

# METRO PICTURES

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## KALEIDOSCOPE

MAIN THEME

CONVERSATION  
The Electronic Revolution

George Vasey and Oliver Laric

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From advertising and cinema to text-to-speech and Siri, a short history of voiceover in the pop realm calls sampling, translating and overdubbing into question, with related issues of neutrality, animism and miscomprehension.



The self  
that utters

and  
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#VOICEOVER



GV Are there instances of voiceover in popular culture that particularly interest you? One that springs to mind for me is *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). Stanley Kubrick utilizes the novel's first-person narration to great effect. We are continually asked to empathize with the protagonist, who of course is committing all of these atrocities.

OL: I like the unreliable voiceover. The viewer becomes aware of the incompetence of an otherwise flawless authority. It happens all the time in *Forrest Gump* (1994). The humor relies on the naive descriptions of Tom Hanks, which the viewer completes.

GV Early German films such as *Blue Angel* (1930), which starred Marlene Dietrich, were filmed twice: once in German and then completely re-filmed in English to appeal to the American market. This made me think of your work. Of course, translation is never neutral; there is an impossibility of an absolute translation.

OL Moustapha Akkad's *Mohammad, Messenger of God* (1976) was filmed twice, even with different actors. Akkad felt that the Arabic acting style would not work for an international audience, so two different sets of actors took turns filming, once in English, once in Arabic. Borges would have probably supported this double filming; he hated dubbing, describing it as an "arbitrary insertion of another voice and another language." Thomas Bernhard said that the translations of his books are the works of the translators. Beckett wrote in French, to translate back into English. François Julien learned Chinese to better understand Greek.

GV In *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), William Burroughs writes about the tape recorder as a "front line weapon" for escalating riots. He talked about repeating recordings of gunshots and police whistles in riot situations. I'm interested in this (and Burroughs' famous cut-and-paste technique) as a form of audio remixing in real time. Maybe we can relate this to your work. Burroughs innovated a type of cybernetic feedback into cultural production—he was one of the first to see the potential of sampling.

OL Do you remember the scene in *Police Academy* (1984) in which Michael Winslow performs gunshots and helicopter sounds via speakers of a police car to scare thugs? This was a formative movie scene for me. Ignacio Uriarte did a brilliant piece, hiring Winslow to emulate the sounds that typewriters make when typed on. The video shows Winslow in a sound studio, wearing headphones, listening to the sounds of someone typing, while simultaneously mimicking the sounds, beginning with the oldest typewriter and ending with the newest. Perhaps this also relates to the famous "Wilhelm scream," supposedly the most widely used recording of human suffering in film. The scream first appeared in 1951, and has since reappeared in over two hundred movies. Its success can be attributed to being integrated in a Warner Bros. stock sound library. If it hasn't been done yet, someone will definitely make a supercut of all the versions of the scream's appearances in chronological order.

GV I'm interested in your use of text to speech software (or asking voiceover actors to mimic it). For me, it suggests a form of estrangement—how do you see it functioning in relation to your work?

OL I've used text-to-speech before, but mostly work with voice actresses and actors now. About ten years ago I tried creating my own text-to-speech sound archive, where each sound or syllable came from a different voice. It gave me some sense of the complexity and difficulty of creating words from a limited number of sounds. The same letter demands a different pronunciation, depending on the sound it follows or anticipates. I've asked actresses and actors to emulate synthetic voices. It's counterintuitive to keep the voice so flat. There is a point where it starts sounding robotic, like faux-synthetic voices in older sci-fi movies. If it does not exist already, I would hope for an app that creates a personalized synthetic voice based on your own voice recordings.

GV Text-to-speech doesn't have any of the emotional timbre of the vocal; we lose a lot of the meta-information. I'm thinking of the way that Will Holder talks about performance as another form of typography. Words are merely vessels that need formatting to be activated.

OL In *Don Quixote* (1605), Sancho Panza continuously uses proverbs. He often lists whole series of proverbs in the form of short monologues. The proverbs are very general, authorless expressions, but they become specific within the context of the story.

One of my favorite paintings is the *Netherlandish Proverbs* (1559) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It depicts 112 proverbial scenes combined in a single landscape. Cervantes and Bruegel transform the objective into the subjective, in a similar manner as contemporary stock imagery is continuously transformed by context.

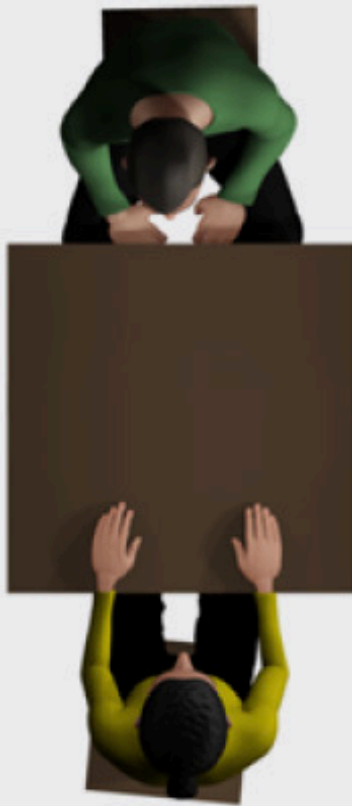
GV Your ongoing work *Versions* (2009–present) has been remixed numerous times. The vocal and the visual are not static, and you often use different voice-overs. It refutes the master narrative that you often find in a certain type of humanistic documentary tradition.

