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Vocalizing Nothingness: (Re)configuring vocality inside the spacetime of Ottavia

ABSTRACT

In 1634, a Venetian academy, Accademia degli Incogniti/Academy of the Unknown, published a discourse on Nothingness, Le Glorie del Niente. Their idea of Nothingness can be simplified to the fact that words were the sparkles of meaning, and immediately when spoken the rational context was transformed into other meanings and purposes. Nothingness was in a sense fragmented but at the same time filled with paradoxes and multiple meanings. A list of figures of Nothingness was formulated by the Academy. Voice was one of them. The purpose of this Voicing is to stage an event where Nothingness becomes a part of a singer's conscious process into an historical vocal manuscript. This event – being an essay delivered in both written and sounding format – invites the reader to join the singer in her paradoxical journey through words, thoughts and vocality. Her methodological format is built through a continuous questioning into how sensuous experiences of singing and performing can be understood and communicated in words. Theories and vocal practice materialize through one another continuously. The result is a complex poetic event in words and sound, serving as a model for how a voice can develop through a never-ending learning process of vocalizing and theorizing.

KEYWORDS

nothingness
madness
seventeenth-century
opera
fragment
figure
intra-action
diffraction
becoming

1. Professor Karen Barad, University of California Santa Cruz, proposes a theoretical framework, which she calls *agential realism*. This is an onto-epistemological framework providing a posthuman performative/new materialist account of natural-cultural practices. The theory includes an understanding of *phenomena* as units of realities that lack a dualistic distinction between object and subject (agencies), thus emphasizing a sense of wholeness. Intra-action explains the unforeseen encounters occurring within phenomena, as abilities to act (from) within, as opposed to the term inter-action, according to which actions occur through independent, separate agencies. From a methodological point of view, in this particular study, intra-action describes the way thoughts, sound, words, practice-based and theoretical references diffract through one another as entangled agencies. Barad's theoretical framework thus allows for a close reading of performative encounters within a specific event, as opposed to an understanding of agencies separated as dichotomies loaded with distinctions between subject and object or between cause and effect (see Barad 1996, 2007, 2010).

ARGOMENTO

To my most illustrious and most excellent reader ...

Or just simply (as I would say today)

Dear reader ...

You are about to move into my world of vocal wonders. (And into my particular understanding of a Voicing – as a poetic, mad and senseless writing through vocality, singing, practising and theorizing.) A world that, perhaps, makes you wonder even more. About clarity, about the obvious, about the curious questions or references that I do not ask, use or even mention. This world is about sketching, drawing and colouring in words, always departing from vocal experiences. My intention is to present a set of facts, based on the empirical data I collect from my own creative journey into meanings and mattering of vocal experiences. A journey depending on more-than-one-encounter with anything and nothing. (Because Nothing – or Nothingness – has enchanted me for some time.) At the same time, my intention is not to make sense about anything particular than this voicing adventure in itself. (What a crazy person! Yes, I can read your thoughts.) I believe that whatever you might think will be the very beginning of your own journey into anything or nothing. (Perhaps you'll become as curious as myself. Perhaps even enchanted.) So, most welcome. Take my hand if you like. Let's move along together ...

This Voicing is an attempt to exhibit fragments from an adventurous performance event acted from inside a wondrous shadowland beyond a voice in action. I like to think of this wondrous shadowland as a rather dubious location. Not like a vocal performance event/space in a more traditional sense, where the audience knows what to expect. No, this shadowland is space/time/event all in one. A parallel world and landscape bordering the safe and known grounds of what a voice normally is expected to perform. This shadowland is not one single field, but an infinite land of unforeseen curious events. The path I have decided for us to walk is via action and intra-action.¹ Through acts of passing, encountering, performing, wording, writing, entangling, reading and thinking. The aim of this Voicing is to investigate how a voice reforms, matters, grows and consciously accumulates a nomadic sense of learning and knowing through Nothingness.

