, and North America and in other locations such as India as directional indicators. Hegarty distinguishes the negative identification of noise, by separating it from its plurality—noises. ‘Noise is not the same as noises. Noises are sounds until further qualified (e.g. as unpleasant noises, loud noises, and so on), but noise is already that qualification; it is already a judgment that noise is occurring’ (Hegarty, 2007, 3). Following these conditions we could say that the sound of car horns that are perceived as *traffic* is noise, whereas the car horns interpreted as warning or *indication of direction* are a set of noises or sounds. Yet, this negatively perceived, publicly produced noise can also function as a medium of concealment.

Background noise can act as a medium within which an illegal or violent act can go undetected. Noise can be used to cover up sound (screams) that could signify a criminal act—such as the ‘playing card murderer’ in Madrid who left different playing cards alongside the bodies of each victim. ‘He apparently timed his attack to coincide with the end of a Champions League football match between Real Madrid and Lokomotiv Moscow, when fireworks were being let off across the city to celebrate the Madrid team’s victory’ (Tremlett, 2003, 18).

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<sup>37</sup> Here, at the epicentre of economic crisis the desperate shouts create such noise that gestures are adopted to communicate prices and stocks, in order to buy and sell (see gesture in Chapter 4).

Noise can be used to conceal words as well as actions. In the film *The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), the process of acoustic surveillance is central. The film follows a Stasi intelligence officer who is responsible for collecting information regarding the motives and movements of suspected cultural dissidents in Berlin. In order to inhibit the success of Stasi surveillance operations, the dissidents often use background noise to drown spoken words in private apartments. There are two examples where sound is employed in this manner. Firstly, as one character arrives in an apartment to meet a fellow ‘conspirator’, a couple are arguing with raised voices and the dog is barking (noisy neighbours), drowning out the sound of their own conversation from anyone potentially listening in. Another scene later in the film uses Punk music rather than raised voices and barking as a vehicle to hide the words used to arrange a meeting place.<sup>38</sup> We should note the muffling nature of sound heard intentionally (surveillance), or unintentionally (neighbours) from the other side of an interior wall. Both voice and music are ‘denatured’ (Barthes, 1989, [1967] 77) as sound passes through the brick and plaster material that mark architectural and social boundaries. Music loses its ‘organization’ (Attali, 1977, 6) and becomes ‘noise’ (Hegarty, 2007, 3). Speech loses its semantic definition and becomes an indecipherable murmur. Here, the architectural materiality of private space defines the identity of social sounds.<sup>39</sup>

For Hegarty, noise is defined by its *external* authorship. The production of noise by ‘other people’ is integral to its identity—this sound omitted by ‘them’ is

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<sup>38</sup> It is interesting to note, in terms of Attali’s statement that music acts as *organized* noise attributed to a commercially viable product in the capitalist market place—that here we have punk music that is concerned with stylistic disorganization yet at the same time is highly marketable. In fact, in the East German context the transgression away from ‘organized’ or harmonious music is a central radical cultural concept. This ‘unorganized’ sound (punk) is being used to hide the words of cultural ‘conspirators’ who are trying to publish, or reach a Western audience where their cultural production also has an active economic value. For further discussion on this subject see Paul Hegarty (2007) on ‘Sound Art’, p 167-179.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey Goldfarb (2006), notes the influence of architecture upon surveillance and secrecy during the Soviet period, referring to the sanctuary of the kitchen: ‘Here personal and collective memories were told and retold in opposition to official history. This was the private place that was most remote from official mandates and controls, although in the worst of times, attempts were made to invade even this space, as children were called upon to denounce their parents’ (Goldfarb, 2006, 10).

complicit with specific power relations. As well as the surveillance techniques used by the Stasi in highly politicized contexts, there are examples today of similar social values associated with the authorship of *noise*. The control of sound in residential space for example, has increasingly influenced social power relations resulting in the Anti Social Behavior Order Act (1998), where ‘neighbours who make too much noise can be fined up to £5000 or have noisy equipment removed’ ([ww.homeoffice.gov.uk/anti-social-behaviour](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/anti-social-behaviour)). For persistent re-offenders, noisiness even presents the possibility of confinement. Hegarty suggests that noise produced by someone else *increases the volume* of noise: ‘Different sub cultural or cultural conditions or practices that are thought of as other are noisier, hence perceptions of people speaking in ‘foreign’ languages being loud’ (Hegarty, 2007, 4). This suggestion relies upon a specific understanding of one’s own linguistic and national identity in relation to he or she who is ‘foreign’. Hegarty does not specify in what social context this is most explicit, yet speaking as someone who has lived in an urban, multicultural environment from birth, the noises of foreign words are a comforting acknowledgement of a multiplicity of heritages. Again, noise or noises are subjectively determined. Rather than assert the ‘otherness’ of foreign language as a negative perception of overheard background linguistic ramblings that *increases* volume, we should instead think how these sounds in the background, can be perceived in a contrastingly positive manner.

### **Loudness of Noises.**

#### ***The Rustle of Demonstration.***

...There always remains *too much meaning* for language to fulfill a delectation appropriate to its substance. But what is impossible is not inconceivable: the rustle of language forms a utopia. Which Utopia? That of a music of meaning; in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say *denatured* to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuousness, without a sign ever

becoming detached from it (ever *naturalizing* this pure layer of delectation), but also- and this is what is difficult without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed, in short castrated (Barthes, 1989, [1967] 77).

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*There's more definition now. Low and high pitches attach themselves to these overlaid patches of sound, and for the first time, the sound of voices is recognizable. But, there are still no words yet. The shouts are still muffled, cried out in rhythm together, and as these sounds get louder and louder they follow each other, keeping in time together or responding to an unidentifiable distant single call. Here, approaching the voices, text on banners and placards announce intentions and anger, opposition and alliance, yet still the words in these voices are hard to find. Closer still—walking towards this mass of sound, text repeats and repeats on leaflets that appear again and again, on the floor, stuck on walls, left on benches and pressed into open slits on lamp posts. These leaflets are passed between hands too; confirming 'Guilt', 'Murder', 'Lies'. Words hastily printed, spluttering onto primary coloured paper rectangles. These leaflets, with the sound of words shouted by the mouths alongside them bring to mind the outpouring of verbal expression on the streets during the French Revolution and the printed journals and pamphlets that accompanied them—titles such as 'bouche' (mouth), 'voix' (voice), and 'cri' (cry)<sup>40</sup> footnoting the vocal tools of protest alongside the noise.*

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Within this demonstration there is a vast constituency of allegiances. We march 'together' and at the same time we walk alongside each other at a distance—as inevitably our politics do not marry universally. These individual subjectivities are announced through placards, imagery, text and words, but from a distance these

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<sup>40</sup> For a detailed historical account of the affect of language upon the political movement of the French Revolution see Rosenfeld 2001, 127.

voices together produce a collective *hum*. This sound represents the unification of thousands of voices a live, temporal, collective act. From afar, the fragmented subjective identities are hidden and a public *occupation of territory* is announced. But this is not *only* an occupation of real physical space, in real time, in a capital city centre; this moment also activates a mass *occupation of language*.

At this stage in the march, words are hidden amidst the rustle of the sound of the demonstration. Crucially, following Barthes above, these individual words have not been lost or expelled; they still constitute the hum or rustle, but they cannot be recognized as words themselves. They are dormant threads within a vast fabric. They are not detached from the overlaid medium of the voices; they are very much part of it. This avoids the complete ‘naturalizing’ (Barthes, 1989 [1967]), 77) of this utopic fabric or meaning to be erased and ‘dogmatically foreclosed’ (Barthes, *ibid*). This stipulates the *concealed presence* of meaning as a constituent to *rustle*.

Roland Barthes describes this moment where individual words are lost amidst a collective rumble of voices as the concealment of the ‘symbolic aggressor’. He suggests that the absence of subjective deviation presents a ‘linguistic utopia’ free from the distraction of the signifier; a language that reveals the *form* and presence of the speaker’s language, but not specific meaning. The *rustle* is the sound of the presence of language, not the specific constituents of it (decipherable words or meaning). I understand Barthes’ use of the term ‘utopic’ as a simultaneous occupation of both *form* and *content*, *langue* and *parole*—where the separations in language that we have seen through Debord and Agamben symbiotically reside together, but at the same time they conceal each other.

As with Hegarty, Barthes uses an example of the sound of overheard foreign language, where ‘the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me’ but ‘I was hearing the music, the breath, the tension, the application’ (Barthes, 1989, 78/79). Yet contrary to Hegarty’s reference, Barthes uses this figure by pointing to the individual’s positive relation to his/her language, rather than of nuisance noise.

In general terms, Barthes sees the inevitable *mis-firing* of language as a perpetual game of failed catch-up. Every verbal addition that endeavours to undo what has already been said becomes another failure, and so words seem to be



perpetually ‘stammering’. Interestingly, he likens this to the noise of a malfunctioning machine. Again, noise is used pejoratively (malfunction) and *rustle* is used positively, to describe a machine working well—in this case the sound of ‘the enormous rustle of the little balls’ (Barthes, 1989 [1967], 77) in huge pachinko halls in Japan. The vast pachinko gambling halls with line after line of slot machines, represent the sound of the mass surrender to the economic desires that spectacle provides and promotes. There are no voices in the Pachinko halls, as with the vast gambling halls in Las Vegas. If voices are present at all, they are drowned by the sound of the games, leaving the ears with a ‘ringing’ sound that follows you when you go to your hotel room or even resonating in the eardrum on the plane home. Indeed this is a performative ‘community of bodies: in the sounds of the pleasure which is “working,” no voice is raised, guides, or swerves, no voice is constituted; the rustle is the very sound of plural delectation—plural but never massive (the mass, quite the contrary, has a single voice, and terribly loud)’ (Barthes, 1989 [1967], 77). Barthes’ examples of the *rustle* are limited to both the Pachinko halls where there are no voices and the incomprehensible overheard foreign conversations. Both these examples are already linguistically inaccessible to the hearer, as firstly, there are no words spoken (Pachinko halls), and secondly, there is no identifiable vocabulary present (unfamiliar foreign languages). Can we extend this idea of a utopic linguistic fabric, revealed through the denatured words of a plurality of voices, to the muffled calls that constitute the demonstration in London? And if so, how can we see the sound of this mass as a ‘plural delectation’ rather than a ‘massive’ loudness?<sup>41</sup>

Barthes describes the mass as ‘loud’ but the mass is only loud when you are close to it. Its ‘delectation’ depends on distance where the sound of voices gets diluted by the medium through which it travels. The recognition of the sound of the mass from afar reveals the true potential of the *rustle*. Barthes’ evaluation is based on an external figure (the author) *listening in* (as we saw with the Stazi earlier) to socially produced sounds. He is working at the periphery of these

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<sup>41</sup> Note, following Hegarty (2007, 3), again ‘volume’ or ‘loudness’ is used pejoratively.

sources. I want to extend his analysis by shifting the proximity, and entering closer to the source of the rustle.

Consistent with the form of the walk that we have been following throughout this Chapter, I want to propose that the individual's relation to this demonstration should be seen as temporal—occupying varying geographical spaces, and *proximity to* the voices that produce these noises. It is thus integral to our understanding of the 'utopic' potential of the rustle of demonstration, to consider how this notion of rustle changes as our physical and corporeal relations to the emanating sound transforms. As this proximity is reduced, we become further aware of the individual corporeal intimacies that constitute the rustling mass.

### **Listening to *Internal* voices.**

What secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message? What secret is yielded—hence also made public—when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself? And the other indissociable aspect will be: What does to be listening, to be all ears, as one would say “to be in the world,” mean? What does it mean to exist according to listening, what resonates in it, what is the tone of listening or its timbre? Is even listening itself sonorous? (Nancy, 2007, 5).

The first words we hear as humans are those of our parents, but this occurs before the comprehension of language and even before birth. The first encounter we have with words is the muffled sound of speech from the womb. The words produced by the partner of the mother are produced externally to the child, whereas the words of the mother are produced at a greater corporeal proximity to the baby's sensory receptors in the womb. The resulting sounds are not only identified by the different tone of voice (father's relatively low tone for example) but are also dependent upon a corporeal mediality—how these sounds *travel through* and

*reverberate with fluids, organs, voice box, lungs and skin. In a sense, these first words we encounter could be described as an encounter with the mediality of language, where meaning is absent and is therefore defined by its form or corporeal rustle.*

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*Up close now, walking next to those who shout with voices projected from their mouths I can hear the way the words are shouted as much, or if not more, than I can hear the words themselves. I stand near the caller and hear the rasping dryness of his throat as he shrieks, it sounds like it hurts. It's a rough sound that is almost stringy—a vocal chord. It's about to snap. Break. Hoarse and rough, throbbing larynx, inflamed tonsils, it sounds as if it could disappear into an empty projection of air at any moment, like a hissing serpent—the sound of speech when the voice box is removed. And then, after listening to the internal workings of the caller—I hear the ligaments and cartilages of proclamation, and imagine the strained colour of internal sound production from outside. At this moment I can hear his voice, and those around me, but above all I can hear these voices resonating within me, in a sort of internal rumbling of reception. I can hear these words in my ears but I can also feel the reverberations deep in my stomach.*

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The sensory encounter with the politicized, urban event that we have been following presents contrasting corporeal and temporal relations. We can identify a collective bodily time-based rhythm where this ‘throbbing crowd, its vibratory nexus both dis- and reorganizes body parts and individuates them into an event with its own duration’ (Goodman, 2010, 111). To compare listening with seeing, sound is activated with the *arrival* of the event, whereas vision is already there before the event. Listening presents a durational encounter with the event providing a real-time, live, temporal relationship between event (in this case protest) and its sensory reception. As things we look at can be silent—like a

parked car for example—their presence does not rely upon sound; they exist before and after sound is omitted or produced. The ongoing nature of vision is accompanied by the ability to block this sensory stream. The eyelids provide the ability to control the relationship with the event or object—allowing a sort of sensory censorship to take place. Conversely, listening does not have this facility. So as well as being temporally linked to the event when it has commenced, there is also no ceasing this relation once it has started, as we cannot close our ears without external devices.

