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# Speaking Sex to Power? The Female Voice as a Dangerous Instrument<sup>1</sup>

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Ever since Athenian orators studied the art of rhetoric it has been understood that the human voice, skilfully deployed, has the power to command attention, turn minds and sway emotions. The most powerful male politicians of the twentieth century – Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt – used their voices to display and amplify their power. Yet women’s voices are rarely discussed in the context of political power. On the contrary, women’s voices are more commonly characterised by their (actual or potential) erotic power.

The female voice has long been a site of anxiety and taboos against women speaking have a long history: the best way to be properly womanly was to desist from speaking altogether. St Paul urged men to «Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. [...] For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church»<sup>2</sup>. According to Aristotle, «Silence is a woman’s glory»<sup>3</sup>. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century Sophocles’s *Ajax* declared that «Silence gives the proper grace to women»<sup>4</sup>. As a 16<sup>th</sup> century writer on rhetoric put it, «What becometh a woman best, and first of all: Silence. What second: Silence. What third: Silence. What fourth: Silence»<sup>5</sup>. Beard<sup>6</sup> has argued that the effects of the active exclusion of women from the public sphere of speech in Greco-Roman times, along with the abomination of those who

<sup>1</sup> This paper originated in a presentation given at *Vocal Folds: Her Noise Symposium*, Oslo, 18 January 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Corinthians 14: 34-35, *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Cambridge Edition 1769; King James Bible Online, 2016. [www.kingjamesbibleonline.org](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org).

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* [384BC], part X111, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Sophocles, *Aias*, English translation by Herbert Golder and Richard Pevear, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999, p. 293.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Henton, *The Abnormality of Male Speech*, in George Wolf (ed.), *New departures in linguistics*. Garland Publishing, New York 1992, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Beard, *The Public Voice of Women*, «London Review of Books», 36 (6), 6-20 March 2014, pp.11-14, available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women> [Accessed: 11 July 2015].

did speak out and the fact that public speaking was considered a defining attribute of masculinity, are still being felt today.

When women did speak, men drew on what Jamieson has called «a thesaurus of contempt» to describe their voices. A New England preacher proclaimed in 1619 that «the *tongue* is a *witch*»<sup>7</sup>. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was argued that if women persisted in speaking in public, their uterus would dry up. In 1906 Harper's Bazaar said of the American woman: «She sometimes spoke through her nose, she twanged, she whiffled, she snuffled, she whined, she whinnied»<sup>8</sup>, while Henry James compared the female voice to the «moo of the cow, the bray of the ass or the bark of the dog»<sup>9</sup>.

Curiously the invention of the megaphone, loudspeaker, and microphone – instruments whose very *raison d'être* was either to amplify the human voice or to render its amplification unnecessary – did nothing to change the common belief that women made poor orators because their voices were not powerful enough. In fact the history of women's exclusion from broadcasting represents perhaps the most blatant example of prejudice against women's voices. According to Bell Laboratories in 1927: «The speech characteristics of women, when changed to electrical impulses, do not blend with the electrical characteristics of our present day radio equipment»<sup>10</sup>, the fault self-evidently lying with the women rather than the equipment. Some seven decades later Dyson<sup>11</sup> drew attention to the fact that the radio microphone was originally designed for the male vocal range.

Belief in the unsuitability of women's voices for announcing began in the early days of radio, in both the US and Britain. According to the British newspaper, the Daily Express: «Many hardened listeners-in maintain that [...] Adam has a more natural broadcasting voice than Eve. Some listeners-in go so far as to say that a woman's voice becomes monotonous after a time, that her high notes are sharp, and resemble the filing of steel, while her low notes often sound like groans»<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, Oxford University Press, New York 1988, p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> Caroline Henton, *The Abnormality of Male Speech*, cit., p.29;