OL I've used the same actress since the beginning of *Versions*, so the alternate voices that you are referring to might have been the alternate interpretations of *Versions* by other authors. In 2009 I invited Momus, Dani Admiss and Guthrie Lonergan to reinterpret the audio layer. Now these reinterpretations also happen without my involvement. Juilliard school actors recently performed *Versions* as a play. The text was alternately performed by a live actress and a recorded performance of a live actress. And I'm working on yet another version at the moment. The different iterations are dialogical and remain in a constant beta state. The future versions modify the past versions just as much as the past versions modify the future versions.

GV How does something like Siri change our relationship to objects? Can we look to the recent interest in animism by curators and artists such as Anselm Franke and Mark Leckey as a response to objects becoming sentient and talking back to us? We're really at the start of this; I think that vocal interfaces will become much more pervasive. Maybe it's an insidious marketing ploy to create greater empathy between consumers and objects?

OL I was trying to hire the voice actress responsible for the U.S. Siri voice, but her identity was kept hidden. She revealed herself recently, but I had already found another voice for her





part. The U.K. Siri and Australian Siri also revealed themselves. I wonder if they get recognized in daily life, or if they are met with immediate sympathy by people who unconsciously recognize them. I could imagine that GPS voices and Siri have an influence on language, in a similar way that birds are influenced by cell phone ringtones. I recently read an article that suggested reading and writing would become skills that only lawyers and notaries will use. The general population will have more effective means of perception and expression to rely on, such as text-to-speech and voice recognition. I think the article was also suggesting that information could be digested more efficiently. If you play a video at double the speed in Quicktime, the pitch is not modulated. The tone of voice remains and the content is graspable. This might hint at a type of speed listening.

GV How do you see vocal dubbing operating within contemporary cultural production? I'm thinking of the countless ghetto versions of *Sponge Bob Square Pants* on YouTube.

OL Woody Allen's feature-length directorial debut is an overdubbing of a Japanese spy film. Already in 1966, Allen did what would later become a YouTube standard. Aleksandra Domanović reversed the process in 2007 by exchanging the visual layer



of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) with stock videos, while keeping the soundtrack. The second incarnation tends to enrich the precursor.

GV Can we see these alternative versions as serving a political function? We could look to Public Enemy sampling Elvis Presley in the '80s as a precursor in some ways. Overdubbing can claim a subversive agenda.







OL The *Sponge Bob* remix defines the cultural significance of the official *Sponge Bob*. Mandarin is spoken by more people than English, but English has the advantage of being spoken by more people as a secondary language. According to the linguist David Crystal, the ratio of non-native to native speakers is 3 to 1. There are more people playing the bootleg remix of English than people listening to the official iTunes release.

GV There is cultural obsession with the unmediated voice. The disdain for auto-tuning and rise in “talent” shows offers a counterpoint to the increased estrangement of the body from the vocal—the cultural need for the natural talent is deeply embedded.

OL Do you know Frank Farian? He is one of my German musical idols. His first single was unsuccessful but his career took off when he began separating the voice from the body. He’s the mind and voice behind Boney M and Milli Vanilli, among others. In the current climate of acceptance for constructed bands, this would not seem to be such an event, but at the moment when the story behind Milli Vanilli was revealed in 1990, over twenty lawsuits were filed under various U.S. consumer fraud protection laws.

GV Your new work *5* (2013) reminds me of Samuel Beckett. The vocal is desynchronized from the body. It suggests a compromising of self-determinism. Historically, we equate the right to speak, and the literacy to do so, as part of a social determinism. Do you think that this fragmentation typical of Beckett articulates a particularly contemporary anxiety?

OL The part of Lewis is spoken by Barry McGovern, possibly the best-known living interpreter of Beckett. His voice was recorded in a studio in Dublin, and attached to a body by an Italian 3D animator working in France. The voices of Beckett occupy several positions at once. They are detached from the body and attached to the body. It’s a voice that is not mine but can only be mine, the voice that is without and in me, the self that utters and the not I.

GV I’m interested in how gender operates in this work. A man introduces himself as Janice, for instance. In your work you often use the female, rather than the more ubiquitous male, voice-over.

OL I chose to work with a female voice actress for *Versions* as a response to this tiresome tradition of the male voice-over in documentaries. The movie trailer world is even more dominated by male baritone voices like Don LaFontaine. The few trailers dubbed by female actresses are often for movies targeted towards a female audience. I named the character you mention Janus, but I’m happy that it can be misunderstood as Janice.

All Images: Oliver Laric, *5*, 2013, Courtesy of the artist; Tanya Leighton, Berlin; and Seventeen, London