‘Moreover, the sound that penetrates through the ear propagates through the entire body something of its effects, which could not be said to occur in the same way with the visual signal. And if we note also that “one who emits a sound hears the sound he emits,” one emphasizes that animal sonorous emission is necessarily also (here again, most often) its own reception’ (Nancy, 2007, 15).

Following Nancy, we can now see that where vision requires an external tool such as a mirror to make the individual aware of his/her relation to an event, listening has a materiality that physically reverberates within the body. This internal sensory reception ignites a self-reflexivity that announces one’s own presence to oneself. This exchange or return (*renvois*) describes a site of both sonorous emission and reception (listening) occurring at the same time, and as Nancy continues, ‘it is precisely from one to the other that it “sounds”’ (Nancy, 2007,16). So in effect, Nancy is describing the inter-subjective identity of the sonorous event. This presents the acknowledgement (as we will see in relation to online communication in Chapter Four) that an act of exchange is taking place, regardless of the message that is being transferred. Rather than see ‘individual’ voices being engulfed by a ‘massive loudness’, this intimate proximity to the audible source of demonstration presents a truly corporeal reverberation formulating an inter-subjective exchange within the particular medium of resistance: the voice.

We have seen how the presence of an overtly politicized act such as the demonstration, should not only be read by the numbers of participants or through the contents of its banners and the letters scrawled on its placards. Rather than *read* the politics of this mass of individuals we can also *hear* it. Through the temporal, sonorous negotiation of this event, we can attribute the collective production *and* occupation of a fabric of language, which is not confined to its symbolic identity but exists as a vast linguistic utopia amidst the ideological consumer oppressions of the urban site of demonstration.

These politicized readings of language can be extended to the corporeal nature of other forms of communication such as gesture. In Chapter Two, I set up a general outline of the formalization of language present in web 2.0 and have referred to *the poke* as an example of a gesture of communication rather than an exchange of content. The poke, which acts as a virtual nudge, stimulating further communication, becomes the central figure of the following Chapter.

## CHAPTER 4.

**Gestures in Distance, Communication in Silence.**

The possibility of the poke.

On a hot evening in Mexico City in the late 1960's, two men walk slowly one behind the other wearing black socks and holding their shoes behind their backs. They each wear a black glove—one of the men wears a glove on the right hand, the other on the left hand. As the national anthem of The United States of America plays, their heads lower and their gloved fists raise.

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To interpret the actions of US athletes Tommy Smith and John Carlos after winning the Gold and Bronze 200 metre medals at the Estadio Olimpico Universitario, on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1968, their gestures must be scrutinized for their political symbolism. Although it is the raised, gloved fist gesture that has become an iconic image in the history of protest against the racial discrimination of black people in the United States during the civil rights era, there are other details of this politicized performance that hold further significance. The two men also wore black socks—representing black poverty ([news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday)), Smith wore a black scarf—representing black pride, Carlos had his track suit jacket unzipped to show solidarity with all blue collar workers in the US, as well as wearing a necklace of beads which he described 'were for those individuals that were lynched, or killed and that no-one said a prayer for, that were hung or tarred. It was for those thrown off the side of boats in the middle passage' ([www.famouspictures.org/mag](http://www.famouspictures.org/mag)). This highly politicized meaning was constructed not by words or text but by specifically choreographed and costumed human figures, presenting a performance with specific political symbolism, to a global audience.

The symbolic politicization of gesture has a long history, and as we shall see, acts as a language with shifting authority, both autonomous to, and acting

symbiotically with, informal communication. Here, I want to focus on the more informal of gestures—those which are not necessarily conceived as a politicized performance, but act accompanying speech and contemporary communication networks. To do this we must acknowledge the relationship between formal and informal gestural communications, and the political ideologies and authorities that are performed. This chapter asks how we can read these abstract rather than symbolic gestures? And what significance these communicative actions hold for a technologized public, where communication is often made in physical absence?

When we are with people we are inevitably surrounded by gestures. Sometimes they are loaded with meaning; sometimes they accompany speech—supporting meaning. Gestures can be made in direct physical relation to an addressee, or separated through technological mediation. Arms that fold in on themselves, palms of hands clapping or clasping, thumbs joined with fingers, fists and crossed legs are all physical movements and arrangements that do not use words but carry, support, and materialize meaning.

Following discussions relating to ‘network power’ in Chapter 2, I want to look at the role of gesture in contemporary communication systems—not as an example of non-verbal, mediated body language but as an action of performative mediality. In this sense, I want to look at social networking and more specifically, at the figure of the poke function in Facebook. Following Kierkegaard and Heidegger, this figure or virtual nudge, used by millions of individuals each day could be seen as an example of our fragmented, isolated and separated forms of communication; where nothing of consequence is uttered and an inert ‘levelling’ (see chapter 2) is produced. This approach is rooted in the belief that the copious forms of communication now available, produce an increased volume of communication at the expense of content, and that these communications have been hijacked by ‘the visible negation of life’ (Debord, 1973, 10) produced by the spectacle. In contrast, I want to use the poke, as an opportunity to analyse the abstract possibilities of these forms of communications, and to interrogate the mediality and distance of gesture in assessing the political agency of evolving forms of social exchange. To do this we must understand this idea of a positive political potential in the materialization of language illustrated by gesture.

### **The Mediality of Gesture.**

Since de Jorio's study of gesture as a support to speech in 1832, the Giorgio Agamben's essay *Notes on Gesture*, first published in *Infanzia e storia* in 1978, presents gesture as a form of communication that does not intend to produce meaning, but rather, supports it. We have already seen how Agamben asserts the individual's alienation from language through spectacle, as a distance that suspends its function, and in so doing reveals the ability for individuals to experience 'their own linguistic essence' (Agamben, 1996, 85). Here, once more, a possibility is proposed in those supports to language such as gesture—which do not produce content or meaning, but instead act as a constituent of production. Gesture for Agamben, is therefore not a sphere of means addressing a particular goal, it is the 'exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such' (Agamben, 2000, 58).

Crucially, Agamben bases his analysis of gesture through a binary distinction between gestural *function* and *dysfunction*. For Agamben, the 'catastrophe of the gestural sphere' is our loss of 'control' of our gestures, polarized between the (controlled) gestures of the Western bourgeoisie, leading up to the end of the nineteenth century, and the involuntary (uncontrolled) nature of gestures following on from this point. Agamben bases this premise on the fact that there 'is practically no further record of them [gestural disorders] in the early years of the twentieth century – until the winter's day in 1971 when Oliver Sacks, walking through the streets of New York, saw what he believed were three cases of Tourettism within the space of a few minutes' (Agamben, 2003, 137). Therefore, it is the absence of academic observations of gestural disorder during this time that represents its accepted proliferation and 'normalization'. There is no reason to question Agamben's research but it seems limiting to base an understanding of an intimate, private and fleeting mode of public behaviour upon the 'absence' of academic interest. Furthermore, this binary depiction of gestural *function* as a controlled bourgeois affliction or *dysfunction* as 'uncontrollable jerkings' on the streets of New York in 1971, also seems to simplify some of the possible nuances of the 'function' of gesture which may not fit so snugly into



either of these categories. Instead, I intend to propose categories of understanding that I see as pertinent in relating examples of public gesture to forms of transforming communication technologies, which in turn Agamben fails to acknowledge. These factors are crucial to a contemporary re-interpretation of Agamben's 'Notes on Gesture', in articulating clearly the idea of an 'essential experience' of language in a contemporary context.

These non-verbal communications, which we will investigate through this Chapter, are visible *actions* influenced by the social, cultural and technological transformations affecting production, reproduction and dissemination. These contexts are driven by the scientific and economic conditions of the time, and so this chapter will begin by presenting a selected genealogy of some of the key representations and uses of gesture in relation to language and politics. While sympathizing with Agamben's ideas of gesture as a *form* of pure means, the chapter endeavours to present and configure an extended presentation of examples leading to contemporary forms of abstracted gestural communications—including the political and social uses of gesture in Sculpture (Roman statues), the German, fourteenth century *Sachsenspiegel* illustrations, and developments in printed media in order to contextualize the 'poke' as a communicative gesture in contemporary Social Networking sites. If the materialization of language reveals an 'essential experience' it seems important to also look at how gesture has been represented in particular material forms dependent on cultural and social contexts.

**Gestures of History:  
*The Orator and the Weight of Rhetoric.***

*Tagliare*; Cutting.

The action of cutting with scissors something that offers little resistance is expressed with the following gesture.

1. *With the hand held on edge, index finger and middle finger are extended, the other fingers closed.* Extending the index finger and the middle finger, and opening them and closing them several times, imitates the movement of

scissors. Besides denoting scissors, this sign also indicates the effect of scissors, that is, that of cutting.

This is used in a figurative sense to mean:

2. *Slander, gossip. A slanderer, a gossip.* The word tagliare ('to cut') is very often used in our vernacular in the sense of whispering or murmuring against something or someone. One says *Cajo taglia a ttunno* ('Cajo cuts everyone') to mean 'Cajo whispers against everybody, he criticizes everybody indiscriminately.' One can also say *Cajo e tagliato a ttunno* (Cajo is cut by everyone') meaning that everyone speaks badly of him, without qualification. It is also said of someone who has a reputation as a gossip, that his tongue is always going *fuorffece, fuorffece*, that is, that he is always cutting up the reputation of others, like a pair of scissors that is opening and closing, always cutting. The gesture used in this meaning perhaps has its origin from that.

3. Chattering, in the sense of always talking in a foolish manner. Perhaps the movements of the lips are similar to those of the scissors when it opens and closes without cutting anything.

de Jorio, Andrea, (1832, 2000) *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity*, 393)

One of the first surviving, late second-century BC bronze figures is the Roman 'Orator', today housed in the Archaeological Museum in Florence. This figure of Etruscan Art lends his arm out to the audience, the people, in a gesture extending an act of communication between the figure and those looking upon it. Those who stared, almost two thousand years ago would have looked upon this cold, bronze body, its frozen limbs and eyes and tight-cast lips with a live human faculty. The Orator's body, like those in Mexico City in 1968, acts as a highly symbolic and

precise configuration of posed limbs and choreographed gesture—but in this case its symbolism is frozen in three dimensions. Arm offered out, legs stable and calm, his comportment projects a composed rhetoric, alluding to a communicative contract passed between the dead material object (itself) and the (a)live sensations of the individuals that look up. The Orator's lips are frozen, not a sound is uttered. Silent, he proposes an unheard rhetoric, which represents the act, power, and status of public speech in the absence of any content. This presents an inter-subjective reading which suggests a hierarchical relationship between the audience who stands *below* and *listens* and the orator who stands *above* and *speaks*. This symbol of a communicative power relation is not composed of words but material (marble) *form*.

Agamben's (2000) *materialization* of speech on the other hand, does not concern material (marble) as such, rather he talks about the *abstraction* of the tools of production and presentation of language that depend upon separations that liberate sounds, gestures, and expressions from a symbolically and linguistically defined system. This abstraction through separation articulates a *materialization* and is understood ontologically through an abstract concept.

Looking at the words Henri Lefebvre uses to describe his methodological approach to *rhythmanalysis* (which we will look at in more detail later); starting 'with full consciousness of the abstract in order to arrive at the concrete' (Lefebvre, 2004, 6), we are reminded of the materiality of processes of academic thought and philosophy, which endeavour to mould, sculpt and form our understanding of transient subjects such as language. Here, I use text to write about language and I do so following Lefebvre, using abstract concepts, yet at the same time these are formalized with historical reference and formatted with Harvard referencing and academic protocol (footnotes, bibliography, introduction etc). This work is then physically produced as text either on screen or on paper. The finalized concrete nature of the bound thesis contrasts with the audible resonance of speech regarding the project with colleagues, supervisors, friends, or the scrawled ink notes on the back of pieces of paper hidden in the back pocket of denim jeans. These varying conceptual and practical material constituencies construct a picture about language—a picture where we attempt to compare and

contrast the materiality of speech and writing, gestures and text. Stuart Eldon acknowledges in the 2004 introduction to Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis*, the relation between the corporality of acts of communication and the materiality of concept and analysis:

The question of the body, and in particular the body under capitalism, is a recurrent and indeed central topic. As he [Lefebvre] notes, the push-pull exchange between the general and the particular, the abstraction of concepts and the concrete analysis of the mundane, starting with the body, is at play throughout the work, although Lefebvre follows the former (Elden, 2004, viii).