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Anne McKay, *Speaking Up: Voice Amplification and Women's Struggle for Public Expression*, in Cheri Kramarae (ed.), *Technology and Women's Voices*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Frances Dyson, *The Genealogy of the Radio Voice*, in Daina Augaitis and Dan Lander (eds.) *Radio Rethink. Art, Sound and Transmission*, Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Cheri Kramarae, *Resistance to Women's Public Speaking*, in Senta Tromel-Plotz, (ed.) *Gewalt durch Sprache*, Fisher Taschenbuch Verlag, Fisher 1988. The concept of 'listener' had yet to take root at this time – here they are still 'listeners-in', with this phrase's palpable sense of eavesdropping. Add to that the sound-image of 'groans' and yet again we encounter the female

The female timbre was singled out for particular opprobrium. The wireless correspondent of the *Evening Standard*, a London newspaper, suggested that women's high-pitched voices irritated many listeners, and that they talked too rapidly, over-emphasised unimportant words, or tried to impress listeners by talking beautifully<sup>13</sup>. Women were also indicted both for conveying too much personality through their voices (according to another British newspaper, the *Sunday Dispatch*, in 1945: «Critics consider that women have never been able to achieve the 'impersonal' touch. When there was triumph or disaster to report, they were apt to reflect it in the tone of their voices»)<sup>14</sup> and too little («For some reason a man... can express personality better by voice alone than can a woman» insisted the *Southern Daily Echo* in 1928)<sup>15</sup>. America threw up similar complaints about lack (*Radio Broadcast* magazine, 1924: «few women have voices with distinct personality», according to the manager at a Pittsburgh radio station)<sup>16</sup> and excess (*Radio Broadcast* magazine, 1926: «Perhaps the best reason suggested for the unpopularity of the women's voice over the radio is that it usually has too much personality»)<sup>17</sup>.

In 1933 the BBC finally caved in and, in an “experiment”, hired Sheila Borritt (or Mrs Giles Borrett as she was called: as was customary for the time, she went under her husband's name) to announce not the news but, daringly: «This is the National programme from London. The tea-time music today comes from the Hotel Metropole, London». On August 21 1933 Mrs Borrett advanced further, reading the BBC six o'clock evening news bulletin for the first time, although two months later BBC officials declared that the experiment had failed. When the BBC eventually accounted for Borrett's dismissal, it blamed – yet again – not its own prejudices but those of other women: of the 10,000 complaints they had received, they declared, more than 90 percent had come from women<sup>18</sup> (Murphy, 2016). Elsie Janis, Mrs Borrett's American counterpart, appointed as first female announcer in 1935, met almost exactly the same fate. Her NBC employer soon declared that he was not «quite sure what type of program her hoarse voice is best suited for, but he is certain

voice's apparent sexual suggestiveness, and the almost shameful impact of transposing a voice that clearly belongs in private (in the bedroom) into the public realm.

<sup>13</sup> Cheris Kramarae, *Resistance to Women's Public Speaking*, cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> Anne McKay, *Speaking Up*, cit., p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 202.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke-Hants 2016.

she will read no more Press-Radio news bulletins. Listeners complained that a woman's voice was inappropriate»<sup>19</sup>.

When women were allowed onto the airwaves, their voices were closely scrutinised and harshly judged. The BBC Radio series *Men Talking* decided, in 1937, to include a woman speaker when «a woman's point of view» was called for. Yet the first participant, Winifred Parsons, was viewed as a disaster: according to one of the producers «she talked too much, she interrupted unscrupulously, she sounded aggressive»<sup>20</sup> – all characteristics considered normal in male broadcasters. As a result it was decided to no longer use women like Parsons – «intelligent, vivacious, used to public speaking, eager to express her views» but to replace her with «a mouse-like woman instead of the tiger we have been experimenting with in the past» and to coach her not to interrupt<sup>21</sup>. Yet even then gender was not an absolute category but existed in a complex interplay with social class: while, in the early years of British broadcasting, women were excluded from roles such as news readers in which they might have been deemed to represent the authority of the BBC, they were allowed on air if they were prominent cultural figures, invariably with crystalline upper-class accents: social class thus helped to modify femininity<sup>22</sup>.