SCENARIO

Nothingness

This Voicing came out of a research project exploring vocal Nothingness as part of a seventeenth-century discourse, staged in a twenty-first-century artistic/academic setting (Belgrano 2011). The project observed Nothingness as a theme intensely debated in Venetian and Parisian academic circles (Calcagno 2003; Ossola 2007; Muir 2007), with its characteristics of expanding extremes, absurdities and bizarre extravaganzas; as eternal con/temporary nature/cultures (Haraway 2003), part of time/space and sound/silence, making all binaries-as-we-see-them-today becoming *part of* the same (Barad 2007: 133); as a topic infinitely twisting in any direction, making no-sense and all sense simultaneously. When voice and body (characters in this drama) together walk onstage, a vocal performance event starts. On the other hand, the shadowland of a vocal performance is harder to pinpoint when silence

and sound alternate unrehearsed, when the body is hiding in darkness for as long as needed, and when the voice itself is a collection of dispersed ‘fragments of an identity’ (Ross 3 December 2015, personal communication) whose actions cannot be predicted beforehand. Every figure/fragment is part of the same sketch. Of the same image. Of the same sound. Fragmented events and ‘becomings’ are all parts of the same event.²

Barad talks about ‘a performance of spacetime (re)configurings’ as offering ‘a way of thinking with and through dis/continuity – a dis/orienting experience of the dis/jointedness of time and space, entanglements of here and there, now and then, that is, a ghostly sense of dis/continuity’ (2010: 240). Her words make me lose track of my own thoughts. Lose control. I am both continuing ahead of myself and at the same time, I become the very end of my own path. Becoming extremes and paradoxes in the same breath. Through the same voice. In the same scene. I am lost, yet woven into a net that makes me feel at ease somehow. I am still in my act of reading and performing, on the verge of madness. Or perhaps I am not mad at all. Like in the mad scene in Francesco Saccati’s opera from 1641, *La Finta Pazza/The False Mad*.³ In all this chaos, there is hope, keeping me on my feet. Barad continues to tell, ‘what comes across in this dis/jointed movement is a felt sense of *différance*, of *intra-activity*’ (2010: 240, original emphasis). Myself/my voice are part of yet another intra-active act, meaning here and now, including the Voicing you hold in your hand, your eyes reading these words, your thoughts meeting mine on the page in front of you. Your critical look at the form and the content of this article – which most probably appears as an unclear and misty image – has probably already given up. But I tell you, we have already met before. Because what you now whisper in my ear is simply not true. Never mind. Let us move on ...

This Voicing is a first article and an early attempt to returning historical voices into a contemporary experimental spacetime of entangled thoughts, vocal sound and written words, allowing for vocal art to become its own glorious spacetime of Nothingness. A place where voices of all times gather. A place where sighs and silence are *seeing* one another through a window glass, rather than through a mirror. In this Voicing, Nothingness allows voices to sound and speak independent of time and space. Becoming one and many, without an end ...

Le Glorie del Niente

In 1634, a Venetian academy, Accademia degli Incogniti/Academy of the Unknown, published a discourse on Nothingness, *Le Glorie del Niente* by Marin dall’Angelo. It was a text expressing a sense of *wonder* for the imaginary and the extraordinary. The Incogniti’s philosophy served as a background to the public opera productions in Venice from 1637.⁴ Their ideas of Nothingness can be simplified as the fact that words became sparkles of new meanings. Immediately, when spoken, their rational context was transformed into different meanings and purposes.⁵ Nothingness was in a sense fragmented and filled with paradoxes and multiple meanings at the same time. A list of figures of Nothingness was formulated by the academy, including death, air, beauty and voice (Calcagno 2003). One of the great vocal performers in Venice, Anna Renzi romana, became herself a figure of Nothingness, because of her thrilling performances of mad scenes and lamentations. Her many voices can be recalled in a publication distributed by the same academy, with poems in

2. Becoming as a concept has been pointed out by various scholars in connection to time and motion. In this Voicing, I elaborate around the concept according to Barad’s theories and I point here to the following description: ‘Becoming is not an unfolding in time, but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering’ (Barad 2007: 180). In my performance of Ottavia, I see a relationship between Nothingness and the continuous movement through an entanglement of bodily and mental acts, voices, thoughts, words and gestures. The performance of Ottavia turns into a series of ‘becomings’ and ‘enfoldings’ as part of an ongoing spacetime-mattering process.