There is also a *real* material value to these constituents of language: voice, speech, text; a materiality which can be felt physically through sound waves and voice (see Chapter 3), and acted out live with gestural expression. These *parts* of language are temporal in their resonance but have a physical presence. What defines this materiality is its impermanence, for gesture in particular relies on the time-based performance of a series of movements being replaced by the next.<sup>42</sup> Voice passes from silence to sound and then to silence again—even the bass reverberations of guttural screams disappear in the wind.

The material gesture of the Orator is something different and located (literally) in its permanence. This gesture is not a single frame of bodily movement amongst many, ready to be replaced by the next—it is a singular frame frozen in time and permanence. This is a monumental materiality, an unmoveable column, and this powerful weight dictates its authority. As Richard Brilliant (1963) outlines in his analysis of the function of gestures in Roman Sculpture ‘the symbolic gesture was used in works of art as a principal instrument of status

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Muybridge's photographs of human live movement seem relevant here, particularly work such as ‘Man Performing Contortions’ from *Animal Locomotion*, 1887. Where the body is stretched and placed into unconventional situations. Artist Mark Wallinger has commented on the ‘cruelty’ ([www.southbankcentre.co.uk/exhibitions](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/exhibitions)) in Muybridge and that the grid in the background of these sequences acts as a ‘peripheral fence at the end of a concentration camp.’ These dehumanizing bodily contortions could be seen following Giorgio Agamben's (1999) idea of the *Muselman* discussed in *Remnants of Aushwitz*.

identification because gestures were familiar social acts and their significance was accessible to all' (Brilliant, 1963, 9). In a culture primarily dependent on face-to-face interactions, artists were used to produce figurative symbols of authority and power using these familiar methods of communication. As the mechanisms to record sound or image were not available, the permanent materiality of marble and the symbolic silence of gestures were utilized as visual rather than oral propaganda. In Roman culture, the study of rhetoric formed an integral part of the education of a political figure and the use of gestures to support speech and meaning was acknowledged as a primary political tool, to influence political peers and the public.

The importance attributed to the symbolic function of bodily movements is also a product of the central position of theatre in Roman culture. The exaggerated body movements of acting in mime replaced the oral articulations of Classical drama, which relied more heavily upon speech, and words to communicate to the audience; 'The complete substitution of the visible for the audible theatre took place in the pantomime which was the delight of the Imperial period' (Brilliant, *ibid*).

*Pantomime*, originally from the Greek *pantomimos*, used to describe a solo dancer who 'imitated all' (pano: all, mimos: mimic), refers to the performative, *symbolic* use of gesture separated from speech, rather than gesticulation which accompanies speech. This relationship between gesture and speech was acknowledged in David McNeill's seminal study of gesture in 2005, which focussed on 'speech linked gesticulation'—those bodily movements that accompany speech, which he distinguished not as 'body language' seen separate to speech, but gesture as a *part of* speech and communication. McNeill uses Adam Kendon's (1988) system of gestural classification to identify the nuanced roles of gesture in Language. Following McNeill (2005), Kendon's findings can be summarized as follows. Firstly, *Speech-Linked Gestures* that act as constituents of sentences themselves, having a grammatical role to convey meaning, for example: 'he went...(gesture right or left)'. Secondly, *Emblems* are conventional signs such as 'OK' or 'Thumbs up'. Thirdly, *Pantomime* describes a single or sequence of

gestures with a narrative line produced without speech. And, fourth is *Sign* language such as ASL.

McNeill ordered these distinctions by their reliance on speech to propose *Kendon's Continuum*. 'As one moves along Kendon's continuum, two kinds of reciprocal changes occur. First, the degree to which speech is an obligatory accompaniment of gesture *decreases* from gesticulation to signs. Second, the degree to which gesture shows the properties of a language increases.' (McNeill, 2005, 6).

With the exception of ASL (which is itself a developed language and active within a relatively small population), pantomime is the gestural distinction most autonomous to speech. It activates narrative that does not rely on speech or words. Accordingly, *The Orator* operates in silence and mimes it's meaning permanently. It does not fade with the relinquishing of a shrug or a pointed finger that closes into a fist and vanishes. Its authoritative function lies in the monumental, historic permanence, and coldness of its materiality.

### ***Sachsenspiegel: The Formality of Hands.***

As with *mediality* and *materiality*, we must also look to enlarge our understanding of gesture's relation to spheres of *formality* and *informality*. The *Sachsenspiegel* is a fourteenth century illustrated document of central importance to the history of German law. The books document law proceedings from the period using text and drawings dominated by enlarged hand gestures. Four large picture books survive and are named after their present day locations in Heidelberg (H, 1295-1305), Oldenburg (O, 1336), Dresden (D, 1295-1363), and Wolfenbuttel (W, 1348-1362/71). As with the Roman Imperial period, oral exchange was the primary form of communication in the Middle Ages, both in everyday informal public interaction, and within institutions of authority such as the law courts. In the thirteenth century written records of court procedures did not exist in Germany (Akehurst, 2005) and the public was scarcely literate. In order to present the oral exchanges that took place during court proceedings to the public, illustrated

pictorial plates were produced, representing the figures engrossed in the trials. Again, the public familiarization with physical expression and bodily interaction rather than printed text prompted the use of hand gestures to form an accurate and trustworthy form of documentation.

They [Sachsenspiegel illustrations] therefore serve to overcome the doubts that a scarcely literate audience may have had about the authority of the book: users could see people taking oath on relics, giving testimony, being charged, presenting cases, and so on, and the judges responses were also rendered visible (Fenster & Smail, 2005, 51).

The illustrators of the Sachsenspiegel employed a detailed system of hand gestures, acting as speaking signs to convey speech. In order to present this gestural linguistic system as the primary focus, the hands themselves were enlarged in an almost comic fashion. Presenting an illustrative key to the hand gestures, Karl von Amira (1905) produced one of the first studies concentrating on the arm and hand positions; attempting to configure an understanding of this specific symbolic system of the Sachsenspiegel gestures. The significance of the Sachsenspiegel, in contrast to other historical figurative representations such as the hieroglyphs, and French cave paintings for example, is the specific relation between gesture, formality, and *informality*.

Where The Orator performs his gestures with the precise rhetorical training familiar to the Roman period and is then *cast* and *fixed* to represent a formal authority in relation to his live subjects, the gestures in the Sachsenspiegel transgress boundaries of informality and formality. The individuals who encounter each other in courthouses inevitably derive from starkly different backgrounds—the judge and the defendant represent polar positions of authority and formality where accents, attire, expression, and gesture are acutely juxtaposed. Yet here, in contrast to the video cameras that represent US celebrity legal trials, or the court drawings that still appear in UK newspapers, the Sachsenspiegel's *primary* language is gesture itself. Although modern day court drawings and the Sachsenspiegel are similarly hand illustrated, the actual grammatical linguistic

structure of the *Sachsenspiegel* is presented as a narrative or story constructed by sequences of gestural images not dissimilar to semaphore. This formal, legal document is composed by the formal gestures of the judge, and the informal gestures of the defendant. These individuals present an array of informal and formal gestures ranging from the pointed finger of the judge to the gestural reference to the ‘rear pudenda’ of a female defendant who showed her dissent to a judge by showing her rear end. The *Sachsenspiegel* shows us that rather than gesture simply becoming a pedagogical, political tool of rhetoric in the Roman era (where formal gestures could be learnt to represent authority and then preserved in marble) informal gestures could be performed and then formalized as *functioning grammar* to constitute an authoritative document.

The orator identifies the figure of authority in terms of his ability to speak / rhetoricize, where the practice, knowledge of grammar, performance, pause and delivery signifies an educated status, placing the speaker in a position of power in relation to those who listen. The *Sachsenspiegel* does something different, it documents *both* social positions of power: the criminal and the judge, in the same linguistic form—illustrated gesture. Here, the representations of these gestures form a common language, assigning the performance of gesture in the courtroom to an authority based upon its archival *permanence* (as an illustration in The *Sachsenspiegel*). But as we have seen in Chapter 1, this permanence contradicts the natural ‘disappearance’ of the initial performative gesture. In effect, the drawings *end* the courtroom gestures as they themselves cease as live, performed language and become aligned with a particular cultural process of historicism.

If we consider performance as ‘of’ disappearance, if we think of ephemerality as ‘vanishing’, and if we think of performance as the antithesis of ‘saving’, do we limit ourselves to an understanding of performance predetermined by a cultural habituation to the patrilineal, West-identified (arguably white-cultural) logic of the archive? (Schneider, 2002, 100).

The drawings also disrupt the ‘liveness’ associated with my reading of Agamben’s analysis of gesture seen as a support to language, revealing the living mediality of



communication. Through the drawings and the ‘authority’ that they hold, the visibility of mediality is lost. However much gesture was involved in the *production* of the drawings—until they are at some point *finished*; where they become ‘evidence’. Instead, let us think about Schneider’s reference to the idea of a history in terms of a ‘body-to-body transmission’.

To read ‘history’ as a set of sedimented acts which are not the historical acts themselves but the act of securing any incident backward – the repeat act of securing memory – is to rethink the site of history in ritual repetition. This is not to say that we have reached the ‘end of history’, neither is it to say that history didn’t happen, or to access it is impossible. It is rather to resituate the site of any knowing as body-to-body transmission. Whether that ritual repetition is the attendance to documents in the library (the acts of acquisition, the acts of reading, writing, education) or the family oral tales of lineage (think of the African American descendents of Thomas Jefferson), or the myriad traumatic re-enactments engaged in both consciously and unconsciously, we refigure ‘history’ onto body-to-body transmission (Schneider, 2002, 105).

In terms of its bodily relations, The Sachsenspiegel is a diagrammatic drawing created by the hand and then manipulated again by the hand to manifest its function as a book. Think of the hand and pen that drew the fingers onto the page, of the careful placement of the book in archives in Germany, and of the handling and reading of this material carried out by myself, through an ongoing process of research, at home and in libraries, and then in turn, stimulating the production of these words on this page which are being followed by a single set of eyes. This process reflects a bodily relation to the document but not necessarily directly to another individual, another body or audience. What Schneider suggests is taken from a broader view—that processes of knowing are transferred between bodies via the material engaged with. Considering Schneider goes on to clarify that this body-to-body transmission should be considered as performance, could we then suppose that this thesis is performative, and furthermore that it performs its own

mediality? ‘We are reading, then, our performative relations to documents and to the documents ritual status as performatives within a culture that privileges object remains. We are reading, then, the document as performative act, and as site of performance’ (Schneider, 2002, 105).

If we accept that an understanding of ‘performance’ implicates a live audience<sup>43</sup>— Schneider’s examples create a problem. The ‘attendance to documents in the library (the acts of acquisition, the acts of reading, writing, education)’ (Schneider, *ibid*) is primarily a private, solitary activity. Whereas ‘the family oral tales of lineage’ (Schneider, *ibid*) suggest the *live delivery* of a narrative with the *intention* of passing on a story, moral tale, or culturally specific event, inherent to rumour or gossip. The ‘audience’ that attends to *this* document here is *you*, the reader, but crucially, this moment of the reception of the document does not share the liveness of its production<sup>44</sup> producing a temporal *lag*<sup>45</sup> between the process of writing and moment of reading. Rather than pose the question of ‘what is performance?’ what is important here is the acknowledgment of the circulation of body-to-body transmissions that are activated both within the *subject* of gesture, and the physical process of *research*.

If we were to ‘rescue’ all language from the potential ‘dangers’ of permanence<sup>46</sup> we should reject words completely, and base language upon the informalities and performative expressions of gesture and speech performance. But this proclamation is not in fact, a wild fantasy—it is an ideology that has held significant credence in the past.

### **Revolt of Language.**

The 1787 French edition of *Azor*, by Pierre-Charles Fabiot Aunillon is an old, leather bound dusty book, hidden away in the recesses of the library. The

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<sup>43</sup> ‘*-noun* 1.a musical, dramatic, or other entertainment presented before an audience.’ dictionary.reference.com/browse/performance.

<sup>44</sup> I am writing this at 9.10pm Friday, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> David Crystal (2001, 34) notes this as a constituent to email communication.

<sup>46</sup> See Jacques Derrida’s critique of Plato’s *Phaedrus* in *Dissemination* (2003 [1972]).

endpapers are marbled and text is pressed deep into each page. *Azor* is a story about a silent island where the inhabitants are mute—using gestures instead of words. A shipwrecked boat brings English merchants to the remote island, where they find a people who use ‘a sign of the head, a gesture of the hand, the movement of a single finger, the contraction or expansion of various parts of the face [to create] an entire speech’ (Aunillon, 1787, 21:277). The English travelers eventually see that the bodily form of communication is not simply ‘primitive’ and tribal but they are ‘so intelligible that these same signs sometimes make us conscious of the falsity of our own words.’