Although the role and status of women in broadcasting has changed enormously since then, the exclusion or marginalisation of women from the airways is still characterised in similar terms. In the early 1990s Ros Gill quizzed British commercial broadcasters about the paucity of female DJs. Among the explanations they proffered were «it's a bit strange to have a woman talking to you»<sup>23</sup> and that women's voices were too “shrill”, too “dusky” and just plain “wrong”. As recently as 1999 the head of news and speech of a commercial radio station in Manchester described a potential recruit as «a great reporter, a very good journalist but I couldn't put her on air with that voice. She sounds like a fishwife or a washerwoman»<sup>24</sup>.

If the prejudice against women's voices was often shared by both female listeners and female employers, this is hardly surprising. The ways in which we speak

<sup>19</sup> According to Murphy, although a female announcer on national German radio was also subject to press hostility, European stations such as Radio Luxembourg, Radio Normandie and Radio Budapest regularly used female announcers, as did stations in Lithuania, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain and Poland.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, cit. p. 239.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 240.

<sup>22</sup> Anne Karpf, *Spoken Like a Woman*. [Radio programme], BBC, Radio 4, 'Archive on 4', broadcast 2 February 2013, 20.00. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01q7g6n> [Accessed 1.10.16]

<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Gill, Justifying injustice: broadcasters' accounts of inequality in radio, in Caroline Mitchell (ed.), *Women and radio: airing differences*, Routledge, London 2000, pp. 141-145.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Haworth, *Women in radio news: making a difference?*, in Caroline Mitchell (ed.), *Women and radio*, cit., 2000, p. 254.

are historically and culturally-determined but so too is how we hear. The way a voice is heard is shaped by how it is valued and this in turn helps affect how it is used; the hearing and evaluation of a voice never occurs in some universal, ungendered, culture-free ether but is a situated and circular process. John Berger famously argued that «according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome – *men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at»<sup>25</sup>. One could argue that, until recently and often still today, men listen to women and women hear themselves being listened to, by a male speaker.

What men have long heard in women's voice is a dangerous sexual power. Both Judaism and Christianity grafted ideas of shame and indecency onto women's voices, articulating a connection between the voice and sexuality.

The female voice has been seen as a sexual instrument, an agent of carnality, an irresistible conduit for debauchery with the potential to either ravish men or increase their sexual anxiety. The Sirens lured men to destruction by falsely promising them bliss. According to the second century Babylonian Talmud, «the voice of a woman is nakedness»<sup>26</sup>. Men were prohibited from reciting the Shema, one of the most important Jewish prayers, while hearing a woman's voice because it was so seductive that it might distract them with impure thoughts<sup>27</sup>. The less a woman spoke, the more chaste she was considered. Women's voices were almost always considered in relation to the desire they could evoke and never the desire they could express.

The rare broadcasting exception invariably generated storms of controversy. Most notorious was the only major radio performance by the actress Mae West. In a sketch on NBC in 1937 which re-imagined Paradise, Eve (West) seduced the serpent to acquire forbidden fruit, which she then served to Adam «like women are going to feed men for the rest of time»<sup>28</sup>. This transgressive combination of religious revisionism and sexual innuendo produced an immediate uproar, NBC declaring West an 'unfit radio personality', even though her bordello-madam persona sounds today

<sup>25</sup> John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, BBC Books, London 1971, pp. 45-47.

<sup>26</sup> Berachot 24a, *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Berachot, Folio 24, front (a) side.

<sup>27</sup> Subsequent orthodox commentaries have conducted heated debates over whether this also applied to a woman's speaking voice and not just her singing one, if it covered a man's wife as well as strange women, and whether listening to women singing on radio and television was proscribed too. Despite the insistence of some modern female commentators that men's voices might possess a similar power to induce sinful thoughts in women, the Talmud's dictates that women should not sing in the presence of men have prevented women from participating in orthodox synagogue choirs for centuries.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Murray, *The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals: Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy*, in Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (eds.), *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, Routledge, New York 2002.

more camp than subversive. A letter to the programme sponsors made explicit the nature of the objections: «The lewd suggestiveness, mingled with the sound from her lips, makes one think that she should wear a veil over the lower part of her face to hide her nudity»<sup>29</sup>.

