

GUSLARI *ON-LINE*. A technological interpretation of "oral poetry"

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Electrified memory

The legacy of Milman Parry and Albert Lord can not be reduced to philological transcriptions, but encompasses the audiovisual archive of recordings as well.

Is cultural memory (notably oral poetry) of a different nature if it is not mechanically recorded by phonograph or gramophone which is - as its very name suggests - still close to graphical "writing", but electronically on magnetic wire or tape, as performed by Albert Lord on the same ground around 1950? Apart from being of a different technological essence, such recordings stimulate a different kind of scientific analysis which is not just philological or musicological any more but researches the sub-semantic poetic articulation on the media-archaeological level (spectral analysis with electronic measuring media), thus revealing evidence of a different (but still poetic?) kind.

With phonographic recording of the real voice, an irritation of the temporality of cultural memory took place. Next to the traditional notions of archival historicity, with the recordability of oral poetry as a physical audio-event (not just symbolically like on the phonetic alphabet) a kind of re-presentation of past performances takes place which eludes historiography by being invariant to historical time. Media-inherent temporality differs from the established notions of cultural history.

Let us muse about technologies of cultural feed-back: What happens when such a recording is being re-played these days to the local culture in Serbia from the sound recordings using the same device? Are we (and the oral poets) in Lord's position when we record a *guslar* performance with a historic Webster Wire Recorder today?

And further, is the digital processing of such recordings just another technical extension or does it transform the very essence of oral literature? In a crude way, algorithmisch processing of poetic rhythms, as genuinely re-generative, might be closer to the "formulaic" principle detected by Parry than any other kind of technical reproduction was before.

The tradition of songs and tales, for millenia, happened in

mnemotechnics of oral transmission, increasingly accompanied (supplemented, deferred) by notational writing (the vocal alphabet, musical notes). The 20th century enabled a media-induced re-entry of orality, a secondary orality (Walter Ong) based on analog recording technologies like phonography, magnetic tape and cinematography. In the 21st century, the symbolic notation has re-entered as well: in the form of the alphanumeric code within computing. What difference does the digitization of the audiovisual legacy of Parry and Lord make to the essence of its cultural content?

From this situation arises the „archival“ question: What happens to the genre of oral poetry when the "online"-instrumentation (the *gusle* string) and the "online"-recordings (literally Lord's wire spools) become accessible "online" (in the World Wide Web sense)? Is the media-critique of writing as recording device, articulated once by Plato in respect to the ambivalence of technical memories, valid again?

Transcription versus technical recording

When in the mid-1930s the Harvard scholar Milman Parry investigated the South Yugoslavian unwritten memorizing techniques of epic singers (the *Guslari*) as a living analogy to Homer's ancient songs, it was direct phonographic sound recordings on aluminium discs that formed the analytic basis for the resulting theory that the hour-long oral tales were regenerated for each occasion from a stock of existing formulae (the formulaic theory of oral poetry).

In 1950/51, Parry's assistant Albert Lord returned to the scene to repeat or continue some of the first recordings, sometimes with the same singers. But this time he used a new technology, a magnetic recording device (based on steel wire). Which difference does it make if popular song recording does not take place gramophonically on aluminium discs any more but electro-inductively *happens* on magnetic medium? Mechanical recording is a passive storage technology; electromagnetic recording, though, requires a dynamic re-enactment to be reproduced.

Such a wire recorder like the "Webster Chicago" used by Lord is not a phonograph, which, as the name suggests, is still part of the tradition of graphical recordings, but instead transforms the sound memory into a different physical state. The process of electromagnetic recording and reproduction is, however, not a continuation of writing in a new form, but rather a fundamentally different and genuine technical media event born of the very nature of electricity.

Technical recording vs. symbolic transcription (Bartok)

According to the thesis of the classicist Barry Powell (1990), the Greeks added vowels to the Phoenician alphabet for the explicit purpose of making the musicality of oral poetry, in fact: Homer's epics, recordable.

But this notation is still symbolic, like the musical transcription which Bela Bartok provided for Milman Parry's recordings of Guslari songs on aluminium disc. What the discs were able to record, though, was a surplus: the non-musical articulations, noise or bird-singing in the background, even Avdo Mededovic's coughing:

<Abb.: Spektralanalysenbild AVDOHUSTENSTILL.png>

Different from notational transcription into musical scores, technical signal-recording of cultural articulation allows for the electro-physical measuring of recorded events (digitally done by "sampling"). This subjects the cultural event to experimentation, thus enabling a non-hermeneutic analysis of cultural articulation on the sub-philological, even sub-alphabetic level.