According to Rosenfeld (2001), works of fiction at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century such as *Azor* represent a wider, enlightened cultural awareness of the negative consequences of the transgression of spoken words and their potential for inaccuracy, insincerity, and ambiguity at the time of the French Revolution. This negativity and distrust towards the word induced the term: *l’abus des mots*.

[The French Revolution] brought forth an extraordinary and unanticipated outpouring of words. From street corners to private societies to the newly constituted National Assembly, individual subjects seized the opportunity to make public declarations of their ideas and thoughts. New journals, pamphlets, and other political tracts proliferated, many of them employing titles with terms such as *bouche* and *voix* and *cri* to suggest their connection to this eruption of speech (Rosenfeld, 2001, 127).

It has been proposed that the revolution did not only *witness* these eruptions of speech but was actually *induced* by them. Following Georges Lefebvre (1970 [1932]), it was the orally produced Great Fear of 1789<sup>47</sup> that created a social context conducive for revolution. ‘The panic [the Great Fear] was instantly followed by a vigorous reaction in which the warlike passion of the

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<sup>47</sup> *The Great Fear* occurred between the 20<sup>th</sup> July and the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1789. Impoverished social conditions, increased bread prices and worsening grain supplies stimulated rumours among the peasants that nobles had hired ‘brigands’ (vagrants) to attack them in order to control the new harvest. These rumours circulated vigorously, prompting mass social unrest and violence aimed towards the aristocracy.

revolution was seen for the first time and which provided national unity with an opportunity to appear in its fullest vigour' (Lefebvre, G, 1970 [1932], 211).

Rosenfeld argues that following the 'outpouring', this period of Enlightenment was a moment in history where exceptional attention was placed upon the viability of existing linguistic structures, leading to the development of a general appreciation of the political power of language to shape the future of humanity. During this period, language was seen as a subject that directly related to the success and failures of society at large. Intellectual and social progress were linked to linguistic advancements. Improvements of communication systems were integral to utopian ambition and conversely, malfunctioning communications were seen to be the source of society's problems.

An enlightenment conviction, about the restorative effects of a perfect language, crystal clear and impervious to misuse, encouraged many of the leaders of the French Revolution to believe that deliberate language-planning efforts, in keeping with the principles of "nature", would eventually make possible the creation of a thoroughly consensual and harmonious revolutionary state (Rosenfeld, 2001, 9).

The oral culture was seen to be subject to artificialities and social conventions, and therefore an 'impure' form of communicating thought. Talk was looked upon as a barrier to thought and as with Kierkegaard and Heidegger these voices of the masses were very much seen as a problem. Yet the French thinkers went further, actively proposing the end of words as the primary form of language. For these thinkers who followed Locke, such as Condillac and Rousseau, non-verbal forms of communication based in gesture were more natural and closer to the source of the conception of ideas. For Locke the distance between language and the object or idea was too great. It was impossible to bridge this gap, especially in relation to more theoretical and obscure thought. Not only was the structure of language an impossibility in the sense that it could never truly cater for the rich subjectivities of emotion and feeling, but also humans themselves were guilty of neglecting their responsibility to communicate precisely.

In an effort to re-introduce primordial and ancient forms of non-verbal communication, Condillac argued for the revival of a *langage d'action*. Using the natural responses of a child to its external environment as a central thesis, *langage d'action* used the direct active responses (sound, gesture, expression) induced by the immediate relationship to the object or subject. Focussing on the child before speech, the effect of an object provokes sounds, cries and bodily gestures. These were seen as the *pure* signs for the external world, which did not depend upon an understanding of French, English or any other spoken language. This manifested in the re-emergence of pantomime in the theatre through Jean-Georges Noverre's *ballet d'action*<sup>48</sup> and in the classroom as a pedagogical tool.

In *Emile*, Rousseau proposed that vocabulary should be restricted and replaced by lessons directed by experiment, relations with objects, and experience ref. As with the iconography of Classical Rome, as we have seen, The Orator's power is produced through its gestural pose: 'what was said most vividly was expressed [In Classical Rome] not by words but by signs. One did not say it, one showed it...Alexander placing his seal on his favourite's mouth, Diogenes walking before Zeno—did they not speak better than if they had made long speeches? What series of words would have rendered the same ideas so well?' (Rousseau, 2008 [1762], 395).

Rousseau referred to the priority placed upon pose and gesticulation in Classical Rome as a central feature to his proposed pedagogical approach. Using

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<sup>48</sup> Choreographer, Jean-Georges Noverre used the theatre as the sphere for these linguistic experiments. He aimed to communicate sentiment from his dancers to the audience using a collection of movements, gestures and features that would act as syntax translating words of the heart rather than those of the head. Influenced by Noverre's gestural dance, pantomime began to re-emerge in all corners of the theatrical world: '...short narrated pantomimes, *pieces al la muette* (in which actors spoke only nonsense syllables while miming), parodic English pantomimes, *pieces a ecriteaux* (in which scrolls or placards with dialogue were unfurled to accompany the action), *operas-comiques* combining speech, pantomime and programmatic music and pantomimes accompanied by vaudevilles.' (Rosenfeld, 2001, 63) Noverre's *ballet d'action* rendered words useless and elevated gesture as a primary expressive form, 'each gesture will reveal a thought' (Noverre, 1760). These experiments intended to re-imagine the sphere of social and political order and 'to renew the culture of the present in anticipation of the ideal society of the future. In other words, they hoped that, through pantomimed performance, it would ultimately be possible to re-create the kind of unified, *inter-subjective* moral community devoid of misunderstanding and strife that the *langage d'action* had supposedly once, long before, ensured.' (Rosenfeld, 2001, 58) [My italics].

the orators of Rome as an exemplary example, he encouraged educational institutions and teachers to ‘Clothe reason in a body if you want to make youth able to grasp it...Make the language of the mind pass through the heart, so that it may make itself understood...I shall put in my eyes, my accent, and my gestures the enthusiasm and the ardour that I want to inspire in him [Emile]’ (Rousseau, 2008 [1762], 396).

Rousseau proposed a system of education devoid of verbal signs, activated purely by tangible experiences, things (*les choses*) rather than words (*les mots*). For Rousseau, there were too many words in society at large, and an over attention to academic study, foreign languages, rhetoric and terminologies producing a mass of superficial chatterers using words as a form of status, rather than to forge social bonds. In stark contrast to this position, we have seen, critiques of chatterers and gossip that propose how *baillards* (those who chat) construct their own social networks of empowerment (see Tebbutt, Spacks, Roggoff etc), challenging the desire for a pure language devoid of uncontrollable talk. As we have also seen in Agamben and through the example of *The Orator*, both class and political status can be acutely represented as much through gesture as with the use of spoken words. We can accept these differences in a similar way in which we have noted the contemporary re-interpretation of rumour and chatter after Heidegger and Kierkegaard. What is of importance here is that both the French thinkers and Giorgio Agamben both present gesture as a politically active form of communication. What differentiates these positions is the idea of control.

The Rousseauian idea of a ‘perfect language’ depends upon the *control* of meaning. The very reason gesture was seen to answer the demands after *l’abus des mots* was because of its *stability*—a form less susceptible to subjective subversion.

Agamben and Rousseau’s shared sympathies for the integral role of gesture in a political reading of language begins to contrast if we think about the *completion* of the communicative act. For Agamben gesture’s relevance is in its *support* to communication, exposing its own *mediality*. For Rousseau it is the *stability* of the gestural communicative act to communicate something precisely, which is its strength. This difference can be defined by the criteria employed to

evaluate the potential role of gesture, and this can be seen in simple terms as the difference between *means* and *ends*.

To think of gesture in these structural terms restricts the possibilities that we have discussed, following Schneider's impermanence and Agamben's mediality. This contradicts the individual interpretations of a language based on gestures such as sign language, which can be just as subjectively delivered and received in the same way as speech based language communicating accents, personality, and variation. Sign language is also a medium conducive to rumour and gossip. It is interesting to acknowledge some of the similarities of gesture with the spoken word, in relation to the circulations of story-telling and the firm view of the 'stability' gesture held by Rousseau: 'It's a form of culture which is passed on and is based on tales sometimes almost mythical' (Philibert, 1992).

### **Corporeal Conflict: Gestures of Resolution.**

The examples we have looked at have presented gesture in a politicized context, dependent on the communicative technologies and materials that surround it. The marble materiality of *The Orator* and the hand drawn, enlarged illustrations of the *Sachsenspiegel* represent this relation between gesture, its form of representation and its authoritative status to a particular social and political context. What of gestures today? Who acts as our Orators? And what material form represents them? Before we look at the more informal function of gesture in contemporary forms of communication, I want to first look at the how bodily gesture occupies and informs our understanding of major global political events.

Today, the most significant, official agreements, treaties, and documents are finalized in words as text, and still signed off with ink on paper. Yet, the preliminary disagreements—the arguments and disputes, manifesting in volatile actions of war and conflict—are acted out physically, with guns, bombs, or through the bodily movements of rioters on streets. In recent history, the technologically advanced forms of attack (or 'defense') have been adopted by occupying powers such as the US-led allied army in Iraq and Afghanistan, the

British army in Northern Island, and the Israeli army in Gaza. Here, the body-bag has iconic political status. It has huge significance at home and consequently the physicality of war is avoided at all costs. The predominantly mechanized and computerized actions of these occupying forces are visualized and *mediated* by images of smoke, infrared missile targets, and structural devastation. If we do see bodies on the news, they are of the opposition: children's hands amidst rubble, bent arms, folded ankles, twisted limbs and screaming faces. In contrast to the bodily distancing of occupying forces, the paramilitaries who retaliate against these occupations in Iraq and Palestine use their bodies in the most explicit form—the suicide bomber<sup>49</sup>. Here, the body communicates a message through the tearing of limbs and the shattering of bones. The suicide bomber uses the ultimate destruction of his own physical being as a final act to symbolize a specific, politicized position. The fingers that once pointed, hands and arms that followed and supported words expelled from the mouth, lie amongst glass and other human and architectural debris in a lifeless mess. This point marks the end of bodily gesture but notates a mid-point in its communicative function. The suicide bomber depends on the *mediation* of his final gestural act. The politicization of these dismembered body parts is formed through both the informal (local word-of-mouth/oral) and formal (national / international, media) communication of the act. As the gestures have ceased, they no longer support meaning—here, the physical gesture has produced an *end* point—politicized through its mediation. So rather than gesture acting as a *support* revealing its *mediality*, it has reached an *end* relying on *mediation*.

These 'asymmetrical' Guerrilla (Hardt and Negri, 2006, 51) conflicts that we discussed in Chapter Two, are played out on the borders of disputed sovereignties with the bodily movements of those who resist. When the inevitably temporary 'ceasefire' arrives, what gestures are used to think, discuss, debate, and ultimately decide about these lines that are fought over? Those with power use words over tables in bulletproof conference rooms with translating earpieces and jugs of water to make words slip out more fluidly. Agreements are made by words and then finalized by the pen in text on paper. These significant discussions and

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<sup>49</sup> See Hardt and Negri (2006, 51).



agreements are then represented visually for our mediated world with a parade of gestures.

### **The Global Embrace and The Image of Talk.**

At the opening session of the Middle East conference in Annapolis on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2007, President George W Bush outstretches his arms to both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The tips of the US President's fingers are just visible behind each man as he embraces, not just two men, but the whole world. This is an almost identical replica of the bodily positions of the previous President, Bill Clinton on the White House lawn in 1993, as he stood together with then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat. Ron Edmonds, the White House photographer for the Associated Press explains to Melissa Block on US National Public Radio what he saw in the picture that he captured:

Well, I see a well-orchestrated picture to try and show people what the White House wanted to get out that's gone on that day in the meetings. The question, of course, that day was whether or not Rabin would shake hands or whether Arafat would not shake hands. In fact, it probably would have been a bigger story if they had kind of stood there and looked at each other. I think the president would have had heart failure because for a moment there, he kind of looked like there was a little, slight hesitation, if I remember right, the two kind of looked at one another. And I could see in his eyes that he was thinking, oh, my gosh, if they don't reach and shake hands, I'm done (eblogs.npr.org).

The choreography of this gesture and its potential failure shows us that it is the performance that symbolizes the political currency of the event. What is of note here, especially in light of the Israeli demolition of Gaza 16 years later (Jan 2009), is the redundancy of these final gestures of 'agreement'. The embrace acts as a

repeated bodily performance, which does not represent the success of ‘talks’ but rather an attempt to conceal their continual failure.

From today’s political perspective, Barack Obama is a scholar of the public use of gesture. At The ExCel Centre in London on April 2nd 2009, Gordon Brown welcomed each Head of State in turn in front of the media. Unlike every other leader, Barak Obama managed to out-manoeuvre the British Prime Minister, by holding Brown’s elbow with his left arm while handshaking with his right (repeated 3 times), and then actually placing his arm around Brown’s shoulder in an informal manner. These gestures symbolically suggest that it is Obama who is in fact hosting, and that the true host (Brown) is held in the care of the guest, informally dominated by the embracer.