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that there is a physiological and evolutionary basis for linking women's voices with their erotic power. Such studies, finding that both men and women rate women's voices as more attractive when they're recorded during the peak fertility period of women's menstrual cycle, conclude that the female larynx is under the influence of sex hormones<sup>30</sup>. Yet this is to assume what constitutes an attractive sound is universal and ahistoric, even though it is clear that, at least until recently, the 'ideal' female voice has differed significantly between cultures and has changed significantly over time<sup>31</sup>.

A more likely explanation for the association of women's voice with sexual power lies in the fact that, as Kristeva has argued, femininity is seen as an expression of the pre-verbal and the body<sup>32</sup>: women are sound and men are language, even though generally it is women – either as mothers, nursery workers or teachers – who play the most active role in inducting the infant into speech, as Silverman reminds us<sup>33</sup>. Yet while men's voices are regarded as disembodied, women's voices are seen as pure body. Hilmes has argued that women's voices were deemed unsuitable for broadcasting because of this discomfort associated with the disembodied women's voice. She quotes the director of a Detroit radio station in the 1920s: «I do not believe that women are fitted for radio announcers. They need body to their voices»<sup>34</sup>.

In 1928 Adorno argued that:

Male voices can be reproduced better than female voices. The female voice easily sounds shrill [...] in order to become unfettered, the female voice requires the physical appearance of the body that carries it [...] Wherever sound is sep-

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 140. Ehrick's documents a rare instance, a 1954 Argentinian radio serial, that created a public space for a female voice to articulate sexual desire. See: Christine Ehrick, *Nené Cascallar's Thirsty Heart: Gender, Voice and Desire in a 1950s Argentine Radio Serial. Feminist Radio Histories*, 1 (4), 2015, pp. 31-45.

<sup>30</sup> Nathan Pipitone and Gordon Gallup, *Women's voice attractiveness varies across the menstrual cycle*. «Evolution and Human Behaviour», 29 (4), 2008 pp. 268-74.

<sup>31</sup> Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice*, Bloomsbury, London 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Goodwin, *Wordsworth and Romantic voice: the poet's song and the prostitute's cry*, in Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones (eds.), *Embodied voices: representing female vocality in western culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (IN) 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting 1922-1952*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (MN) 1997, p. 142.

arated from the body [...] or wherever it requires the body as complement – as is the case with the female voice – gramophonic reproduction becomes problematic<sup>35</sup>.

When, in the 1980s, National Public Radio in the US had three prominent female broadcasters, resentful male colleagues dubbed them the Fallopian Troika<sup>36</sup>.

Women are thus placed in a double bind: as an expression of an embodied self the woman's voice is deemed seductive, but attempts to escape this constricting role are equally problematic because disembodied, unmoored from the body, the female voice is considered even more destabilising, requiring commentators and listeners to engage in strenuous work to 'return' them to a bodily presence and 're-embodiment' them – which renders them suspect once again<sup>37</sup>. Interestingly, when television started up in Britain the first announcers were women. This might be partly because of the strides female announcers had made in radio. In addition the role was conceived as a 'hostess' – a role traditionally assigned to women. Yet it was surely also due to the fact that the television image itself re-bodied women.

The anxiety produced by the female voice undoubtedly arises from the fact that it is the first voice we hear, in utero. Prenatally, the maternal voice has a uniquely enveloping reach, and is *primus inter pares* among the sounds that the baby is exposed to. Yet in our journey from foetus to adult, something curious happens to the status of the female voice. Although the mother's is in some sense the first voice-over that we ever hear<sup>38</sup>, in both cinema and television voice-over narrators are predominantly male – the female voice has been stripped of its social and public authority. Forever associated with matters internal, subjective, and corporeal, the mother's voice – as Silverman has pointed out – must be repudiated.

Perhaps sexualising women's voices is one way of doing this: the only the power that this leaves women – aside from the power to 'nag' – is the power to en-

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Engh, *Adorno and the Sirens: tele-phono-graphic bodies*, in Leslie Dunn and Nancy Jones (eds.), *Embodied voices*, cit., p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Sound effects: Gender, voice, and the cultural work of NPR*. «The Radio Journal. International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media», 5(2), 2007.

