

RESONANCE OF SIREN SONGS

[Related to lecture delivered at the Humboldt University Conference *Sound Politics* (10th Transatlantic Dialogue), New York, April 8, 2005]

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[Introduction]

The critical awareness and reflection of political techniques of surveillance have too long be dominated by metaphors and practives of the visual regime: such as Michel Foucault's discourse analysis of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon", the visually guarded prison architecture which became paradigmatic for modern forms of hidden surveillance by visual means up to camera systems in public spaces today.

When this panoptic landscape is being replaced by an pan-acoustic one, all of the sudden, we are acoustically beamed into a setting, a soundscape described in the scene of the Siren songs in book XII of Homer's *Odyssee*. The poetic version means *resonance of Siren songs*:

CD: Min. 1:30 - 2:50, Radio broadcast Wolfgang Scherer (SWR): female voices in old Greek language, followed by recitation (male voice) of Homer

A media archaeology of acoustics in the *Odyssey* is confronted with a paradox: how can an acoustic event which is supposed to have happened before the age of gramophonic recording be verified? The Siren songs in Homer's *Odyssey* have long been treated as a mere cultural-poetical invention by the bard. In contrast, a research project tried to test and reconstruct such acoustic events by media-archaeological means – a sound political provocation to philological methods and visual studies, a kind of monumental media philology (in free adoption of Eduard Gerhard's archaeological method).

Since antiquity, the Li Galli islands at the Amalfi coast (Italy) have been believed to be the place were Ulysses during his journey heard the famous voices of the Sirens. However it remains still unclear what could Odysseus hear. Were there some acoustic phenomena in this region? Did he hear real sounds or was the sound sensation only an illusion? And finally, if there were human voices, could Odysseus understand the message?

We are dealing with reverberations of the acoustic real. Can the acoustic phenomenon of the Siren songs media-archaeologically be located, traced by measurements (analytic rather than performative) and thus verified?

It is not by coincidence, that since antiquity, in cultural memory there insists the knowledge that the region around the Gulf of Naples has been the scene of the Siren songs.

[Solch ein lokales Wissen, das sich in einer Reihe kleiner antiker Sirenen-Heiligtümer entlang der Küste zwischen Neapel und Salerno manifestierte, ist nicht arbiträr. Ausgehend von dem für alle materialistische Medientheorie maßgeblichen Satz Jacques Lacans, daß das Reale (in diesem Fall die Stimmfrequenz) immer an seinem Ort ist respektive dorthin zurückkehrt, wurde von den Teilnehmern der Expedition die Inselgruppe Li Galli ("Le Sirenusae"), die als zwei markante Felsen (Castellucio und La Rotonda) und eine vorgelagerte längliche Insel (Gallo Grande resp. Gallo Lungo) aus dem Meer vor der Amalfi-Küste ragt, als ein solcher (H)Ort der Sirenenklänge vermutet.]

[Es galt der positiven Hypothese nachzugehen, daß es sich dabei um ein reales akustisches Phänomen handelt.]

Acoustic settings have another endurance than visual evidence. That has been the reason for media-archaeology to inquire into the present physio-acoustic setting of the Li Galli islands in April 2004.

[While up to that point everyone seemed to have been content in reading the *Odyssey* as pure fiction¹, the team of media archaeologist rather performed acoustic excavation by measuring techniques - just like young Heinrich Schliemann took the readings of Homers *Iliad* verbally. Otherwise, ancient Troy had never been actually identified.

Thereby the whole range between mythology and media archaeology, between human voice, animal sound (monk seals), electronically producted frequencies, unfolds

Audio: SIRENLIVEMITSCHNITT.wav

The media-archaeological research expedition undertaken by members of Humboldt University Berlin (assisted by the Center for Media Arts and Technology Karlsruhe) provided sound propagation experiments at the supposedly original historical scene, at the Galli Islands.

A central media-philological questions had to be answered: Can the human ear, situated on a by-passing ship, understand the supposed Siren language - or rather just the vocal elements therein? Central to the experimental setting was acoustic testing a) with real human (opera) singers, and b) from loudspeakers with pre-recorded sounds.

