

Ventriloquism in the virtual classroom by Alma Krilic

The abrupt switch to Zoom education due to the pandemic stirred up all sorts of technological, financial, logistical and pedagogical problems. It also made us feel nostalgic for the good old days of in-person teaching and studying. Without bodies in the classroom, we now rely on visuals on the computer screen and on listening to voices. I claim that the voice has taken on a pivotal role in online education today. To illustrate the central role that the voice plays in the virtual classroom, I will give the example of my colleagues who record their lectures or create podcasts for students to listen to. The teacher can't see their students and the students rely solely on the teacher's voice. Most of my own classes are synchronous and I spend a lot of my time talking into the computer. However, there are times when I get tired of being on camera during class so I turn it off and go about my lecturing without my students seeing me. It does not seem odd being off camera as practically all of my students tend to turn theirs off too. I can't see my students and they can only hear my voice. As I am speaking, I have no clues whether they are listening or even in the same room as their computers. I am teaching behind the computer screen and all I hear is deafening silence.

Because the teacher's voice seems to play a more prominent role in education today, it is worthwhile to think about its features and its purpose in online education. The teacher's voice in the virtual classroom should not be construed as merely the medium through which some content is delivered to the students. Mladen Dolar argues that the voice neither belongs to the body (of the teacher) nor to language. The voice emanates from a body without being its part while at the same time it upholds language without belonging to it. Dolar writes that voice occupies this peculiar space in-between bodies and languages, and shares the topology of the Lacanian *objet petit a*. If seen through the lens of Dolar's theory and through his characterization of the voice as ventriloquism, the role of the voice in the virtual classroom can be understood as something more than a medium.

While this predicament we find ourselves in might seem new, I suggest that teaching behind the screen can be traced all the way back to antiquity. This is not a call for a return to antiquated teaching methods or an endorsement of a particular pedagogy. Rather, I believe that it is instructive to take a look at the following example in order to highlight the feature of the voice as ventriloquism. In antiquity, the teacher's voice took on a central role as it does on Zoom too. The Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras famously delivered his lectures concealed behind a veil or a screen. His disciples, also dubbed the "Pythagoreans," would sit in silence for about five years without ever seeing their Master in person. The Pythagoreans were confined to their Master's voice without being distracted by the theatrics of teaching, such as Pythagoras's looks, quirks, body language, etc. The disciples turned their attention only to the teacher's voice and the meaning emanating from it.

The pedagogical premise of Pythagoras's teaching behind the screen was centered around the question of what a philosopher is supposed to be. Peter Sloterdijk writes that Pythagoras portrayed philosophers as spectators who come only to watch rather than participate in sports games. While players seek money or fame, spectators are driven by curiosity. Unlike people who are slaves to honor, money and glory, philosophers live a life of quiet contemplation. As Hannah Arendt writes, this life of contemplation was contingent on

active non-participation in life's daily business. Arendt describes Pythagoreans as disinterested, undisturbed and intent only on the spectacle itself. To join Pythagoras's philosophical school and to become philosophers themselves, his pupils took a five-year vow of silence, devoting themselves to the practice of non-involvement and quiet contemplation. Though I think the Pythagoreans would have made better analysts than philosophers!

By concealing himself, Pythagoras revealed a quality of the voice that Dolar refers to as *acousmatic*. Dolar claims that every emission of the voice is a form of ventriloquism which pertains to the voice and "its inherently acousmatic character: the voice comes from inside the body, the belly, the stomach – from something incompatible with and irreducible to the activity of the mouth" (p. 70). The acousmatic voice is the voice whose origin is hidden and not easily discernable. Like the ventriloquist's puppet, the voice appears to emanate from a body while at the same time not belonging to it: "There is no voice without a body, but yet again this relation is full of pitfalls: it seems that the voice pertains to the wrong body or doesn't fit the body at all, or disjoins the body from which it emanates" (p. 60). If one of the Pythagoreans ever rebelled and pulled the veil, they likely would have been sorely disappointed to see a little old man who looks nothing like the all-mighty voice behind the screen. Or take the example of the uncanny experience when we hear our own voicemail or listening to our own lectures and podcasts. The common reactions of "This sounds nothing like me" or "I hate my voice" point to this mismatch between the voice we hear and the body it is supposed to fit. For Dolar, the mother of all acousmatic voices *is* the mother's voice. The infant may hear and recognize the mother's voice without pinning it down to this one particular woman as its source. It could belong to anyone.

In his critique of Badiou's claim that "There are only bodies and languages," Dolar points out that such a statement does not take into account the voice that holds bodies and languages together: "The voice ties language to the body, but the nature of this tie is paradoxical: *the voice does not belong to either*. It is not part of linguistics, ...but it is not part of the body either – not only does it detach itself from the body and leave it behind, it does not fit the body either, it cannot be situated in it" (p. 73). The voice, thus, should not be construed as a medium through which information travels from one body to another. Rather, it is situated in the gap between bodies and language, and shares the topology of *objet petit a*. The voice does not coincide with any existing thing - whether it is the body or the signifier. This impossibility to match the audible to the visible might offer an insight into the role of the voice in the virtual classroom. If seen through the lens of the theory of voice as ventriloquism, I wonder if it can ever be said that one voice 'belongs' to the teacher while the other emanates from the student. The borders of little black screens on Zoom eventually light up during my lectures and another voice can be heard. Someone's asking a question and I respond, which is soon followed by another voice and another, and so on. Now there are only overlapping voices and it becomes difficult to discern a teacher from a student.

I think Pythagoras was on a bit of a power trip and perhaps his teaching methods might not be palatable to progressive educators. But I still see his approach as food for thought, especially now that my own Zoom classes are sometimes in Pythagorean spirit. In the virtual classroom, it is as though much of the teaching and learning has been reduced to its bare minimum: voices emanating from behind the screen. I believe that Zoom classrooms offer potential to become sites of emancipation. It is true that, as Dolar writes "there is something in the very nature of the voice which endows it with master-like authority" (p. 76), but that is only

one part of the story. The student also has the power to decide the fate of the “teacher’s voice” on Zoom. For example, the student can mute the computer, surf the internet or leave the room altogether without the teacher ever knowing it. The fate of the voice is equally in the hands of all Zoom participants with a functioning computer and an internet connection. And if it is impossible to match the voice to the body, perhaps it can be said that in the virtual classroom there are only voices with no teachers and no students.

References:

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