So not just oral poetry was recorded but as well noise, while the transcriptions into musical notation treat the sonic event as "oral literature" (as the Harvard Collection actually calls itself), thus keeping the analysis within the disciplinary discourse of the researchers (Milman Parry, a trained philologist).

Singers and Tales in the 21st Century: digital memory

The Legacies of Milman Parry and Albert Lord at the end of the 20th century became transformed into digital files (both the textual and pictorial documentation of the Yugoslavian research journeys and some of the recorded Guslari songs themselves). Does this digitization (by sampling) transform the essence of such a memory? And which is the new "archive" to which such files *online* give access?

The tradition of songs and tales, for millenia, happened in mnemotechnics of oral transmission, increasingly accompanied (supplemented, deferred) by notational writing (the vocal alphabet, musical notes). The early 20th century enabled a media-induced re-entry of orality, a secondary orality (Walter Ong) based on analog recording technologies like phonography, magnetic tape and cinematography. In late 20th century, the symbolic notation took revenge by its re-entry: in the form of the alphanumeric code within computing. The digitization of the audiovisual legacy of Parry and Lord on aluminium discs and wire spools makes a difference to the essence of its cultural content;

Plato's primary „media“ critique of writing as an ambivalent memory technology is valid again.

Mathematically discovering sub-semantic poetic articulation

The poetic event cannot be reduced to its semantic (verbal and literal) level:

It makes a media-archaeological (rather than philological) difference for the notion of "oral poetry" when its notation for analysis does not take place in symbolical writing (the phonetic alphabet since the age of archaic Greece, or more recently, musical notation) any more, but by (electro-)physical recording media like the phonograph, as performed by Milman Parry on aluminium discs. Micro-events in performing oral poetry might thus get under consideration, near-discontinuous change, probabilities of transitions, re- and protentions which require stochastic rather than simply statistical analysis (known from Claude Shannon's analysis of dynamic toys, described as "Mathematical Theory of Little Juggling Clowns"¹). The "realtime" feedback on the sensomotoric level which takes place between the human articulation and the rhythmic *gusle* play. e. g., turns out to be of a servo-mechanical rather than musical character

- or "musical" might be re-defined media-archaeologically.

<ü> Mit stochastischer Mathematik läßt sich ebenso das Maß oraler Poesie bestimmen, in der ein Sänger - Milman Parrys *formulaic theory* zufolge - aus einem gegebenen Set von Auswahlmöglichkeiten gemäß den aktuellen rhythmischen oder prosodischen Erfordernisse eine konkrete Auswahlentscheidung (etwa für silbenfüllende Epitheta) zu treffen hat. Sensomotorik (im Feedback mit dem Begleitinstrument) und poetischer Ausdruck bilden hier einen kybernetischen Verbund aus Mensch und Maschine, aus Willkür und Wahrscheinlichkeit.

Can oral poetry be re-generated by the machine, transforming the *formulae* (as defined by Parry) by algorithms? Claude Shannon defines: "artificial languages <...> we merely define abstractly [as] a stochastic process which generates a sequence of symbols"²

- which is exactly the definition Jacques Lacan gives to the mechanism of signifiers in the human unconscious.

P.S.: Re-play (Hamdo 2006)

1 See Axel Roch, Claude E. Shannon: Spielzeug, Leben und die geheime Geschichte seiner Theorie der Information, Berlin (gegenstalt Verlag) 2009, 163f

2 Claude Shannon, Collected Papers, Piscataway (IEEE Press) 1993, 5

When in September 2006, I unexpectedly got hold of an identical technical version of the „Webster Wire Recorder“ which had been used by Albert Lord for his South Yugoslav recordings of oral poetry, I went down there (near Novi Pazar, now Serbia) to record such songs on the same medium myself.

When the singer, Hamdo, sang into the wire recorder microphone accompanied by his Gusle, a knee-held violin, looking directly into my eyes, I was overcome with a sudden and double astonishment. Firstly, although this moment was one of a symbolic configuration, a combination of body, epic and instrument, what I was seeing and hearing was not a soundmachine but rather the power of an individual in the state of poetry; a cultural performance that at this moment rose up above all symbolic and technical mechanism and - although a function of the latter - transcended them. At the same time I was overcome by the impression induced by the almost surrealist proximity of the Gusle and the wire recorder and created a new image: the mysterious correspondence between the string (horse-hair chord) that was being bowed and the recording wire (steel).

The most human aspect was expressed precisely in the playing of the instrument, and it was the wire recorder that recorded exactly this momentum: the circle of vibrations in technology and poetry was thus complete. Thus the most human was at the same time the most inhuman - precisely the coldest media archaeology ear was listening to the most magical of all sound machines.