<sup>37</sup> In a fascinating piece of radio history, McCracken showed how, in 1942, a CBS thriller-drama in the *Suspense* series called 'Sorry, Wrong Number' and starring Agnes Moorehead, exploited the disquiet associated with the disembodied female voice to create a terrifying story in which the listener overhears Moorehead's screams as she is being murdered, her voice finally silenced. See Allison McCracken, *Scary Women and Scarred Men*, in Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (eds.), *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, Routledge, New York 2002.

<sup>38</sup> See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*. English Translation by Claudia Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York 1999.

snare<sup>39</sup>. There is also a logic to the sexualising of the voice: it comes out of the mouth, an emblem of female sexuality that can be contorted into provocative shapes like the pout. Since women's mouths today are outlined, glossed, stained, plumped up with collagen, or tricked out to look natural, *they are not what they seem* – duplicity is attributed to the very chamber of the woman's voice. The displacing of sexuality from women's genitals to their mouths is encouraged by the apparent resemblance in shape of labia and larynx, and is expressed in their shared terminology (labia). By attributing a dangerous ensnaring power to the female voice, the concept of the vagina dentata has, in a sense, been extended to the mouth. When, after her outspoken appearance on BBC TV, a website superimposed a photo of the face of Mary Beard, the British professor of classics, onto a penis, it was clearly implying that a woman's voice is good for only one thing.

The connections between the power of the maternal voice and the image of the female voice as a seductive and hence dangerous weapon are complex. As Frank suggested, «the feminine voice emerges as a signifier that is erotically charged with nostalgia for the maternal but circulates in a system based on the devaluation of the feminine»<sup>40</sup>. Silverman went further and argued that a writer such as Chion could only understand the child's emergence into speech from the maternal enclosure by placing the mother herself into that pre-verbal enclosure. Certainly Chion sees what he calls «the elemental power» of the female voice as originating in «the umbilical web» which, he admits is a «horrifying expression»<sup>41</sup> and regards the maternal voice as imprisoning. The Italian psychotherapist Suzanne Maiello<sup>42</sup> has argued, conversely, that, to the foetus, the maternal voice comes and goes but is beyond the baby's control: our first internal object then is a sound-object. This, I suggest, is a more compelling reason for the male hostility that it has so systematically inspired. I would go further and argue that the idealisation of the maternal voice and the denigration of the supposedly erotic voice are integrally related – two sides of the same coin.

No wonder the speaking woman needs to be policed and made an example of; mythology abounds with examples. Echo, the talkative nymph, is punished by Juno

<sup>39</sup> Possibly this is another reason why British upper-class women had far more access to airwaves than working-class ones in the 1930s and 40s: their high, thin, strangulated voices – produced from a tight, constricted space made smaller by the boned corsets they wore which congested their throat and breath – could never be mistaken for those of a femme fatale.

<sup>40</sup> Felicia Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, the Voice and the Artificial in 19th Century French Narrative*, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 1995, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, cit. p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> Suzanne Maiello, *The sound-object: A hypothesis about prenatal auditory experience and memory*. «Journal of Child Psychotherapy» 21 (1), 1995, pp.23-41.



with the loss of her voice: all she's able to do is repeat other people's words<sup>43</sup>. King Tereus of Thrace rapes Philomela, daughter of the King of Athens and then, to prevent her telling anyone about his crime, cuts out her tongue. Hans Christian Andersen's (and later Disney's) Little Mermaid is prepared to forfeit the use of her voice in order to live a human life: she trades in her voice to win herself legs<sup>44</sup>.

If, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, women are made, not born, then the voice is one of the ways in which we are made male or female, through which we perform our gender. Yet feminist discourse itself sometimes colludes with the essentialising of the female voice and reifying the very sexual differences that feminism set out to interrogate. Cixous is a prime offender: while she produces euphonious, lyrical passages about the vocalic («My German mother in my mouth, in my larynx, rhythms me») <sup>45</sup>, her paeons to rhythm, warmth, flow and the maternal body, all collapsed into each other, constantly fall back on idealised, essentialised conceptions of the maternal voice. Yet pitch itself, it appears, is constituted not only physiologically but also socially: American research<sup>46</sup> has found that the average acoustic differences between boys and girls are greater than they would be if anatomy were the sole determining factor and that they set in long before puberty.