[An dieser Stelle kommt die Aussagemöglichkeit wissenschaftlicher Texte an ihre medialen Grenzen. Die digitalen Video- und Audiobänder, die den wissenschaftlichen Ertrag der Expedition vom April 2004 darstellen, haben hier

¹ Ernle Bradford, *Reisen mit Homer. Die Wiedergefundenen Inseln, Künsten und Meere der Odyssee*, Bern / München / Wien (Scherz) 1964, 7

das bessere Gedächtnis. Von nun an sprechen die Tonaufnahmen aus Li Galli, und sie enthüllen ein Phänomen, das möglicherweise den realen Grund für die Sage von der tödlichen Verführung der Sirenenstimmen bildet. Werden nämlich Klänge von Gallo Lungo emittiert, brechen sie sich nicht schlicht an den zwei gegenüberliegenden Felseninseln als Echo, sondern werden von diesen auch untereinander noch hin- und hergeworfen. Somit stellt sich ein Verstärkereffekt ein, der den Nah- und Fernsinn eines vorbeisegelnden Seefahrers verwirrt, eine Art akustischer *différance*.]

We emitted both synthetic signals (sine tones, white noise) and natural voices (vocalizations of Monk seals, voices of two female singers) via loudspeaker. The signals were then recorded along a thought line along which Odysseus could approach the Siren Island.

The acoustic analysis of the recordings revealed strong evidence for an acoustic effect which could explain the nature of the song of the Sirens. The specific position of the three Islands yielded in an deformation of the acoustic signal in form of amplification and changes in the timbre. We can be sure that there is a trace of the real in the myth of the song of the Sirens, maybe based on natural voices transformed by specific acoustic conditions of the landscape. However it remains still under question who was the emitter of the song.

While the literary tradition of the Siren songs has never ceased from Homer until today - think of the notorious chapter on Ulysees in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* von Horkheimer / Adorno, but equally of Franz Kafka's and Maurice Blanchot's assumption on the *Silence of the Sirens*,

the exploration in early April 2004 to the Gulf of Positano south of Naples actually tried to test the motive by a sound-archaeological investigation, back to the origin of music.

Since in Old Europe, in ancient Greek Europe, the idea of political order is essentially linked to musical harmonies and the media technologies of performing and recording acoustic phenomena like songs, speech and musicality.

Homer in his *Odyssee* performs this in the medium of the supposedly for that exact reason vocally augmented vocal alphabet.²

Visual coding (such as writing) sharpens vision, but it can supply acoustic data füttern only in its specification as *vocal* alphabet.

The poetic sujet of the Siren songs is media-archaeologically rooted in the vocal alphabet, in fact a kind of epic phenotype of the cultural-technological genotype of the vocal alphabet.

[Einerseits spielt sich diese Erinnerung also in der Ordnung alphabetischer Symbole, also Philologie ab. Andererseits resultierten Versuche, vokalhaltige Stimmphänomene apparativ zu erzeugen (Euler, von Kempelen), in der von-Helmholtzschen Doppelsirene. Von daher war die doppelte Analyse der Expedition

² Barry Powell, *Homer and the Origin of Writing*, Cambridge 1991

vorgegeben: Stimmen, Erzählung einerseits; Akustik, Messung andererseits.]

Hypersonic beams

So what kind of "sirens" are we talking about? Modern ears, especially those with acoustic memory of World War II in Europe associate the acoustic warning devices against air raids with "sirens", or maybe the working class associates the acoustic signal of factory time (beginning / end of the working day, lunch breaks etc.). A violent sound.

As emphasized by Jacques Lacan and others, the ear is "im Feld des Unbewussten die einzige Öffnung, die nicht zu schließen ist." <Jacques Lacan, Die vier Grundbegriffe der Psychoanalyse, Olten 1978, 178> - thus unsheltered against sonic violence.

[Tatsächlich lassen sich Augen leichter verschließen als Ohren; Ohren sind verletzlich, und es gibt kaum so etwas wie das „kalte Ohr“.]