3. According to Paolo Fabbri, mad scenes appeared in the commedia dell’arte, ‘regularly presented as bravura pieces’, lacking both reason and proportions (see Belgrano 2011: 42). These scenes were often improvised, evolving while being performed. The characteristics included exaggeration, fast tempo, senseless phrasing and vivid articulation. The mad scene came to play an interesting role in the early Venetian opera since it was highly esteemed by its audience, ‘while at the same time it came to represent an upside-down anti-rhetorical opposition to Renaissance ideals supported and powered by the Catholic church’ (Belgrano 2011: 43). Claudio Monteverdi declares that ‘the imitation of this feigned madness must take into consideration only the present, not

the past or the future, and consequently must emphasize the word, not the sense of the phrase' (in Belgrano 2011: 44).

4. Ellen Rosand refers to the production of *Andromeda* during the Carnival in 1637, performed by the opera company headed by poet-musician Benedetto Ferreri at Teatro San Cassiano in Venice (Rosand 1991: 67). Vocal experimentation with Monteverdi's musical setting for the roles of Ottavia and Arianna was carried out at the same location (Teatro S. Cassiano, currently transformed into a private garden) by Belgrano during her doctoral research (2009, 2011).
5. For further reading on Nothingness and the members of Accademia degli Incogniti, see Calcagno 2003; Muir 2007: 70–80; Ossola 2007.
6. All material collected for this Voicing are part of the performance project *Glories to Nothingness*, curated and performed by Elisabeth Belgrano and Björn Ross (artist and curator of Copenhagen Renaissance Festival/the SOLO-performance series, among others). The first open-laboratory event was performed in Copenhagen on 3 December 2015. The project is continuously developed in the Research Catalogue, <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/226423/226424>.
7. Barad draws a methodology of diffraction and intra-action from both physics and feminist theories and defines the term diffracting as 'to break apart, in different directions'

honour of Signora Anna Renzi's vocal acts, *Le Glorie della Signora Anna Renzi romana* (Strozzi, 1644; see also Rosand 1991: 228–35; Belgrano 2011). Signora Anna was the first singer to perform the sounds and acts of Ottavia in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* at Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice in 1642. Right now, at this moment, we meet her again, here and now, as a voice among many voices in other times and spaces. We meet in an open spacetime where we all become part of a drama.

*Ottavia: A poetic and adventurous event*⁶

Re-acting through wonder, we find the Roman empress Ottavia in a state right in between glory and loss, life and death, sleeping and awakening. She has learned of Nero's decision to ask her to leave her roles as an empress and as a wife. She is forced to leave Rome. Commanded to disappear from Nero's sight. In despair she sighs, cries and mourns her loss while cursing the love between Nero and his new love, Poppea. Ottavia is asking herself who she is, and where she is going. She travels through her own past and future and expresses farewell to her land, her love and her friends.

With reference to theories of new materialism, the performative process of diffracting Ottavia as an event-as-it-comes-along depends on a consciously onto-epistemological cutting together-apart (Barad 2007, 2010).⁷ The notion of 'becomings' – as fragmented figures – appears in this Voicing as words, sounds and images. At the same time, I try not to forget that this Voicing might be a dream, or a curious event that might not even be happening at all. As Fischer-Lichte points out, the materiality of this event 'is not given as an artefact' (2008: 162). The singer's vocal presence,

the ecstasy of things, atmospheres, and the circulation of energy 'occur' in the same way as the meanings brought forth as perceptions or



Figure 1: Elisabeth Belgrano during the performance *Glories to Nothingness*, 3 December 2015, Koncertkirken, Copenhagen. Photograph by Björn Ross.

emotions, ideas, or thoughts resulting from them. The performance's aestheticity is manifested in its nature as event: the spectators respond to what they perceive just as the actors react to perceived audience responses and behavior patterns.

(Fischer-Lichte 2008: 162)

In this way, we all create our own meanings and truths based on everything and nothing. What we perceive are each other's dreams. Real or unreal. Because the dream, as well as the voice, was considered a figure of Nothingness in the minds of the operatic producers in the seventeenth-century Venice. Nothingness became a collection of fragments, events, symbols and figures, making sense and non-sense at the same time.

and diffraction/
intra-action, as in
'cutting together-
apart (one move) in
the (re)configuring of
spacetime-mattering'
(2014: 168).