There is a perpetual stasis here—gesture wants to support meaning, but here nothing is being played out, there is no process to support except the *image of talk* and the status of its gestures. These images do not affect the subject to be considered—The Middle East or the global recession. Instead, they mediate the status of a leader on a global platform. Here, we can see that the power of the everyday gesture, such as the handshake, is dictated by its *mediation*. In terms of peace ‘talks’, the authority of this communicative act is produced through the need for an image to *represent* ‘agreement’ to the world—but the gesture itself has no legal authority. Here, gesture *symbolises* the treaty and writing *authorises* it. The treaty is discussed over long, formal, varnished tables. Words are exchanged via translators who hover (hands ceremoniously clasped behind their backs) behind each party member. Talks, Handshake, Treaty—Speech, Gesture, Writing.

### **Gesture and technology.**

#### ***A question of representation or production?***

Kings Cross St Pancras is an International junction. It is hard to categorise those who frequent this terminal, as one can with other stations such as Liverpool St (majority city bankers), Brixton (majority Afro-Caribbean), Piccadilly Circus (majority tourists) etc. Here, at Kings Cross everybody walks, runs and collides

with each other. After Rimbaud and then, de Certeau and Lefebvre we are familiar with philosophical flaneurism which profiles the everyday nature of human urban activity. As with the window onto the street (Lefebvre, 2004), the Japanese Pachinko halls (Barthes, 1989), and The World Trade Centre roof (de Certeau, 1984), the departure board at Kings Cross St Pancras acts as another portal for these movements of bodies and limbs:

*A small boy follows two steps behind his mother who wheels a large piece of luggage across the concourse. He looks up to the ceiling of the train station—any minute he could trip up. He is staring upwards as his mother rolls on, looking forward for a shop? the toilet? the train? The boy rotates his arms like a windmill as he walks and stares. But these circulations are not in time, they are awkward rotations, trying to catch up with each other. Those in suits seem to walk faster, but not just faster, their bodies have an angular straightness that after watching for a while, I begin to realize starts with the feet and the shoes. Trainers make soft body movements, even at speed. There is a fluidity to the lower limbs, whereas leather shoes and sharp heels make pointed sharp fast movements. I begin to notice the search for time. As there are trains to catch—time is important. The arrival beneath the departure board prompts the search for time, in pockets, bags, and around wrists. The soft trainers push into pockets to retrieve mobile phones and the smart suits twist and raise their wrists presenting a gesture that seems from another era. You can hear leather shoes—where wet trainers and sandals only squeak like trapped mice, shoes notate a precise rhythm. Close your eyes and listen to these clockwork movements across the shiny floor. All that softness disappears and the clipped clapping of calf muscles, balls of feet, ankles and tired thighs mark out sonic pathways to the trains that speed them away from here.*

These gestural identities *are* apparent. There *are* differences, we have not completely ‘lost our gestures’ they exist as I sit at Kings cross—they correspond with a social order, maybe not so pronounced, but these bodies move in ways that

define their identities and separations. In direct contrast to Rousseau and Condillac, Henri Lefebvre suggests gestures are socially constructed rather than being a primarily natural and immediate communicative expression:

Gestures cannot be attributed to *nature*. Proof: they change according to societies, eras. Old films show that our way of walking has altered over the course of the century: once jauntier, a rhythm that cannot be explained by the capturing of images. Everybody knows from having seen or appreciated this that familiar gestures and everyday manners are not the same in the West (*chez nous*) as in Japan, or in the Arab countries. These gestures, these manners, are acquired, are learned (Lefebvre, 2004, 38).

If we accept that gestures have a complicit relationship to the society in which they are performed—that they are, to use a Lefebvrianism, a kind of *dressage*, something that is learnt but at the same time, and contrary to Agamben's premise that we have 'lost our gestures', we must also at the same time concede that they may well have become filtered, normalized, condensed, diluted, and less pronounced than the exaggerated examples of the bourgeois gait. We may well go as far as to say our gestures have been subdued, squashed, *levelled* (Kierkegaard) even. What is apparent in both Agamben and Lefebvre's analysis of gesture is that they both use the presence of exaggerated gesture and gait in film as a cultural measurement of importance and presence in the broader social field. If we were to follow this today, when image and sound are united, we would be hard pushed to find examples where gestural behaviour is as primary as it was with the films of Charlie Chaplin, Etienne-Jules Marey, and Auguste and Louis Lumiere. Rather than looking at gesture's cultural significance through its *representation* in transforming cultural technologies such as photography (Muybridge) and film (Chaplin) we should now look at the significance and choreography of gesture *produced* by these technologies.

### **A Gesture of Distance: *The Poke*.**

We have looked at some recent examples of the political *mediality* of gesture through the suicide bomber and the peace treaty handshake, existing within a westernized political mainstream. I now want to focus on those more informal uses of gesture that are employed in direct relation to, and as part of our constantly transforming communication networks. As with our encounters with mediated news events, the geographical *distance* between the storyteller or sender, and the receiver of information are often great. Whether technology has *reacted* to the unprecedented social migratory movements across the globe in the last century or has indeed *encouraged* it, is a complex question not to be answered in this thesis, yet what is important here is to recognize the impact of these geographic social separations upon the technologies, tools and forms of our communications. Globalization has produced movement in all directions due to issues of political asylum, economic migration, flexible job markets, and conflict. Now more than ever, we are aware of the distance that our communication networks must overcome to re-connect these dislocated social networks. New technologies have endeavoured to make these distances seem smaller, allowing conversations to be *visualized* simultaneously to speech (skype), and *mobile* through speech and text (online mobile / cell communication).

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*Today, people talk out loud to themselves in public. They move through spaces chattering but are rarely in close physical proximity. People talk to others who are not there, imagining their faces while simultaneously connected to invisible networks. Mobile phone consoles themselves are often hidden from sight. There was a time when those individuals who spoke aloud to themselves in public were at the same time announcing some sort of psychiatric disorder, but now the use of 'hands-free' phones have confused these assumptions. As we wander through public spaces, externalizing internal conversations, our actions simulate the symptoms of those suffering from communicative 'dysfunction'. In a café, I heard*

*a car crash. It was a mobile phone ring-tone. Then, waiting for a friend to return from the toilet, I noticed his phone on the wooden table in front of me. After a few seconds it too 'rang' and vibrated, sliding over the wooden tabletop. 'Knock knock knock' the sound of knocking on a wooden door—the phone's ring-tone was mimicking the material it rested on.*

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A walk through any public space today presents a sonic field of audible symbols announcing communicative acts taking place. Throughout history, the sound of the production of communication has been heard alongside its content; the scratches of a inked quill on paper, telephone rings and type-writer<sup>i</sup> clattering. Yet, today these communicative announcements are becoming an integral component of language.

The re-emergence of the Apple brand is based on design based on simplicity and primal function, exemplified by the iphone. Central to the global success of the iphone are the 'finger-tip' control features which allow the user to adopt 'swipe-gesturing functionality' to activate the handset, presenting command features that act out the required function. For example, when scrolling down a screen, instead of pressing an icon, the fingers are used as if miming a flick or scroll down a page. The gesture acts out the function, enhancing speed and increasing the cognitive coherence of the communicative act. It is rumoured (cultofmac.com) that Apple are currently applying for a patent to extend the gesture functionality of the iphone handset from single 'finger swipes' to 'multi-touch' gestures: 'If a single finger left-swipe might delete a letter, a two finger left-swipe could delete a whole word, and a three finger left-swipe could delete a line. Similarly, a single finger right-swipe could add a space, while a two finger right-swipe could add a period. Up swipes and down swipes could also invoke different functions based on the number of fingers used' (ibid, cultofmac.com). These gestural tools of contemporary communication consoles act out the physicality of previous processes of communication technology. If we take the rumoured erasure command for the iphone 'a two finger left swipe', we can

identify that the gesture is in fact less representative of a rubber ‘eraser’ and more illustrative of the smudging or rubbing out of a white board or chalkboard. This suggests the ephemeral nature of letters and words as chalk dust on blackboards, but also of the material presence of words as chalk on slate before they are ‘erased’.<sup>50</sup> The presence of a gesture associated with the removal of chalk dust on a vertical surface as a technological advancement from the ‘tapping’ of keys, which refers closely to the typewriter, demonstrates two things. Firstly, that there is an advancement in re-connecting with more ‘primitive’ forms of communication such as organic material on walls (cave paintings of Lascaux), and secondly that there is an acknowledged removal of the intermediary tool of communicative production (type writer / keyboard) played out through the *tapping* or *pressing* of keys. Key taps acknowledge the form of the instrument (the lay out of letters on the keyboard / the sound of a key) whereas the chalk gesture acknowledges the movement of the hand, or communicative gesture in relation to the visual presentation of the word.

*Skype* offers the (almost) real-time visualization of the communicative encounter, enabling both speakers to perform expressions and gestures, laughter and smiles that can be identified alongside words and speech. Gestures are physically far apart yet ‘virtually’ occurring in a single time/space dynamic between those specific individuals. *Facebook* uses uploaded images as its central tool in creating networks of social activity, in the form of comment, tags, and walls. Yet, as with email and mobile phone messaging, the primary form of communication is text.

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<sup>50</sup> The recent games console innovation Wii specifically enhances the *corporeal* relationship with a virtual narrative. Once again, the physical, gestural control of virtual tools is central to design. Social discussions relating to the increases in obesity relating to the deteriorating activity associated with computer games has lead Nintendo to introduce WII. Nintendo Wii wi-fi connection allows virtual gestures to interact with any player anywhere in the world, sharing a gestural physicality with a ‘foreign’ user. ‘The Wii console returns gaming to simpler times while innovating game development at the same time’ ([www.nintendo.com/wii/what](http://www.nintendo.com/wii/what)). Nintendo explicitly outlines the difference in using the appropriate gesture for the appropriate action: ‘ With Wii’s unique Wii Remote controller, Nintendo puts you in the heart of the action. Forget about pushing a button to start a golf backswing. Wii lets you swing the club! Don’t push a button to swing a sword, actually swing the sword. Video games have always been part of you, now you can be a part of them’ (ibid).

The *poke* feature on Facebook is a text alert that appears on a users profile page saying ‘you have received a poke from...’ This ‘poke’ was created by the designers of Facebook as a tool ‘to be interpreted by the user’ and has been used in varying forms but it clearly intends to act in the same way as a nudge, or prod of an elbow to get attention. It is an action constructed in the same form as all the other words on Facebook, yet this word, *poke*, is figured into the system to arrive separately from other words that form short messages, and greetings. It is at once a word made up of four letters appearing as digitized text on a screen and at the same time it is a symbol for a physical act. It does not intend to mean anything more than an acknowledgement of the presence of the sender or *poker*. In effect, it works like a ‘hello’ or ‘how are you’ which in England annoys so many foreigners who take the question seriously; ‘how are you?’, or ‘how you doing?’ does not mean what it implies. Rather, it announces ‘we are here, lets begin to communicate’. It is an acknowledgement of two parties encountering each other, or more precisely, anticipating communication with one another.

Online discussion about the poke reveals opinions such as “There isn’t much of a point, except maybe to signal you wanted to say something but don’t have the time or strength to write something’ (answers.yahoo.com/question/index). This comment reactivates historical criticisms of chatter—including Kierkegaard and Heidegger—that are largely based on the premise that a developing technological age produces new forms of communication, inducing more *volume* of talk rather than a higher *value* of talk. For these critics, the advancing age exhausts its speakers, it reduces time leant to extended communication; it takes the strength from its user. For these critics, the poke would be the ultimate figure of distrust—a figure of communication so removed from *internal* conceptual engagement and interaction that it is produced merely to represent a presence, rather than to discuss or exchange any content of value. This criticism is produced in terms of a failure to reflect upon a particular subject. Yet, as I have noted previously, there is an alternative approach to this *phatic* communication first noted by Malinowski (1946) that does not measure in terms of *reflection* but by *action*. ‘In its primitive uses, language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of



action and not an instrument of reflection' (Malinowski, 1946, 312). Rather than seeing communicative actions such as gossip and the poke as a failure to *reflect*—increasing the distance from the world and its subjects, following Malinowski, we could propose that the poke should be interpreted in terms of a communicative *act* of human behaviour. But what is this act and how does it function?

### **The Proximity of Text.**

Communications made on social networking sites, such as email and via text messaging, are sent as digitalized text. Although these tools offer the option of 'instant' messaging, the majority of communication acts as textual deposits or *Netspeak* (Crystal, 2001, 28-48), collected by the recipient seconds, minutes, hours, or days after they were originally typed. This dislocation, or *lag* (Crystal, 2001, *ibid*), contrasts distinctly with oral speech. 'It [Writing] initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist' (Ong, 1983, 82). Rather than this idea of the silencing of communication in place of the sound of the spoken word, we should acknowledge that there is a replacement of the sound of speech with the announcement of its *act* (in the form of text message *bleeps* and email arrival *boings*). Walter Ong continues to note the 'artificial' nature of writing in contrast to the 'natural' process of oral speech but in contrast to Kierkegaard and Heidegger, Ong suggests that this *artificial* form of language is an integral condition of realizing our 'human potentials'.