Butler reminds us that «the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced» and that «gender is always a doing», to which we might add: and always a speaking<sup>47</sup>. Gender's acts and gestures, she suggests, produce on the surface of the body what appears to be its internal core or substance: the tacit collective agreement to perform polar genders are «part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character»<sup>48</sup>. Yet, while Butler recognises that the effect of gender is produced through repeated bodily gestures, movements and styles, she falls short of explicitly including the voice among them, even though the voice is one of the main avenues through which such performativity occurs.

Problematizing the female voice can simultaneously naturalise the male one, but the male and female voice must always be considered in tandem, and as twin constructions that are not fixed but respond to changing social, political and economic roles. Hence the growing “emotionalisation” in the male public voice, an ex-

<sup>43</sup> Described by Ovid in gruesome detail – «the severed tongue along the ground/ lay quivering [...] jerking and twitching». See Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book 3, Penguin, London 1970.

<sup>44</sup> Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, Faber and Faber, London 1981.

<sup>45</sup> Hélène Cixous, *'Coming to Writing' and Other Essays*, English Translation by Sarah Cornell et al., Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1991, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline Sachs et al., *Anatomical and Cultural Determinants of Male and Female Speech*, in Roger Shuy and Ralph Fasold (eds.), *Language Attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects*, Georgetown University Press, Washington DC 1973.

<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, New York 1990, pp. 24-25.

<sup>48</sup> Ivi, p. 142.

pressiveness traditionally associated with the female voice but more highly valued when deployed by men and which has not led to a re-valorisation of the expressive female voice<sup>49</sup>. Similarly Power<sup>50</sup> charted the spread of the automated female voice in train stations, electronic checkouts, satnavs and security warnings, demonstrating the ways in which the female timbre has been appropriated for a simultaneously calming and coercive purpose.

While there are far more women's voices to be heard in broadcasting and other public settings today, they are easily outnumbered by men and the range of female timbres remains narrow. Voice therapist Christina Shewell has suggested that the public female voice is still required to be pleasing and musical, with varied pitch and clear diction – unlike that of the male<sup>51</sup>.

But attempts to liberate women's voices have taken many other forms. Riot girl bands, emerging out of punk in the 1990s, challenged the confined spaces into which female musicians had been immured, their very name an extended growl. Pussy Riot, the Russian band, uses a provocative guerrilla style to make political statements. They followed in the tradition of Madonna and Yoko Ono, Madonna appropriating the very thing that Mae West was indicted for – wantonness – and making it her signature. Lady Gaga belts and rasps in a flagrant challenge to all things genteel. Susan Philipsz won the Turner Prize in 2010 for singing, in a frail and melancholy voice, three versions of a Scottish lament in a performance about the relationship between the voice, the body and place. All of them use their voices to make sounds that are not demure, are not afraid of being sexual, unaesthetic, expressing power, being emotional and sounding authoritative at the same time, being too loud, having too much personality or being playful. Elsewhere, in podcasts and performances, women are deploying voices that are sometimes raucous and bawdy but also polemical and authoritative, angry and combative. They are using their dangerous instrument to interrogate traditional vocal roles and constraints. Although women's voices remain a site of anxiety, it is now an increasingly contested one, where women are attempting not to speak sex to power but to speak power itself.

<sup>49</sup> For a discussion of this, see Anne Karpf, *C'est Bien Une Femme Qui Parle: Du Préjugé A L'Androgynie. La Voix Dans La Sphère Publique*, in Anne Marie Bernon-Gerth et al., *Les médias à l'épreuve du réel*, Michel Houdiard Editeur, Paris 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Nina Power, *Who's Afraid of the Female Voice? Paper given at Vocal Folds: Her Noise Symposium*, Oslo, 18 January 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Anne Karpf, *Spoken Like a Woman*, cit.