According to the Greek words Homer uses in his Siren songs, their voice is explicitly directed into Ulysses' ears.

Hypersonic spotlights and sonic hallucinations appear in the *Dictionary of Non Lethal Weapons* edited by John B. Alexander, such as "Voice Synthesis" as as "Morphing Device to synthesize the voice or images of a known figure, to deceive, produce false orders, or gain access." Hypersonic spotlights, brain waves simulators or projections of medially generated realities, are built on both psycho-acoustical and media-acoustic facts. "Ultrasound spotlights which target messages and silently address people. The sound packet, whatever it contains, is only heard in the head of the target person, the skull bones play the role of a resonator, which changes the high frequency waves back into audible sound" - demodulation, just like with radio waves."

<Olaf Arndt, Wer nicht hören will muss fühlen = Voices of the Mind III, in: Babel No 4 (May 2004), 32-41 (38)>.

But he whose ears have not been tuned by the lecture of Homer's text, remains dumb.

Siren song reveal the difference between actual listening practices of sound at present and the sound-archaeological ear. Bradford reports that he felt torn by the Siren voices in a temporal way: "Es bedeutete <...> eine Flucht in eine frühere Zeit, in eine andere Welt" <158>.

["Ich glaube nicht, daß sie völlig tot sind, höchstens, daß ihr Gesang vom Lärm der Welt übertönt worden ist." <Bradford 1964: 153> Mit der *signal-to-noise ratio* (dem Signal-Rausch-Abstand) hatte die Expedition zu kämpfen, als sie gegen die Brandung der Wellen anspielte - der Grund, neben menschlichen Stimmen auch technisch aufbereitete Akustikquellen mitzuführen.]

First of all, the physical conditions and circumstances must be right for an

acoustic event to occur clearly like the Siren songs - which means natural silence as condition for the uncanny Siren sonic event. According to Homer, Ulysses could hear the Siren songs just because a divine power, a *daimon*, calmed down the sea around the islands.

"Windstille war immer ein Zeichen, daß sich die Sirenen in der Nähe befanden"
<Bradford 1964: 150>.

Read against this background, the Homeric description of Ulysses confronted with the Sirens almost reads emblematic: their song being directed into in his ears, with his companions being ignorant of these sounds by having their ears sealed with beewax.

[Nach ersten Erfolgen Edisons, Stimmen und Klang auf Wachswalzen zu bannen, stellt sich die medienarchäologische Frage nach dem Sirenen-Motiv nicht zufällig nach gut 130 Jahren akustischer kultureller Erfahrung mit technisch-akustischen Medien (Phonograph, Grammophon, Radio).]

Sound can attack the body (politic) in ways which are both seductive and dangerous. This is why the "Siren Sound" has been ambiguously coded that way from the beginning.

Sound attacks, invades the body in ways images cannot do. We can keep our eyes (wide) shut in order not to be touched by violent images, but our ears are open unless we close them explicitly with our hands. Sound is the channel of the real. It leaves traces in our bodily memory like gramophone grooves.

The working assumption of the archaeo-acoustic "Location of the Sirens" exploration in April 2004 has been that the fact that for more or less 2500 years popular memory seems to know exactly the place where the Sirens once sung (the islands of Li Galli, formerly even called "Le Sirenuse" at the Amalfi coast close to Naples in Italy) is itself the indication of such an acoustic memory inscription - a memory of the real. Sound has always a real location and source.

But it requires a special device (method) to decode these acoustic memory grooves: the media-archaeological gramophone, i. e., an archaeology of sound.

Conditioned by the vocal alphabet

Only the vocal alphabet can serve as a link between mute writing practice and "living" speech, serving as a recording device not just for acoustic (consonants, syllabic alphabet), but for sonic (or even musical) events. Thus the moment the Sirens address themselves to Ulysses in explicitly Greek word, with no Homeric interpolation of onomapoetic elements or non-semantic phonetic utterances, this is a media-reflection of the sound element in speech (poetry) itself.