8. See also Belgrano (2015) for further elaboration on posthuman theories and the use of 'more-than-human-references'.

PERSONAGGI (*human and non-human*)⁸

Ottavia, the abandoned wife of Nero (lamenting her destiny in Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Venice, 1642).

Anna Renzi, the first singer enfolded the voice of Ottavia in 1642; lamenting her own departure from friends and family in Rome for a career as a singer and performer in Venice and elsewhere.

All separate objects on stage.

The stage itself.

The room.

The altar.

The borderland between sea/wooden floor and land/carpet.

The stage light.

The candle.

The air touching and pushing the flame of the candle.

The air feeding the voice to vocal lab/oration.

The body of the singer.

The golden high heel shoes.

The floor making physical resistance.

Memories shaped by con/temporary texts, stories and other events.

PROLOGUE

Leaving

'Tonight I take a deep breath. I begin an experiment. A journey. Deep into the voice of every spoken word. Into every sound passing through my body. Through every passion acted out of Nothing. A Dio ... To God ...' (Belgrano 1 December 2015, personal communication)

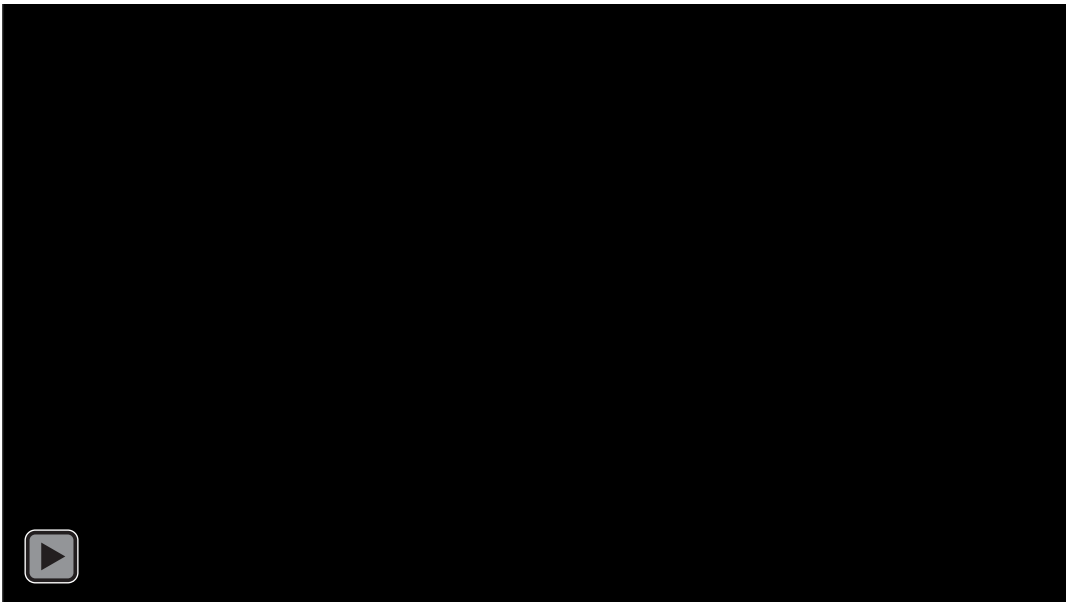
Her body stood next to the speaker system in the cold veranda. His voice sang inside her body. His tears flowed down her cheeks. She ran

9. All films are embedded in the online version of this Voicing.

the same song over and over. Calming her anxious soul. She had two hours still to sleep before she had to leave the house. Her body was cold. Her bags were packed. Wig. Dress. Shoes. Score. Covered in wool, she went to bed. Her bed-light illuminated the words on the page she was reading before going to sleep:

'Tonight (I) take a deep breath. (I) begin an experiment. (A) journey. Deep into the voice of E/very spoke/n word. Into E/very sound passing through the body. In/through E/very passion acted out of no/thing. A Dio ... To God ...' (Belgrano 1 December 2015, personal communication)

