

# Introduction

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**F**or writers and publishers contending with Google settlements and electronic copyright questions, the issue of “technological reproduction” remains as current, and as in need of critical reflection, as it was when Walter Benjamin wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1939), a text that is cited more than once in this issue. With particular reference to early-twentieth-century developments in photography, cinematography, and phonograph recording, Benjamin describes the technological reproduction of artworks—the capacity to mass produce duplicate copies of a work of art—as “something new” (252) in world history, and as “the signature of a perception whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (256). But Benjamin’s concept of “reproducibility” is not about sameness. Samuel Weber makes this point profoundly in *Benjamin’s –abilities*. Rather than designating a process (“reproduction” or “duplication”) that is “traditionally considered to be ancillary, secondary, supplementary” to a self-contained original, Benjamin’s “reproducibility” (Derrida called it “iterability”) suggests what Weber calls a “quasi-transcendental structuring possibility” that is intrinsic to the original itself. “The original is not simply self-contained, not a whole” here, “not self-identical, but perpetually in the process of alteration, transformation, becoming-other” (58–59). For Benjamin, Weber writes, “[a] work can only ‘work,’ do its work, have effects, be *significant*, insofar as it goes outside of itself and is transformed, by and into something else, something other” (63).

Perhaps we are gradually learning to read works as other than simply meaningful, self-contained wholes, as having “reproducibility” rooted in their very structures. Michael A. Bucknor’s essay in this issue, arguing for the move away from a critical practice based primarily on verbal reference, suggests that in Olive Senior’s writing, “verbal rhythms, fluctuations, and pulses of Afro-Caribbean speech rituals” constitute a kind of internal dislocation, an “aural disruption,” that works in revolutionary ways:

“Her female personae’s revolts against colonialism, patriarchy, poverty, and other damaging discourses are captured in the sounds of Senior’s semiotic sedition.” Genevieve Abravanel, studying H.D.’s “Two Americans,” contends that, in H.D.’s conception, mass reproduction of the voice actually countered notions of sameness—particularly that of subject identity and of the racialized body as an integrated whole. Stephen Lucasi, contesting the visual privilege that holds in Western conceptions of subjectivity, and certainly in critical work on Saartjie Baartman, turns to inherent differences—individual and communal—that sonority (speech, and spoken reproductions of print) might introduce. “Can we attend more carefully to the immanent communal self-difference that sonority reveals when the marginalized ‘assume’ the mantle of civilization from which they have been excluded?” Proposing that regional and national accents can create an “excess” of meaning, a dissonance between words and the sounding of them, Kelly Baker Josephs asks, “Can an accent be incompatible with the words it sounds?” To examine “this difficult node of accent and meanings,” she turns to performance poetry, in particular that of the Jamaican lesbian poet Staceyann Chin.

This is the second of a two-part *Mosaic* special issue on Sound. In a number of the essays collected here, “sound” is approached through “voice”—with voice recording as a prominent, and highly political, theme. Sarah Parry, for instance, “undertakes a cultural and media studies approach to spoken-word LP recording” by way of documenting and theorizing “the rehabilitation of [Ezra] Pound’s reputation in the LP as a *popular* medium.” Urging readers of his essay to listen (“awry”) to a recording of the work, or to listen to excerpts online, Adrian Curtin engages the performance of “extreme vocalizations” in Peter Maxwell Davies’s music-theatre piece, *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, as exemplifying a queer vocality “that recognizes the material and political significance of voice as a musical category and a social reality.” Ian Thomas Fleishman examines the archivist imperative in Marcel Beyer’s novel *The Karnau Tapes*, arguing that the novel shows the narrator’s encyclopedic project to be dangerous “as it is an abrupt (and often brutal) transformation of ephemeral experience into eternal memory, and of the immediacy of involuntary memory into an intentional and aggregate order that cannot preserve it.” In Fleishman’s reading, Beyer portrays the ethical ambivalence not only of the narrator’s specific project but also of the occidental positivist desire for comprehensive knowledge. Cédric Jamet’s essay, focusing on a sound poem by Henri Chopin, argues that through his performance praxis, with its creative use of sound technology’s compositional possibilities, Chopin counters the “traditional Western cultural model, in which language and writing dominate every sphere of individual life,” and releases a poetic experience of the body as a libidinal ensemble of flows. In quite a different study by Pleshette DeArmitt, Derrida’s

return to the figure of Echo in many of his later interviews and texts becomes an exploration of voice as iteration and ex-appropriation. DeArmitt suggests that, in Derrida's work, "love" plays a "fundamental role in the allegory of Echo, who is perhaps not simply a figure for a post-deconstructive self but also for deconstruction itself."

Dennis Hanlon's essay concentrates not on voice but on what he calls "sound images" used in silent motion pictures. By comparing King Vidor's 1928 film, *The Crowd*, with D.W. Griffith's 1909 film, *Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade*, and Vidor's 1931 urban film, *Street Scene*, Hanlon argues "that *The Crowd* represents a high point in the American cinema's engagement with the modern noisescap and that, more significantly, this high point could only have existed in the period immediately prior to the coming of the 'talkies.'" Suggesting "that musico-literary discourse can usefully extend beyond even literary studies and musicology into psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and cultural analysis of the musical profession," Hazel Smith reads Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* as a novel that "narrativizes musical meaning and its repression through 'normalization' in professional music-making." From sound images in silent film, and musical meaning in fiction, to sonic features of science-fiction on BBC TV: Anne Cranny-Francis examines the relationship between sonic elements and other meaning-making practices in a televised double episode of the *Doctor Who* story.

*Mosaic* is rightly proud of its two special issues on Sound. Look forward to a general issue of the journal in September and to an issue featuring Peggy Kamuf in December 2009.

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#### WORKS CITED

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