Homer describes a sound-, not landscape; within his own proper medium, Greek

language, he underlines with his Siren songs that "all what temporally is in the world, can (only) be acoustically expressed - with the acoustic, which unfolds only in time, being essentially bound to temporality of being.

Thus the Sirens turn out to be at the origin, at the very media-archaeological origin of music in Europe" <vgl. O-Ton Kittler, Scherer-Radio SWR, 11:30; 12:00>.

With the media-archaeological miracle being that in the vocal alphabet this linguistic event could and can be properly recorded, outdated only since 19th century Fourier analysis of sound spectrums.

Homer's *Odyssee* was registered at the brink of the vocal alphabet; the very condition of passing Homer's epics in a post-oral poetry age. Does the Siren sound correspond to the almost immaterial evasiveness of the vowels in human speech?

Within the classicists, there has been a long debate whether Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssee* should be considered oral or written, oral poetry or literature. The very mnemo-technical hexametric form which made it possible to transmit poetic knowledge on the fall of Troy from the end of the Mycenaean age (around 1200) up to the origin of the vocal alphabet able to record such songs <siehe Latacz in Kittler / Ernst 2005> is matched by the American classicist Barry Powell's thesis that the vocalization of the Phoenician alphabet was consciously invented in Greece around 800 B. C. for the explicit reason of recording Homer's oral poetry at a court on the island of Euboea, at the site of today Lefkandi where archaeological remains point to the contemporary insistence of local dukes to maintain the genealogical tradition of the heroic age. According to Barry Powell, the explicit addition of single vowel symbols to the Phoenician alphabet has happened in early Greece for the explicit purpose of recording Homer's epic. Thus the musicality of the human voice which resides in vowels could be registered in an early form of grammo-phony.

With the vocal alphabet, a paradox occurred which can be deciphered against the background of McLuhan's media theory: While the written information was addressed to the eyes, in the early times of not silent, but explicit verbal reading (Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*) the ears were addressed by the vowels as well. Read against this media-archaeological dispositiv, we do not wonder that the Siren motive in Homer's *Odyssee* is a media-aware reflection of the very material condition of signifying the epic.

The theoretization of the Siren songs requires a differentiation between sound as physically measurable event on the spot as opposed to this sound as written cultural text - without falling into the trap of a binary opposition which is undermined by the fact that the very media tool of transmitting the Homeric poems first took place in hexametric singing (an oral poetry memory technique) but then in the vocal alphabet which includes the musicality of human speech as represented and expressed in vowels. Thus the *Odyssee* underwent a change of its media status, with the Siren songs emblematically focussing on that very moment of media change from oral songs to the vocal alphabet.

Against iconology

The Hollywood Movie with Kirk Douglas as Ulysses does not show Sirens but rather the acoustic hallucination of Ulysses who divinates Penelope's voice, asking him to come home at the shore of the islands.

[Es gilt keine Ikonologie, sondern vor allem eine Akusmatik der Sirenen.]

All archaeological iconology of Sirens in ancient Greece chronologically post-date the Homeric epic. But the an-iconology of Sirens is a structural one, not just a coincidence of lack of archaeological evidence. The absence of visual Sirens is the condition for their acoustic event; they do not seduce with their bodies but with their sound frequencies and melodic knowledge.

["Gesehen habe ich sie nie, die Sirenen, aber ich glaube sie gehört zu haben" <ebd., 154>.]

Whereas the later occidental philosophic tradition links the discourse of truth to visual evidence (the eye-witness paradigm in legal courts f. e.) since Herodot and Platon, we here grasp a more archaic layer of cultural truth technologies.

Against the supremacy of the eye, Friedrich Kittler suggests, the discipline of archaeology should start to trust the testimony of ears instead of the eyes.³

Sirens at war: Sound between poetics and politics

The Humboldt exploration of Li Galli in April 2004 has been the first real test of this mythologem.

Only once - rather unintentionally - a media-acoustic "measuring" of the Sirenes-islands has occurred before. The British navy officer Ernle Bradford, in September 1943, was led on a British battle ship into the Gulf of Salerno at the Italian Amalfi, to identify German submarines. He remembers a night when there was almost no sound except the ship engines, since in war action at night any sound betrays the location of the sender - the very quality of soundscapes, the acoustic difference to the visual regime (on the day).

