

A SERIES OF GAPS RATHER THAN A PRESENCE

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You might imagine this is a tale about home. Or a story of returning. If you are so inclined, it can also be a story of repentance. You would never imagine, though, that this story was thought of as something of lesser importance. Form over content. But you know it does matter, because the world changes whenever a story is told.

Imagine a looped sample, like this one.

What if there is something slightly different every single time the loop is repeated? Would it break the chain of repetitions, would it cease to be a loop? Or would it draw our attention to the very fact that repetition is predicated on what we know about something, on what is there to know about something, but perhaps not so much about that which escapes our attention, evades our immediate perception, or what could be there to be known.

Deviations, peaks, the universe of possibilities that a skipped beat, a longer intake of air, a hard-press on a key, a syllable pronounced slightly differently. Ever so slightly.

Can we ever normalize history to a series of a perfect loops, without paying attention to that which elicits these loops? What can be unearthed from the gaps made silent by conscious acts of selection?

How much is there that we truly know about the nature of history? The nature of repetition?

It seems history is not in loop, though it tends to resurface in interesting patterns. History, it seems, is rather fractal.

Ever so slightly.

And so the story is told, five hundred times plus two.

And so a scene is set, nine thousand, eight hundred and eighty-three times.

But every time this story is told, every time the scene is set, something in the order of the world changes. In one case, a body was temporarily made to feel at home. In another, a body was temporarily made to long for home. To dream of home. Or to find a new one. Repetition is the nature of rhythm. The nature of repetition is unequal. The error margin is twenty percent.

Fabulation is a *Hilfsmittel*. It looks at the crevices, the marks, the traces of fractal threads – like this one. As long as there is someone there to listen.

In 1918, about a hundred years ago, a body was standing in front of a speaking cone. In 2018, a few hundred meters away, a body was sitting in front of a telephone. The scene repeats itself, ten thousand times. The error margin is twenty percent.

Each time, however, it goes a little different.

How much do we know?

How much do we think we know?

How much can we say we know?

How much is there to be known?

How much is known to us?

How much were we allowed to know?

In less than a year we know this story was told nine thousand, eight hundred and eighty-three times. We know that in eleven months a story was told almost ten thousand times. We know that in less than a year a story was told nine thousand, eight hundred and eighty-three times.

In a different timeline, in a similar space, a story was told eleven out of two hundred and twelve times. We know that a similar story was told, eleven out of two hundred and twelve times. We know that a story was told. Same space, different time, eleven out of two hundred and twelve times.

We know that in the Ankunftszentrum of the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, located at Adalbert-Stifter Weg in Ebersdorf, part of Chemnitz, in the state of Saxony, this story was told one hundred and five times.

We know that in the same Adalbert-Stifter Weg in Ebersdorf, part of Chemnitz, in the state of Saxony, only a few meters away from the Ankunftszentrum, stands the former König Friedrich-August Kaserne, a prisoner camp during the First World War.

We know that at the former König Friedrich-August Kaserne, from 1914 to 1919 prisoners of war were forced to record their voices, so that their accents could be analyzed, classified, and catalogued by the Preussische Phonographische Kommission, led by Wilhelm Dögen. This database of voices, engraved in shellac discs, is nowadays stored at the Lautarchiv at the Humboldt-University in Berlin.

We know that at the Ankunftszentrum in Chemnitz, and all over Germany, the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge required asylum seekers to have their accents tested against software in order to determine the probabilities that they speak specific languages. The software was, at first, specially tuned for speakers of Arabic. The error margin is twenty percent.

We know that the databases were acquired from the University of Pennsylvania in the United States, for the amount of three thousand, seven-hundred Euros.

We know that some of these databases bear names such as CALL FRIEND or CALL HOME.

You might imagine this is a tale about home. Or a story of returning. If you are so inclined, it can even be a story of repentance.

Tell me: what are the words, the scenes, the shapes that elicit you to call home?

To dream home anew.

To find home in displacement.

To miss home,

A home no longer there.

In speech and accent recognition, elicitation cues are snippets of texts that make up a database. Their function is to train, test, trigger, calibrate, compute, conform, correlate, connect. Meaningless text to machinic ears, yet never devoid of meaning for those whose lives are determined by the mere act of producing sounds.

We are talking here about content over form. But this is not usually how it goes.

You see, in an accent recognition system, decisions are made before speech is understood as a semantic act. Decisions are made based not on how speech happens but instead on how a machine extracts features of speech. Input speech is split into a series of criteria that elicit decisions in the form of speech. Both ends of this operation persist: they have immediate physical, social, and political consequences. The in-betweens are those which employ machinic language to produce a quantifiable, external 'material proof' of someone's existence – a "colonial soldier"; an "asylum seeker".

An existence always exogenous to themselves.

Exogenous to themselves. Defined elsewhere, by someone else.

Lives subsumed to a collection of papers showcasing a series of numbers.

Log Likelihood Ratio.

Lines traced on a map in Berlin separate families elsewhere.

A line is drawn – and it defines who gets to live, and who gets to die.

A line is drawn – and communities become foreign to themselves.

Does that sound familiar?

Are we talking about 1918, 2018, or is it November 15, 1884?

You see, repetition is the key here. History is not a perfect loop.

A line is traced on a map and a new world erupts from its margins.

And so the story is told, again and again.

A story of the endless infrastructural reach opened up by the articulation of a phoneme.

An apocryphal chapter in the creation myth of colonial white supremacy.

Why is it that the *Phonographische Kommission* required some prisoners of war to retell a story of returning home? *Der Verlorene Sohn*: a biblical story that tells of redemption, of finding unconditional solace.

They were lost, but they are now found again.

They were dead, but now they are alive again.

Sie waren verloren und sind wieder gefunden worden.

Sie waren tot und sind wieder lebendig geworden.

Und sie fingen an, fröhlich zu sein.

Or so the story goes.

Why is it that the *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* required asylum seekers to have their accents tested by retelling stories based on a picture of a family meal?

Can you imagine the most trivial of images as an encapsulation of the unattainable?

Can you smell the fresh coffee, can you taste the sweetness of lemon?

Textured phonemes, organized in a tablecloth

Made of familiar threads.

Sound complicates space. The existence of these two places, however, so close to one another, in fact troubles the linearity of time. We open up a temporal loophole that reaches simultaneously to the supposedly endless database made possible by the phonograph, as it does to the software that supposedly recognizes accents out of a phone call.

A violent whirlwind whose diameter is of a couple of steps and a hundred years.

Are we ever welcome near fortresses made of barbed wire and software-automated decisions?

If the lost sons and daughters return home, will they be welcomed with feasts, or with executions?