To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness. Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many

ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. This writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does (Ong, 1983, 82).

This re-introduction of the positive possibility of distance or *alienation* produced by the process of writing deserves a moment of thought. Contrary to the philosophical efforts of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Rousseau and Condillac who pursue a language at ‘close’, if not immediate, proximity to the speaker, both Ong and Agamben see the alienation or separation from this ‘pure’ or ‘natural milieu’ as an integral constituent in gaining a linguistic consciousness. For Ong, this *distancing* is produced through writing/text/ technology and for Agamben through spectacle. If we are to look back again at the action of the poke in Facebook we can see that this communicative tool functions on both Agamben’s and Ong’s terms.

Firstly, we must accept that online social networking follows Debord’s idea of spectacle in terms of a technological development of instant social contact controlled by ‘administrators’ (as below). We can then see how the inherent alienation of spectacle creates a linguistic separation where singular authorities and specific contents fail, while the act and processes of communication are revealed (see Agamben, 2000, Chapter One).

If the social requirements of the age which develops such techniques can be met only through their mediation, if the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such “instant” communication, it is because this “communication” is essentially *one-way*; the concentration of the media thus amounts to the monopolization by the administrators of the existing system of the means to pursue their particular form of administration (Debord, 1994 [1973], 20).

What is important to note here, is the contradictory positions presented by the majority of the ‘administrators’ of 2.0 social networking sites. The central premise of the transformation from web 1.0 to 2.0 was a transfer of power or control from

the company (who used websites to run their business) to the user (who uses the website as a personal social tool). Recent market values of Facebook, Myspace and Flickr have rendered this ‘transfer of power’ impotent, or at least, simply not a transfer at all. We can see that figures such as Michael Zuckerman (who co-founded Facebook), act as ‘administrators’ to this existing market system, underlining the argument that web 2.0 can be seen as complicit to the system of spectacle.

Firstly, regarding the poke as a (virtual) gesture we have seen how it exists in its own inter-subjective mediality as it communicates a potential communicability: ‘It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality’ (Agamben, 2000, 57).

And secondly, this virtual poke is communicated not as an actual physical nudge but in text on a screen (Poke) forming both a temporal, and psychological distance through *lag* (Crystal, 2001) as well as through the nature of alienation produced by the written word. Following Ong, these distances could be seen to provide ‘uplifting’ interior transformations of consciousness. These alienations and distances associated with the poke presents gesture acting in text, and as part of a technologized system—enhancing a relationship with the interiorities of language which occupied the work of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Rousseau.

‘Technologies are artificial, but- paradox again- artificiality is natural to human beings. Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it’ (Ong, 1983, 83).

An important additional conceptual contrast is found in the understanding of *reflection*. As Kierkegaard saw the ‘coils and seductive uncertainty of reflection’ (Kierkegaard, *The present age*, 1940, 5) encouraging ‘his *milieu* [to form] around him and a negative intellectual opposition’ to force the individual ‘to do nothing’, Ong and Agamben see the visibility of the means of communication as a productive, *reflective* process, identifying a ‘properly internalized’ mental process of communication, produced through the externalization of the production of communicative activities. In this regard, the function of the poke combines the

metaphorical physical proximity of a poke gesture with the geographical/physical distance between speaker and addressee inherent to social networking.

### **Poke War: Internal / External Repetitions.**

*As I write now upon this keyboard I can see the letters I use most frequently (repetitively) identified by their gradual erasure. I tap, or do I prod? Or maybe I even poke these disappearing letters? A flow of writing, maybe even this paragraph—produces a lightness over keys that I could not really describe as a prod or a poke, rather a patter perhaps. But towards an end of a section, where a paragraph break won't suffice, when there is something more final—I use the full stop or the return key, heavier on the keys than a tap, as a performed exclamation and this I think is more a prod or a poke than a tap.*

One of the consequences of online temporal *lag* (Crystal, 2001) is a sense of *ambiguity* less present in face-to-face talk. This ambiguity allows space for further, extended thought on the behalf of individual speakers between sentences, but also emotional and mental distraction away from the addressee and subject of discussion. These lags can be produced by variables such as computer and software error, differing time-zones, individual online routine, and creates spaces between conversations conducting a specific *rhythm* of conversation contrasting greatly with 'live' face-to-face speech.

Evolving forms of communication have their own inherent *signature rhythms*. The scratches on the walls that formed the Palaeolithic Chauvet cave paintings in the Ardeche, the carefully paced gestures of Roman rhetoric, repetitively dipped inked quills, typewriter thudding and clatter, telephone rings and now mobile and keyboard touch pads. In particular, the poke is a striking example of a tool of communication that has developed its own rhythm: the tool has been used to instigate what is known as 'poke war'. When one Facebook user receives a poke from another there is a 'poke back' feature. This allows an

immediate response and has led to perpetual exchanges of pokes. A barrage of pokes arrive one after another, and a barrage are sent back. Abstracted in a similar way to Morse code, acting as a series of repeating announcements, yet there is no code or language that measures the choreography of the poke war. These abstract, repeat, and restage the same symbolic nudge.

The dual meaning of *the everyday* and *le quotidien* found, in the English and French language, reveals the basis behind Henri Lefebvre's work on rhythms and repetition (2004). Here, *le quotidien* translates as both the everyday and the mundane, but also the repetitive. In effect, everything has its own rhythm; 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is a **rhythm**' (Lefebvre, 2004, 15) [his emphasis]; implicating gestures, actions, situations, birth, growth, festivals, celebrations to a proposed *rhythmanalysis*.

One of the central themes in Lefebvre's work on rhythm concerns the symbiotic rhythm of the internal (bodily) and external (social). (The internal rhythms are largely hidden, as with repeating processes of organs such as the heart. Fluctuating rhythm can be felt by the individual but not witnessed externally and are therefore private). The exception lies with respiration, where emotion and physical exertion produces a change in rhythm, announced publicly through the gasping of breath or marking of clothes with sweat. So in effect the repeating, internal bodily functions begin to identify themselves to the external world.

He [the rhythmanalyst] listens – and first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms. His body serves as a metronome. A difficult task and situation: to perceive distinct rhythms distinctly, without disrupting them, without dislocating time. This preparatory discipline for the perception of the outside world borders on pathology yet avoids it because it is methodical. All sorts of already known practices, more or less mixed up with ideology, are similar to it and can be of use: the control of breathing and the heart, the uses of muscles and limbs, etc (Lefebvre, 2004, 20).

When we use a computer or a mobile telephone we are dislocated from the recipient. And at the same time, we can dislocate ourselves from the local environment—focusing on the conversation with this absent partner. The bodily movements of communicative rhythm (thumb tapping, screen touching, key pressing) occur in isolation from the recipient but often in this public situation surrounded by unknown individuals (public transport, the street, cafes etc). We are frequently in situations where we share a public space with those who similarly perform their private conversations through the movements of their hands rather than mouths. In the café, or on the bus we are exteriorising the *act* of communication—performed by the movement of our fingers and hands, these repetitive gestures work as a measure of an act of communication rather than a measure of content.

We also email at home in silence and in complete isolation from the outside world. Here, alone with the laptop on the kitchen table, no one witnesses the movements of our hands that form the messages that we send. The act and content arrive almost simultaneously within the ‘inbox’ of the recipient but there is no reference to the bodily mode of production (fingers/hands). The poke conversely is a self-reflexive message, as it *points* to its own production. When looking at formal identifications of the word poke it is notable that the majority of definitions refer to ‘the arm’, ‘finger’ or ‘stick’ as the thing that pokes.

### **The Inter-subjectivity of The Poke.**

‘Inter-subjectivity involves the speaker’s attention to the addressee as a participant in the speech event, not in the world talked about, and hence it arises directly from the interaction of the speaker with the addressee’ (Traugott & Dasher, 2005).

For Mika Ishino; ‘subjectivity is defined as speakers’ attitudes, emotions, or viewpoints/perspectives towards what they say.’ (Ishino, 2007, 244) Whereas

inter-subjectivity refers to the meaning produced by the speaker's relation to the addressee as a participant in a speech act not by what is said. The inter-subjectivity between two or more individuals engaged in (face-to-face) talk can produce meaning related to status (as we saw earlier in this Chapter), but can also produce a spatial awareness of other potential narratives which can be played out as part of the present speech exchange, 'the existence of an addressee in physical space makes it possible for the speaker to point to the addressee from another perspective' (Ishino, 2007, 249). This could be seen in a discussion between two people, where speaker 1 narrates a previous exchange she has had with another individual. In this narration, speaker 1 may use a pantomime gesture like pointing the index finger to retell an accusatory gesture towards her. This gesture transforms the inter-subjective relations of the exchange—speaker 1 becomes her previous accuser and the addressee becomes speaker 1.

This gestural choreography relating communication to space and character is a central tool in deaf communication. Nicolas Philibert's documentary *Le Pays des Sourds*, 1992 (In The Land of the Deaf), is a portrait of a deaf community in France where we follow the stories of a class of young children. In the introduction to the film, Philibert acknowledges the spatial similarities between sign and the cinematic: 'Sign language is a set of close ups, wide shots and medium shots. It's a set of consecutive shots like in a shooting script with zoom and camera movements' (Philibert, 1992). The relationship between film production and Sign Language emphasises the visually dominated world of the deaf. SL literally acts out numerous inter-subjectivities in varying time / space dynamics. The Signer directs the addressee to follow the narrative as a camera would, using hands to refer to angles, horizons, faces looking up from below, figures entering doorways. The signer also positions the characters around them using the angle of the body, the eyes, gaze and gestures to construct a set of characters acting in relation to a camera.

This is interesting in relation to the poke, primarily for *spatial* reasons. The poke is a deictic gesture, literally pointing to another space. It is conceived, activated, sent from one location via a physical bodily act, usually performed with the 'mouse' component (responsible for controlling the pointer, arrow or finger

cursor). The poke is sent using a similar movement of the fingers as a *poke* (as noted above) and is performed in physical presence—a precise movement of the fingers to assert a directional impact upon another object, subject, material. As we have already noted, the activation reflects its symbol but the physicality of its activation is absent. This occurs through the deictic inter-subjectivity produced through reading text (‘You have received a poke from...’). Inter-subjective meaning here, contrary to Ishino (who focuses his attention on face-to-face inter-subjectivity), is framed around physical *absence* rather than presence. The poke points to an imaginary *space* where two bodies meet. One is touching the other; this is another (virtual) space that both the sender and addressee inhabit. This inter-subjective deictic gesture at distance alludes to another narrative where both ‘speakers’ are present. The poke proposes the possibility of an inhabited, shared space, but crucially does not actualize it; it is a *means* to proximity.

In the director’s introduction, Philibert explains both the universality and spatial relations of contemporary sign language. This language based on highly descriptive expression, eye contact and gesture can ‘express and address every domain of thought, every nuance. It can deal with abstraction, philosophy, the most technical languages, poetry.’ Although SL has its own culturally specific national identities, it has a highly accessible basic form, which can be quickly interpreted by a signer from any country; this helps to construct a universal culture through language.

I have presented the poke as a figure to represent the proliferation of communicative *acts*<sup>51</sup>. Here, we recognize the poke as a condensed example of the short, quick, repeated communications that constitute our social networks. Through first acknowledging a desire and necessity to investigate those communications that don’t necessarily signify some grand dialogue, or subject, we can instead propose meaning through the *process* of exchange rather than through the *content* of exchange. Following these terms and looking at gesture’s informal performative support to language presented by Agamben (2000), we have seen that technological tools of communication have affected our gestural relations

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<sup>51</sup> To distinguish the diverse and intricate variations of Internet language, symbols and grammar see David Crystal’s work on Internet Language (2005, 2009).



since the tapping of keys to configure profiles on social networking sites become the solitary, private bodily performances of communicative transactions. These volumes of quick, anecdotal interactions do not represent a passive solitude as Heidegger would see it, and the uncontrollable amounts of words which deviate and escape in text, delivered every second should not provoke those fears of *l'abus des mots*. On the contrary, we have seen other ways of reading, which combine approaches suggesting abstract potentials in alienation (Agamben, 2000), technological time lapses (Crystal, 2001), rhythm (Lefebvre, 2004), distance in text (Ong, 1982), and inter-subjectivity (Ishino, 2008). These acknowledgements provide us with enriched vocabulary, from which to pursue a politicized understanding of gesture in a contemporary context.

**‘The Conclusion’,**

or *Performing the Future* of Chatter.

No one can speak of the future of “chatter” without delaying its future. Therefore, when the topic of discussion comes around to “chatter,” anticipations and delays, thus a certain uneasiness, idleness, and, boredom, are not only expected; they are, as it were, the rule. Conclusions, however well intended, rely on a present tense or on a future present and therefore break the rule of “chatter,” transforming its idleness into work, its emptiness into fulfillment, its suspension into sublation (Fenves, 1993, 245).

Since I first mailed a full draft of this manuscript to an editor late in the summer of 1991, the following rumors and contemporary legends have come to my attention. Rather than try to incorporate them fully into the book, I have opted simply to identify them here and acknowledge that I have not probed them as thoroughly as I might have. I will also identify those aspects of these new rumors that warrant further study (Turner, 1993, 221).