While Bradford believed to listen to Sirenes, the science of psycho-acoustics tested war situations.⁴ At Harvard University, the twin laboratories for Psycho-Acoustics and Electro-Acoustics (headed by Leo Beranek) were driven by "problems of communication in noisy environments, such as combat vehicles and jammed radio

³ "Versuchen wir eine akustische Archäologie." Friedrich Kittler, *Das Alphabet der Griechen. Zur Archäologie der Schrift*, in: Knut Ebeling / Stefan Altekamp (eds.), *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, Frankfurt/M. (Fischer) 2004, 252-260 (260)

⁴ See chap. 9 "Noise, Communication, and Cognition: The Harvard Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory and the Second World War", in: Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World. Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, xxx

channels". "World War II nearly drowned in the noise of its own technology" <ibid.>. "Noise was not a physical, but an abstract therat: a threat to the mind, nbot th ebody - a threat to `information` itself" <ibid.>.

To return to Bradford: It was around midnight, that his battle ship approached the Li Galli islands, suspecting that there might be hiding German submarines, since the Allied radar signals might be simply reflected back by the rocks.

Not only the eyes, but the ears as well had to be kept open in such a war time alarm setting.

Let us, at this point, recall (that is: re-sonate) the seductive words of the singing Sirens as reported by Homer:

"Come hither, Odysseus <...> listen [akoúses] to our voices. Never has any man passed by in his black ship without hearing the honeuy-sweet voice from our lips."

Attentive listening refers to directional sound, directed and thus adressed directly to Ulysses's unsheltered ears.

A media-cultural paradox: Within the textual body of Homer's epic, the vocal alphabet which is able to record, phono-graphically, Greek language in written form.

Library phantasms

Bradford, in a acoustic pause of the combat situation in September 1943, reports to have heard human-like voices from the Li Galli islands.

His voice hallucinations are the message of which medium? It is a phenomenon of reading texts written in the phonetic alphabet (Homer's *Odyssey*), evoking acoustic imagination as a "hot medium" in McLuhan's sense.

["Heiße" Medien mit hoher Auflösung sind McLuhan zufolge "niedrig in der Beteiligung und kalte Medien hoch in der Beteiligung oder Ausfüllung durch die Zuhörer".⁵ Zu den heißen Medien zählt das phonetische Alphabet; zu den kalten etwa Sprechen (im Dialog).]

"Hot" media, according to McLuhan, lead to hallucinations on the side of the receiver.

["Heiße" Medien mit hoher Auflösung sind McLuhan zufolge "niedrig in der Beteiligung."⁶ Zu den heißen Medien zählen das phonetische Alphabet; zu den

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*, Cambridge / London [*1964] 1994, 22f; dt.: *Die magischen Kanäle. Understanding Media*, Düsseldorf / Wien (Econ) 1968

⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man*, Cambridge /

kalten etwa Sprechen (im Dialog). "Die Aufheizung eines einzigen Sinnes führt tendenziell zur Hypnose und die Abkühlung aller Sinne tendiert zur Halluzination" <McLuhan 1994: 32>. Durch die phonetische Schrift und endgültig durch deren Fixierung und Multiplikation im Buchdruck wird der Gesichtssinn zum dominierenden Sinn "aufgeheizt" <McLuhan 32>.]

[cARCNETZHU: Marshall McLuhan zufolge ist die Botschaft eines neuen Mediums zunächst ein vorhergehendes Medium. Vertraut ist diese Situation aus dem klassischen Medium von poetischer Literatur, der alphabetischen Schrift - ein buchstäblich grammo-phonisches Medium. *Nota bene:* der vokalphabetischen Schrift. Der Inhalt des technischen Mediums Grammophon ist demzufolge ein vortechnisches Medium - die Stimme. Im Medium des Vokalphabets wird aus stummen Texten eine potentielle Stimme - die uralte Fiktion des Gesprächs mit dem Archiv.]

