Emancipation

There is a trademark of Mariah Carey’s best songs where at around the three-quarter mark she pitches her vocal performance up, sometimes as high as an octave, and inverts the melody. From her early G-rated ballads to her self-reinvention as a hip-hop-influenced R&B singer beginning with the alternate Bad Boy mix of “Fantasy” in 1995, these improvised leads usually weave in and around the songs’ choruses, which are usually recited by her backup singers, taking the uneasy position of simultaneously embellishing the chorus, while also suggesting a transcendence of its repetition. One especially significant early example of these best Mariah Carey performances is the cover of the Jackson 5’s “I’ll Be There” from her 1992 MTV Unplugged television special, which was accompanied by the visual spectacle of Carey working to hit the unfathomably high highest notes that close out the song.

Arguably the last truly great Mariah Carey vocal workout of this kind was “We Belong Together,” from her 2005 album The Emancipation of Mimi. On the studio recording, Carey holds the song’s final syllable—the “-ther” of the song’s eponymous refrain—for at least four extra bars, before her lead vocal fades out. By contrast, she is still holding that note. In her many televised performances of the single, which spent fourteen weeks at number one, the workout that begins in the rising last line of the penultimate chorus ends with Carey holding the last note for as long as she can. This is an athletic event as much as a musical performance; in a song whose lyrics feature disembodied voices speaking to the protagonist over the radio, the song ends with Carey’s words worked to the point of physical exhaustion: a total unity of lyric, voice, and body.

Éclat

Mes disques sont un miroir
Dans lequel chacun peut me voir,
Je suis partout à la fois
Brisée en mille éclats de voix.

[My records are a mirror
In which everyone can see me
I am everywhere at once
Broken into a thousand shards of voice.]

—France Gall, “Poupée de cire, poupée de son”
[Singing Wax Doll]

In 1965, seventeen-year-old French singer France Gall caused waves at the Eurovision Song Contest by deviation from the usual ballad fare to sing an American beat music-inspired pop song. That song, written by Serge Gainsbourg, age thirty-seven, famously has Gall referring to herself as a puppet and alluding to the older male songwriter’s ventriloquizing of her, a conceit that Gall either did not understand or, for the sake of the song’s ironic tension, pretended not to have understood. In a watershed moment for European pop music, “Poupée de cire, poupée de son” introduced the post-chanson pop singer as a cipher—perhaps necessarily a telegenic one—and posed Gall specifically as a blonde-haired wax doll with no knowledge of what she sings. This televisual spectacle staged a total disconnect between the lyrics of the song and the voice singing them, and also between the words sung and their emanating body, the latter rendered a mute circulating image. The words are Gainsbourg’s, while the voice is Gall’s; her body, it seems, is ours.

In his Essay on the Origin of Languages, Jean-Jacques Rousseau theorizes a prelapsarian time in which poetry, music, and speech were indistinguishable: “rhythm and sounds are born with syllables: all voices speak under the influence of passion, which adorns them with all their éclat.” The term éclat was left untranslated by John H. Moran, its meaning as untranslatable as the enigma it signifies. Passion, Rousseau suggests, added an extra-linguistic dimension to vocal communication that would become the irretrievable remnant of formal music’s musicality, and later also of lyric poetry’s lyricism. Melody, Rousseau writes, communicates [elle parle], but does so extra-linguistically; by “imitating the inflections of the voice” and “the tones of languages, and the twists produced in every idiom,” it “expresses pity, cries of sorrow or joy, threats, and groans.” Here, we encounter a bifurcation of language resulting in two fallen forms, each circling the other: music imitates the tonalities and rhythms of disalienated language but can only articulate meaning “inarticulable[ly],” while speech, though articulate, lacks music’s “vigor.” In the balance is Rousseau’s prelapsarian unity: not only that of poetry, music, and speech, but more importantly, subverting them a unity between “various particles of air set in motion by the sonorous body” and “certain stirrings of the soul.”

In 1967, two years after Gall’s Eurovision victory, Jacques Derrida published his famous “deconstruction” of Rousseau’s Essay, posing Rousseau’s lost disalienated language in the sarcastic Biblical inversion: “In the beginning was the Song.” In the present, however, what was for Derrida a misguided search for origins might instead be a site of emancipation. This is Italian Autonomist Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s position as he looked to poetry as a model for resistance in the immediate wake of the worldwide political-economic protests of 2011. “Poetry,” he writes, “is the language of nonexchangeability, the return of infinite hermeneutics, and the return of the sensuous body of language.” Though he does not mention Rousseau’s Essay, he implies a Rousseau-ian disalienation. The “return of the sensuous body of language,” whose further result would be to “recompose the social and affective body,” is for Berardi the promise of poetry in resistance to semicapitalism, a regime of social and information production that he described elsewhere as the “new alienation” of “putting the soul to work.”