After ‘introducing’ this thesis with two distinct quotes, I will now ‘conclude’ with two more. The words of Herodotus and Dylan Thomas began an engagement with a subject that marvels in its own ephemeral nature, narrative freedom and disregard for the verified, the documented, the accountable and the authorized. The words above represent the temporal conundrums of addressing a subject within a convention such as a ‘conclusion’.

Academic convention understands that a ‘conclusion’ should be seen to act across temporal zones that constitute a project; commenting on what has been done (past), how things stand (present), and what this leads to (future). Yet we must still accept that when we speak of a possibility of the future we are defining this future *in terms of* the present. This confines any ‘future’ understanding of talk and chatter, in a context of evolving forms of communication technology and political contexts, to analysis written or considered ‘now’, or more accurately—‘then’ (the date of authorship inevitably pre-dating the date of reading). We

should acknowledge the temporal context of ‘conclusion’ and its affects upon its subject however ‘inconclusive’ or transitory we see this moment as being, in order to re-articulate a conclusion in terms of a *stage* supporting a *performance* of its subject rather than a ‘summing up’. ‘This suspension [inherent to chatter] is made accessible to reading once texts are recognized as performances of this very suspension’ (Fenves, 1993, 244). Following Fenves, we can identify the elements of the project (practice and text) as processes that extend the ‘suspensions’ inherent to the subject of informal language exchange.

With this in mind, I want to look upon this point of the thesis in the same way that a theatrical performance is constructed. As a stage set where props, scripts, actors and director are gathered together and as the final page turns or the curtain is drawn, these elements are gone—existing as a *resonance* of a subject; leaving a clean, empty stage that has supported its ‘suspensions’, rather than reducing it to a finalized ‘sublation’. This stage therefore accepts the idea of summary rather than conclusion.

### **A Relation to Subject: Proximity of Practice.**

The text element of the thesis has heard reference to ‘being-in-language’ (Agamben, 2000, 59), distance [from language] (Ong, 1982, 82) ‘touched [by language] with its essential being’ (Heidegger, 1971, 59). These evaluations have presented preoccupations with the individual’s *proximity to* language—its presence, appearance, ownership, and authorship. I have understood this relationship in terms of the way in which language engages and interacts with a specific technological (poke) or public context (demo rustle). These abstractions should not be seen as ‘empty’ *deactivations* of linguistic consciousness, but rather as its *activation*. This theoretical understanding of ‘proximity’ can be extended to both a physical and methodological evaluation of the processes that constitute this project.

During this project, the processes of reading, discussing, thinking, writing and making art works progressed and developed in temporal relation to its subject.

The processes of construction—of cutting and pasting, re-drafting essay plans, organizing film shoots, taking notes, talking through ideas, examining gallery plans, and curatorial decision making produced deviations and alternative pathways. These directions were not only informed by *existing* research material (art works, texts, cultural sources) but also by the *transforming* topical nature of contemporary discourse itself. There is a complex methodological camaraderie here, in the sense that when *you* (the subject of “contemporary chatter”) do one thing, *I* (the author) will do (write, make, present) another, in relation to ongoing research. This is more of a collective network of associations and responses rather than a simple dyadic text/practice dynamic. This process evolved into a truly *conversational* relationship, acutely relevant to this particular project, where the ‘call and response’ process of research mirrored the truly conversational nature of its subject. When I step back to look upon this ‘conversation’, it is evident that the actual process of research has incorporated a vast array of activities and sources ranging from academia, popular culture, politics, art work and artists through to everyday experiences, overheard conversations, mobile phone ring-tones and observations of gestures in public spaces. In a sense, I have engaged with these sources at close proximity, inducing a close physical relation to a subject that I am at the same time *part of*, and *witness to* (as is anyone who ‘communicates’ today). What is acutely interesting for me at this ‘stage of suspension’, is to acknowledge the fluctuating proximity of both art practice and theoretical text elements, in relation to the subject of interest and process of production. Due to the methodological nature of my work, there is evidence of both *presence* and *absence* (distance) of authorship in the practice and text elements of the project. This *presence*, or close physical proximity is identified through the hand made cuts of pasted collage, and the anecdotal reference to the personal encounter that punctuates the text (placing the author at a close proximity to the subject), while a sense of physical *absence*, or distance of authorship is marked by conceptual projects such as *Review* (2004, 2007, 2009) or the outsourcing of manufacture; *Box with the Sound of its Own Making* (2009), and the ontologically removed, theoretically externalized nature of academic research (see Nancy Miller, 1991, *Getting Personal*, Chapter One).

If we are to look at the project as a whole, we can see more specifically where these ‘proximities’ are activated, and how their symbiosis is influenced by the methodological conversational camaraderie I have noted above. Throughout the written element of the project, the anecdotal ‘interruptions’ have intended to position both myself as author, as well as the reader in varying proximities to the central subject of informal communication. This leads in Chapter Three, to a discussion based upon the corporeality of abstract sounds that are produced at varying physical proximity to a collective protest. Additionally, the text is dotted with illustrations of occurrences witnessed personally at *close hand*—the observations of gestures in train stations, the tapping of keys on a laptop, or the sound of crowds from afar for example. At the same time the text presents academic analysis, references, quotes and ideas that approach the subject from an ontologically abstract and *removed* perspective. In some ways these conferring and contrasting ‘voices’ (thought in written text) of academics, theorists and philosophers mirror those of the *babble* of chatter. Yet, the authority of these words and their context (the academy) dislocate themselves from the informalities of the subject.

Working with collage, my hands are physically engaged with the medium of the subject to which the work refers. There is a close physical proximity between authorship and construction. The coldness of the surgical steel, in contrast to the warm and soft, grainy nature of the newspaper produces a physical, sensory nature to the material process of making. This is mirrored conceptually, in terms of spectatorship. The decisions I make in constructing these works are determined by an ambition to influence the viewers’ critical relation to the image they are consuming. This is achieved by inducing visual scrutiny at close proximity (see *In Complete Darkness*, 2007 in appendix). In contrast, I have made conceptually-based projects where my physicality and authorship are almost entirely removed, revealing the project as a set of instructions to another person. These practices present differing proximities to materiality (newspaper, knife, cutting mat), spectatorship (work encountered from afar / at close inspection) and concept (as a set of instructions).

There should be no qualitative evaluation of these proximities, rather, an understanding that these processes offer different physical and intellectual relations with the objects/work that is produced. Thus, invoking a sense of distance to a *concealed* message; or *blurred* linguistic content being contained within the work. A major constituent of much of the practical work is this sense of *being invited into* a material process, where a message is evidently being communicated, and with which the viewer is simultaneously engaged (the system or conventions of looking at art—simultaneously visualizing beauty, craft, material construction for example). This element of the practice directly mirrors the preoccupation with the visibility of a mediality of communication, proposed in Chapter Four using the figure of the Poke.

The written element of the project is engaged with the structures, networks and media of communication in order to induce an activated and informed familiarization with *forms* of contemporary chatter. This *making visible* of examples that represent the materiality of communication rather than content, is also overtly evident in specific art works produced within this project (see appendix). For example: *An Invitation to Ieva* (2009) where a nine year old girl was invited to curate a solo show, and the sculptural film work *Words That Fold Out to Make Screens* (2009). The works invite the viewer into the conceptual and material exhibition of both the processes of gallery conventions and the techniques inherent in presenting ‘a story’ in the media (respectively). Both these works implicate the viewer’s ‘reading’ of the work as a way of highlighting and revealing the mediality of the *act of looking* and cognition.

The text and practice elements of this project present an approach that suggests that an understanding of communication supposedly ‘devoid’ of content, can identify a *fabric of critical consciousness*. To do this I have thought through politics, both in a multidisciplinary art practice, and also in terms of the muffled shouts and overheard conversations, unseen gestures and indistinguishable tapping, noted in text. This focus mirrors those political concealments that are delivered and manipulated, obscured and blurred, and from which much of our meditated perceptions of the world around us are derived—an informed, coherent,

and active navigation of which can produce an ‘ongoing’, critically conscious relation to evolving forms of talk, chatter and the image.

### **Running behind the Subject.**

As I noted in the Introduction, the impossibility of ‘catching up’ with your subject is felt in relation to the particular subject that concerns this thesis and is even more acutely relevant here, at the ‘conclusive’ stage. I sympathize with Turner above (and cited in Chapter One), as she identifies the impossibility of including a comprehensive collection of research sources regarding an endlessly transforming subject. There is an appropriate *spluttering* and *babbling* of voices here, as the processes of research, academic convention / structure, and the practices of writing and art-making collide. Rather than becoming a predicament, this methodological cacophony should be seen as a context within which this particular project coherently resides.

There is nothing ‘new’ in re-contextualizing the role of the conclusion<sup>52</sup>, yet what is of value here, is that in doing so we can open up, and continue the ‘suspensions’ of a subject characterized by impermanence and instability within a specific system of convention and structure. Acknowledging the activity of this particular element of the project, within the frame or format of a conclusion, allows us to make visible the *mediality* of the subject itself within the academic frame that it resides. As we have seen, it is this agency of language operating within a specific network, form, or structure that occupies both the central discussion over the last Chapters and the recent artwork I have produced. Rather than see ‘a conclusion’ as the antithesis to chatter and those informal discourses that I have followed, as identified by Fenves, I prefer to present the *visibility* of the investigation of that subject subject’s presence within a ‘conclusion’ as an illustration, embracing the *specific* theoretical concerns of this project that, in fact, *act out* the conflicts and concerns that the project presents.

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<sup>52</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s preface to Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1997 [1967]), p.xiii.

Only just this morning I came across an article entitled ‘Humanitarianism 2.0’<sup>53</sup> (Giridharadas, New York Times, 21.03.10) that incited immediate interest, in relation to the discussions in Chapter Two, regarding the political power of networked acts of communication. Rather than introducing it in to the existing Chapter, I feel that it is more valuable here, in the conclusion, not for its content (relevant to Chapter Two) but to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the investigation of that subject while simultaneously engaged in the process of writing. If I were to insert the reference for its content value, it would now be planted somewhere within Chapter Two, but as I want to use this article to talk about how it *acts* in relation to the *process* or *form* of the thesis construction, it is presented here, at ‘the end’. This counter-instinctive editorial decision provokes a reading of a source that is not defined by its content but rather by a *relation to* source material. It also shuts the door in a sense, avoiding the scrabbling inertia of research described by Turner (above). If I were to allow this reference access to Chapter Two, I would tomorrow have to open the door to Chapter Three, or Four..?

### **Making the Blurring Visible.**

In the previous pages, we have seen how informal discourses can act as resistance in opposition to various forms of oppression, and that this political tool can be thought of in terms of both its *content* and its *form*. Presenting recent arguments such as those of Turner, Tebbutt and Butt, we have seen how the cultural context of face-to-face oral exchange builds social bonds and networks that act in opposition to the constraints and oppressions of an imposing authority. Where this work (broadly based within discourses of cultural studies) focuses on speech, a re-articulation of these politicized arguments was demanded, provoking an analysis

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<sup>53</sup> The article refers to The Ushahidi Web platform, which is an Internet mapping tool created after the election violence in Kenya 2007. By charting every anonymous text message relating to a specific event, a real time database provides an instantaneous map or ‘surges’ of activity pointing to the same village or urban quarter for soldiers, police, medics or humanitarian workers to focus their activities. The system was used to pinpoint victims during the earthquake in Haiti, Jan 2010.



related to communication in terms of *technology* and its abstract activation such as nudges, sounds, and repetitions. Where face-to-face exchanges had once activated some possibility of resistance, I have proposed the same questions in terms of the *act* and *form* of communications in distance and physical absence from one another (networked through the communicative medium rather than bodily presence). I have argued that there is cause to think of these communicative exchanges in terms of political agency, yet to do so we must realign our perspective and repose our questions. By proposing an approach that engages with and calls upon, social and cultural theory as well as political philosophy, we can create a context from which to point to the positive nature of contemporary communications. Looking at how we *relate to* the structures of contemporary language and perception, in order to assert an informed political cognition. We have seen in Chapter Three, how these corporeal proximities can be identified—in the bodily presence of the collective, through the physicality of the demonstration and in terms of an abstracted noise, rather than a precise, political message.

We have seen how online Networks provide political agency in a variety of means, including governmental financing (Obama'08), grass roots activism (Avaaz, Anti Genocide Campaign etc) and public journalism (global mediation of Iranian protests on twitter and Facebook for example). Yet to limit the discussion here is insufficient. We have seen in this project, that political agency can be seen interpreted in terms of *language* and that online social networks offer a 'space' from which to ask the same questions that were asked of rumour and gossip—those of a potential resistance that activates a linguistic consciousness. We have seen that this resistance is present not simply in the networked organization of protest (Hardt & Negri) but more specifically in terms of our *relation to* language as technologized *chatter*. I have argued that we should see language *becoming visible* through our formalized relation to it. This visibility of acts, inter-subjective exchanges, distances, networks and gestures—that I have referred to, can be seen as a *utopic* consciousness of language.