Is this library phantasies in Foucault's sense?

[Erliegt, wer in seiner Jugend Homer gelesen hat, dem Zwang, vor Ort dann tatsächlich auch die Stimmen vernehmen zu müssen, weil er es nicht ertragen könnte, daß dies etwas nicht geschieht? Bradford selbst schließt die Möglichkeit ein, daß er als Schuljunge vielleicht schon einen Odyssee-Kommentar zu Lesen bekommen hatte, der die Galli-Inseln als Ort der Sirenen beschrieb, und seine reale Erfahrung dort davon gesteuert war. Oder vielleicht doch eine Deckerinnerung, denn erst 1949 las er von Norman Douglas "Siren Land"?]

With the vowels, what had remained exterior to writing (the voice) and is poetically expressed by the Siren songs, sweet musicality enters the writing scene itself. This "heating" of writing has a hypnotic consequence, replacing the former cool medium of writing which privileged auditory hallucination.

Artificial voices, uncanny

Bradford remembers the uncanny nature of the poliphonic voices he heard in front of the Li Galli islands: mehrere Stimmen, polyphon: they appeared "soul-less", "somewhat im-material" <156>.

Exactly when the Sirens appear to perform the most beautiful in human articulation - the musical voice -, they remind of the uncanny in contemporary experience of electro-acoustic voices: a reminder that our most intimate voice might be machinic in itself, and that the human hearing apparatus is not able to separate human from inhuman voices (a manifold Turing-test).

Maurice Blanchot has described the Siren sound as paradigmatic for what can be re-defined as media-cultural state of uncertainty: in the age of Turing tests, we cannot be sure any more whether the sounds we are confronted with are organic or technologically produced. The constellation, the *dispositif* (to take a term from the French *apparatus* media theory of Baudry and others) of listening to Siren songs is metonymic of a further state of uncertainty: is such a sound meant to be communicative, is it directional (a signal) or rather a pure

London [*1964] 1994, 22f

utterance (acoustic impulse)? In other words: Is it acoustic, sonic or musical? These are the three media-archaeological layers for analytic differentiation of sound as event (with the acoustic denoting the physical event, with the sonic being already technoculturally prefigured and the musical being semantically loaded).

Between signal and noise, between muses and mainads

The sound of Sirens can be described in various ways: as a mental impression, a penetrating sensation, a transmitted disturbance. Human ears (the acoustic channel of signal transmission) are always already located within a double-bind of both body and brain (if not to say soul). Human strategies to culturally digest a psycho-physiological experience such as the sound of Sirens, within the realm of uncertainty of actually physio-acoustic event and musical hallucination, between the noisy and the harmonic, can be narrative or non-narrative, poetic or analytical.

Located between the extreme borders of "silence" on the one hand and "noise" on the other, the sono-poetic trope of the sound of Sirens is difficult to theorize. The Siren song motive in Homer's *Odyssee* requires attention to its historically and culturally dependent underpinnings that provide the Siren songs with poetological, erotic and aesthetic qualities. How and when the Siren sound became defined as lyrical rather than noisy?

"Sirens sing - according to Homer - with beautiful voice (*opi kallé*); we only have to reverse, to switch this word order in order to get Kalliope, the utmost Muse. And all of the sudden, the Sirens turn out to be at the origin of all properly (since literally) called music in Europa" <O-Ton Kittler auf Radio-CD SWR Scherer, 12:00>.

Not by coincidence the Muses offer a reverse reading of the Sirens - a cultural-technological double-bind. What has been artificially separated by Friedrich Nietzsche as the Apollinic ("music", the physiological world of dreams) versus the Dionysic (the other physiological state, "delirium") in ancient Greek culture, converges in the mythologeme of the Siren Songs in Homer's *Odyssee*.

The symbolical order of politics is threatened by acoustic rumblings, as described by Jacques Attali under the title of *Bruits*.⁷ Thus once started sound politics.

⁷ Jacques Attali, *Bruits. Essai sur l'économie politique de la musique*, 1977; Engl. 1985