To attempt to follow the great Romantic leaps of Berardi’s poetics: the extralinguistic in poetry rescues the sensuousness of the word from semiotic production. This poetic, unremittable signifier serves as the model for his proposal of a “right to insolvency.” However, the “debtor from which one must exert a right to be absolved here isn’t only the financialized debt expressed in Berardi’s unforgettable line, “German banks have stored Greek time,” but also the demands placed upon the cognitive worker by semicapitalist production and its deterritorialized 24/7 workday.
The social and affective body of the cognitive workers has been separated from their daily activity of production. The new alienation is based on this separation, on the virtualization of social relations. The new alienation takes the form of psychic suffering, panic, depression and a suicidal tide. This is the affective character of the first generation of people who have learned more words from a machine than from the mother.\(^8\)

In the present, social media technologies have given recreational culture the same forms as the techno-cognitive and semiotic labor that Berardi describes above. We might therefore revisit France Gall’s 1965 telegenius through the lens of our current media ecology:

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itself through lyric poetry’s classic—proleptic—declaration of presence: “I.”

The second line of the bridge—“I can’t prevent this hurt from almost overtaking me”—repeats the melody of the first line, but without the long, voluptuous “I.” That “I” returns in the third line: “But I . . .” (held for five beats). Reverb is applied unevenly to the second half of that line, the “wet”-ness of each note corresponding to how forcefully Carey sings it, peaking at the last syllable: “... will stand and say good-bye.” In that “bye,” Carey’s voice vibrates on the note for two and a half beats, while the song’s thickest treatment of reverb exaggerates Carey’s vibrato to the point that it suggests a dissolving of the voice.

Melodically, the “I” and “bye” of this last line mark successively high landing notes, to be surpassed yet again by that of the first half of the bridge’s last line: “For you’ll never be mine ...” After these three peaks, the melody falls almost an octave to begin a huge, scale-like climb to a yet higher one: “—until you know the way it feels to fly.” The last line of the bridge actually extends into a reprise of the chorus, that “fly” landing enjambed on the reprise’s first note. On that first note of this third chorus, all of the instruments clear out as the backup singers reenter the song a capella. The last syllable of the bridge—the “fly” carried over to the chorus—lasts for an incredible four beats. Eleven beats into that extended syllable, we hear the exhaustion of Mariah Carey-the-virtuoso singer who sold more records in the ’90s than any other human being. For a brief second (3:12–3:13), we hear two simultaneous Carey leads melodically fluttering in tandem but not in unison: one the end of a distinct improvisation, the other the beginning of a new one. Again, reverb plays a role: if the “wet”-ness of the “bye” in the previous line suggested the disintegration of the voice, the “wet”-ness of the two voices, each refracted into a multitude of other voices by echo effect, is something like the disintegration of Mariah Carey-the-subject, brisée en mille éclats de voix.

Me. I Am Mariah.

Most likely, this effect began as a solution to a practical problem: how to hold a syllable for a full four bars, beyond, that is, the capabilities of even the world’s most well-conditioned human voice. My best guess: while mixing the two vocal tracks to create the illusion of one long continuous breath, a hand must have slipped and someone must have heard that mis-splice and decided that it sounded better that way. And to the overlap of those two vocal takes, the addition of extreme reverb to render the multiple into a multiplicity.

As I write this, two months ahead of her still-untitled fourth album, media outlets from The Fader to Vulture to Entertainment Weekly are falling over themselves trying to describe what makes Claire Boucher, who performs under the name Grimes, the “voice of her generation.” These attempts almost unanimously share a fascination with Boucher’s life, lived on the internet, and many also with Grimes, the avatar-like product of internet life. For instance, artist Asher Penn, writing in Artforum, periodizes Grimes as the exemplary figure of cultural omnivorousness at the tail end of net neutrality. 14 For her part, Boucher—who claims to have undergone media training to learn “how to stop saying stupid things so I stop having all these constant dramas” but “didn’t really learn anything”—is having a lot of difficulty reconciling her social media persona with the demands of the stardom that may be awaiting her. 15 In February of 2013, she wrote, in response to Jenn Pelly of Pitchfork, “my Tumblr is not a news source. I’m debating whether or not I should delete this shit. I will decide in the next 5 minutes. My specific problem is that I don’t like it when what I say on here is taken out of context and posted elsewhere. It’s not a story and its [sic] not an official statement.”

The world wants very badly for Grimes to be the millennial Björk, though Boucher has repeatedly voiced a quite different desire: to be Mariah Carey. I first encountered Grimes in the basement of the Drake Hotel in Toronto in January of 2011, as the opening act to a friend’s concert. She had recently released her sophomore album, Halfaxa, which to my ears still resonates more with our age than her follow-up, 2012’s critical darling, Visions. At its best moments, that early Grimes, dwarfed behind her table of machines, built her complex, multi-layered vocal signatures in real time, adding, subtracting, and sequencing live vocals, which were then looped, in the way a live DJ mixes records and samples. Grimes was hardly alone in working in this way—Juliana Barwick is another solo live vocal looper who came to prominence in the spring of 2011, and Marnie Stern had done the same with guitar instead of voice half a decade earlier. But what was remarkable about the early Grimes was the spectacle of Boucher juggling all of those fragments of her voice, her face simultaneously suggesting an out-of-body experience and fear that at any moment the entire song could fall apart. This was every bit the virtuoso performance that Carey’s classic workouts were, only Grimes’s feat was one of concentration, not physical prowess. It has been said that the condition of being a contemporary artist is also to be one’s own PR manager, though we would doubtlessly now amend that title to social media manager. But this condition can also be a formal one. Lyric in the age of semiocapitalism, then: to manage a thousand éclats de voix.