Rather than simply accept that we live in a culture of simplified codes, sound bite and advertising slogans (and that this is negative, i.e in the work of Virilio, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Krauss, Bourdieu etc), this project has

deliberately immersed itself in the shards of communication where content is obscured in some way. These abstract experiences of communication and collective action are acknowledged as an integral reading of contemporary politics, and that this sphere should be activated, extended and expanded upon in order to discover the positive possibilities inherent within it.

Within this cultural context where content is often blurred, filtered or distorted—rather than search for an antidote for a ‘truer’, ‘purer’ or ‘richer’ sense of understanding and perception, this thesis has engaged with the system within which these distortions are produced. I have presented a positive case, not simply based upon the individual relation to specific cultural ‘texts’ but upon the actual moments where cultural texts, content, and meaning *is* blurred. Thus, promoting discussion surrounding the individual cognitive *relation to* such content-stripped culture, such as blurred political messages, media headlines or advertising imagery. I have presented how these blurrings act, and what these abstractions of information can *produce*, in order to identify a political landscape that is constantly evolving and transforming, amongst the muffled shouts, taps, nudges and gestures of contemporary talk.

**Appendix.**

This appendix is seen as a transition between the text and visual presentations of the project. This section describes specific artworks in order to demonstrate relations between text and practice that will be extended at viva exhibition/examination. As mentioned previously, there is no visual documentation of these works at this point, as this element of the project is defined in terms of words. This appendix does not intend to present works that *illustrate* the ideas embedded within the text, but instead, it aims to identify concepts where artwork operates in *relation to* ideas within the text.

***Box With The Sound of its Own Description.***  
**2009.**

Wooden box, plinth, audio.

I have never seen Robert Morris' *Box With the Sound of its Own Making* (1961). I have read and heard that it is a wooden box, with an audio recording of the knocking and sawing sound of its own construction hidden inside it, displayed on a white plinth. I have been following the movements of the work to various galleries over the past years, but have never managed to actually see it. The original work was on display at *The James Cohan Gallery* in New York City, in an exhibition titled 'White Noise' (18<sup>th</sup> June – 12<sup>th</sup> August, 2009). During this period my younger brother Joe (15 years old) was in New York. I asked him to go and see the work and describe it to me afterwards over the phone. I recorded the conversation and re-made the piece based on this description. My brother's words describing the sound inside the box were translated to Morse code, and working with a sound artist, the *dits* and *dahs* were replaced with samples of *knocks* and *scratches*. The work is now re-made every time it is shown in a gallery, based upon an oral description of its last exhibition. Rather than see this work as an 'ongoing' project (as with *Review*, 2004, 2007, 2009, see following), each new version of the piece is seen as an edition of the same work.

Primarily, this work materializes the abstract, subjective, and unverified accounts of the encounter with an object through the filter of memory. This work uses the medium of oral exchange as its framework and as we have seen with collective rumour construction in Chapter One: '[rumour is] a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present' (Allport & Postman, 1948, ix). As the number of boxes grow, the object (box) that is produced acts as a material punctuation, within a circulation of references to the objects' last manifestation. The work also activates ideas concerning 'the copy'.<sup>54</sup> Presenting each materialized oral mutation as an edition or copy, that is not identical to the

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<sup>54</sup> Following the loss of Marcel Duchamp's original urinal Fountain (1917), fifteen copies are thought to exist (Leith, 2010), and further to these four more 'flawed' replicas have been revealed by Duchamp's collaborator, Arturo Schwartz.

last acknowledges the impossibility of a true replica. This mirrors the process of *leveling, sharpening* and *assimilation* (Allport & Postman, 1948, 75), inherent to rumour construction that we saw in Chapter One. Allport and Postman also comment on individual versus social memory, stating that generally individual memory is more ‘accurate’<sup>55</sup>. *Box With The Sound of its Own Description* (2009), operates between both individual and social memory, as each description is based upon an individual encounter with an object, but as the editions of the work increase, the babble of individual descriptions produce a collective resonance of description.

The work also activates ideas relating to materiality and language that we have been following over the last Chapters. The viewer is presented with the form of the wooden box, its grain and joints and the abstract sound of Morse code reverberating within it, the words that have described the box are concealed. These words are not ‘denatured’ (Barthes, 1989, 77, Chapter Four) as they are expressed within a code or system that could be translated, yet the key is missing, presenting an abstract rattling, imitating the sound of making, that prescribes its material construction.

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<sup>55</sup> Individual memory refers directly to a previous encounter by the individual, whereas social memory relies upon the passing of recollections between more than one person. (Allport & Postman, 1948, 59).

***When Words Fold Out to Make Screens.***  
**2009.**

Super 8mm film transferred to 16mm (colour, no sound, 3min loop), 200 origami tetrahedra, stack of Royal National Institute for the Blind raised line writing paper.

This work comprises three elements. The film element was shot using a professional hand model, asked to act the gestures of a BBC journalist reporting on the Israeli media blockade during the Gaza conflict of January 2009. The figure wears a white shirt and the image is cropped at the torso. His hands move in a determined, precise manner with a rhythm that relates to speech that is absent. The image is projected onto a stack of RNIB raised line writing paper. This paper has indented, raised lines that guides the hand of the visually impaired during the process of writing. On the floor, at the foot of the two plinths supporting the projector and the paper, is a scattered pile of hand made origami tetrahedra. There is black, typed, printed text on these three dimensional shapes, but it is partially obscured by the edges and folds of its form.

This piece separates elements of a media narrative and then presents these constituents in abstracted form. The particular narrative refers to the control of information imposed by a Nation State and is edited and presented within the vernacular of BBC journalism. The work continues processes of editorial construction, but in so doing, the story is obscured, and the viewer is left with the supports to this process. As we saw in Chapter Four, Giorgio Agamben presents gesture as revealing the *mediality* of communication. Where Agamben refers to gesture in the everyday context, this work concentrates on the formalized, learnt gestures of journalism. Following McNeill (Chapter Four), we can see that ‘language is inseparable from imagery [and that] gestures are *part* of language’ (McNeill, 2005, 4). *When Words Fold Out to Make Screens* (2009) dislocates this relationship by removing the audio—supposedly deforming its linguistic function. Yet, following Agamben we could interpret separation as revealing a mediality that expresses a ‘linguistic essence’. This does not reveal the language of the individual; rather it exposes the linguistic processes adopted by media institutions. The work functions by inviting the viewer into a process where something *is*

*being said*, or some content is *in the process of being delivered*. Thus, revealing the formal strategies employed by media institutions to present particular content, events or current affairs.

***In Complete Darkness***  
**2007**

Newspaper collage  
27cm x 31cm.

It is difficult to identify this black mass emerging from below sea level. It has surfaced amidst an ice shelf; breaking apart fragments of ice that now fall down the side of its smooth form. At a distance the black mass could be a liquid, or an abstract shape—blackness rising up through white. At closer inspection the image does not seem quite right, something awkward, or abnormal is occurring in the composition. Closer still, and it is clear that the newspaper image has been altered—multiple tiny cuts and layers of newspaper are visible within the image.

As I have noted previously, the collage works are activated in terms of both conceptual and physical *proximity*. When the viewer is physically distanced from the work, the collage holds the authority of a folded, archive newspaper article. At close proximity the process of construction is revealed and the authenticity of the reportage image is placed under renewed scrutiny. During these moments, the act of looking becomes more critical. At this stage, all parts of the image are evaluated in detail, and here, the work intends to stimulate critical relations to familiarized media imagery.

In this work, I use the image to erase itself, and so the evidence of process does not present itself primarily, this contrasts with a traditional idea of collage, where the process of juxtaposition is often dominant (Schwitters, Hoch, Ernst, for example). These modes of material subversion have been politically acknowledged by thinkers such as Guy Debord, who with Asger Jorn published *Memoires* (1959), consisting mainly of juxtaposed elements such as newspaper articles. Debord worked with collage and used ‘the same signs and forms as advertising and mass media to wage a total war against the all encompassing reign of the spectacle’ (Craig, 2008, 105). The direct nature of Debord and Virillio’s philosophical criticisms of contemporary spectacle that we have seen throughout this text, is mirrored by the subversive techniques of juxtaposition evident in work of the Dadaists, and Surrealists that continues to be played out in contemporary collage, by artists such as Thomas Hirshorn, Martha Rosler and Peter Kennard. As



the text element of this project sympathizes with the concealments, abstractions and denatured medialities of language seen through the work of Barthes, Agamben and De Certeau, the practice element occupies a territory that reveals the forms of construction and processes that present language rather than explicit content. This is particularly evident in the material processes employed in the collage work.

It is interesting to note the Clipping Bureau's of the early 1900s. These companies responded to the proliferation of information produced by the industrialization of printing processes at the turn of the nineteenth century. The bureau's provided customers with clippings concerning specific search criteria for a fee. As Heesen describes (2004, 300-327), large factories employed clippers (women who searched for articles), and cutters (boys who cut them out) to configure personalized scrapbooks from a range of published newspapers and journals. Heesen notes 'Clipped newspaper articles are certainly elements of a discourse network but might be more precisely thought of as a pasting network. Pasting, not writing, is the operative process for generating meaning' (Hessen, 2004, 300).

Artists such as Peter Piller, Gustav Metzger have incorporated newspaper archives as works of art—presenting these personal editorial processes as alternative presentations of information. Although the processes integral to my work (and the state of my studio) represent the ongoing nature of collecting, the final work does not illustrate this collection or ordering of information, but re-sculpts the form of the images that illustrate them. Following Hessen, it is pasting, not collecting or ordering that is the operative process for generating meaning.

***Review***  
**2004, 2007, 2009.**

Framed text.

*Review* (2004, 2007, 2009) is an ongoing project that takes the form of a commissioned review. Every time the work is shown, an art critic is asked to write a review of the exhibition before it has taken place. The critic is given the names of participating artists, the gallery and curator, and the title and dates of the exhibition, to construct a review written in the past tense. The text is framed and presented as the first work in the exhibition. The project is only produced in a group show format and has so far used the writing of JJ Charlesworth (*Art Review*), Michael Wilson (*Artforum*) and Jonathan Griffin (*Frieze*).

In the same way as I described the collage work above, this piece establishes an authoritative language (of criticism) and then at the same time alters or undermines it. As the review is written before the show, it cannot be accurate, so in effect it contradicts its purpose. The viewer is placed in the position where they both experience the exhibition through the authoritative words of someone else, and through their own experience simultaneously.

This work was made in reference to the case of the disgraced New York Times journalist Jayson Blair (2003). Blair was dismissed by The New York Times for misleading 'readers and Times colleagues with dispatches that purported to be from Maryland, Texas and other states, when often he was far away, in New York. He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not.' (The New York Times, editorial, 2003). *Review* (2004, 2007, 2009). This work endeavours to reveal the forms of rhetoric and persuasion that are employed in order to present a sense of authenticity, regardless of whether the author has encountered the subject matter or not.

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#### Selected Conferences, Performances, Talks and Exhibitions:

*Characters, Figures and Signs*, Performance Symposium, Tate Modern, 20/02/09-21/02/09.

de la Barbara, Joan. Performance, ICA. Performance of a group of seminal works, that immerse the voice in the conditions of the body. 31/05/09.

Gibson, Beatrice. *Prologue-A Conversation with Will holder*. Occasionals, Curated by Philomene Pirecki, Cremer Street Studios, 01/05/10.

*Media Matters- Freidrich Kitler and Technoculture*, Symposia, Tate Modern, 27/06/08-28/06/08.

*On The Idea of Communism*, Conference, Birkbeck College, University of London. Speakers included Judith Balso, Alain Badiou, Bruno Bosteels, Terry Eagleton, Peter Hallward, Michael Hardt, Jean-Luc Nancy, Toni Negri, Jacques Ranciere, Alessandro Russo, Alberto Toscano, Gianni Vattimo, Slavoj Zizek 13/03/09-15/03/09

*Stutter*, Level Two Gallery, Tate Modern. Curated by Nicholas Cullinan and Vanessa Desclaux. 23/04/09-16/08/09.

*Talk show*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Curated by Will Holder and Richard Birkett. A month-long season of artworks and live events addressing the act of speech 06/05/09-31/05/09

Venice Agendas V. *Artists, Gossips and Critics: A Panel Discussion* chaired by Professor Stephen Partridge with Dr Gavin Butt, Sacha Craddock, Professor Richard Demarco CBE, Ian McKay and Francesco Ventrella. 08/07/10. [venice.wimbledon.ac.uk/](http://venice.wimbledon.ac.uk/) accessed 03/05/08.

Film, Television and Radio:

'Homo Interneticus?' Presented by Dr Aleks Krotoski. Episode 4/4 of *The Virtual Revolution*, BBC2 [Broadcast 03/03/10.]

*The Lives of Others*, Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, (2006). Sony Pictures. DVD

*The Today Programme*, (2009). Jimmy Wales on, BBC Radio 4. [Broadcast: 13/11/09.]

*What Texting Owes to the Literary Enlightenment?* Addison, Chris. BBC Radio 4, [Broadcast 10/03/09.]

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