SCENE/FIGURE/FRAGMENT 1 (FILM 1)⁹

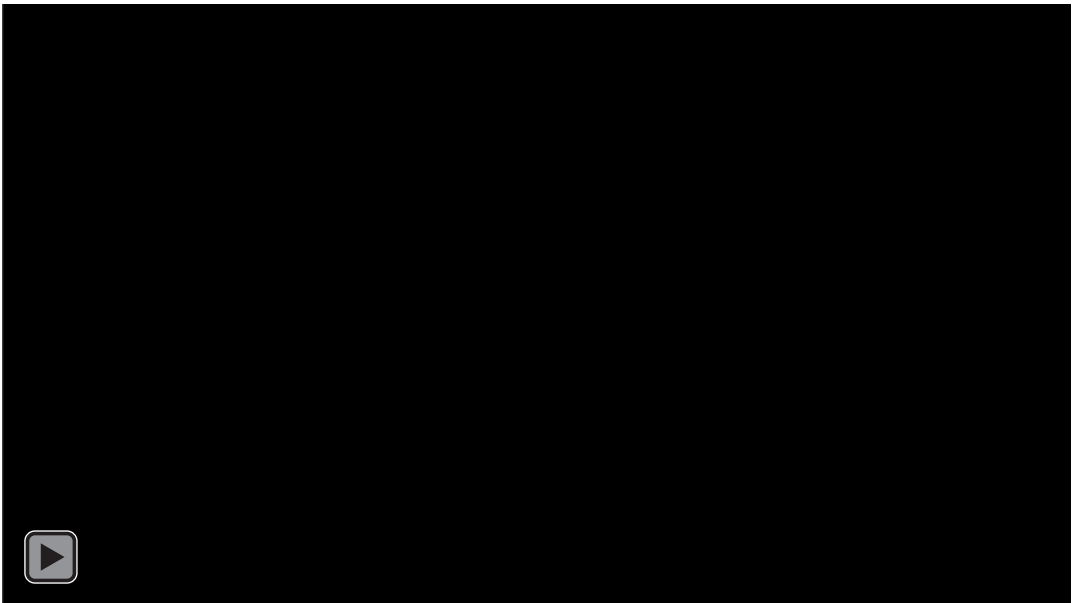


'... A Dio ... to God'. She was hidden away from everybody. Under a dusty old blanket. In darkness. Her body could feel the cold surface of the altar. A deconsecrated surface. Guilt. She felt as if committing an error. Did she betray her own faith? Left behind. She and the room had this in common. Both ignored and left behind. She had to force herself from moving. Nobody was meant to know of her presence. I turn and return. To the image of God. She feared the space and the fact of her sinful act. Even if she knew the place was forgotten by the powerful hand commanding the rituals. She became an image of God. Magnified by them. Magnificent and honoured. Open and complete. As a Goddess, she walked through the streets. Never ever questioning her right to speak. Yet she was invisible to everyone. She was a woman of few words. A woman with a voice. No/thing/ness on two feet.

A Dio. To God. I re/turn.

She said. She sang. Making pleasurable deeds to the world. Bringing tears to the soil. Disturbing through her presence. She opened her mouth and a naked utterance melted out on stage. Warm and thick – it coloured the stage floor red. What is left of this performance has been kept alive through the presence of Pasquino. A silent storyteller. A talking statue. In Rome. He mentioned her name to any/every/one. Whispered her name in the street. I found a proof of her acts by his side. Kept alive for centuries. Now I am here to tell you about the naked voice – dressed in red and black. Warm and thick. I turn to God. To God I re/turn ... A Dio ... Amici ...

SCENE/FIGURE/FRAGMENT 2 (FILM 2)



The air grows like a storm from the sea right through her body. I. I. I. I. will show them all. The power I am. The power I own. The strength that I and nobody else can cope with. Because it burns. Wind and fire. A match and an explosive No-thing. My heart is the source of my many threats and I ... Fearful stories comes out of my presence. But how can any/one be afraid of air? Of a female weak and vulnerable breathing body. Left to rotten. To be forgotten. But even stones and rocks are brought to tears. Frozen tears.

I teach. You see, I will teach you to show a sign of touch.

You, walls, fragmented dividers made out of brick and stones.

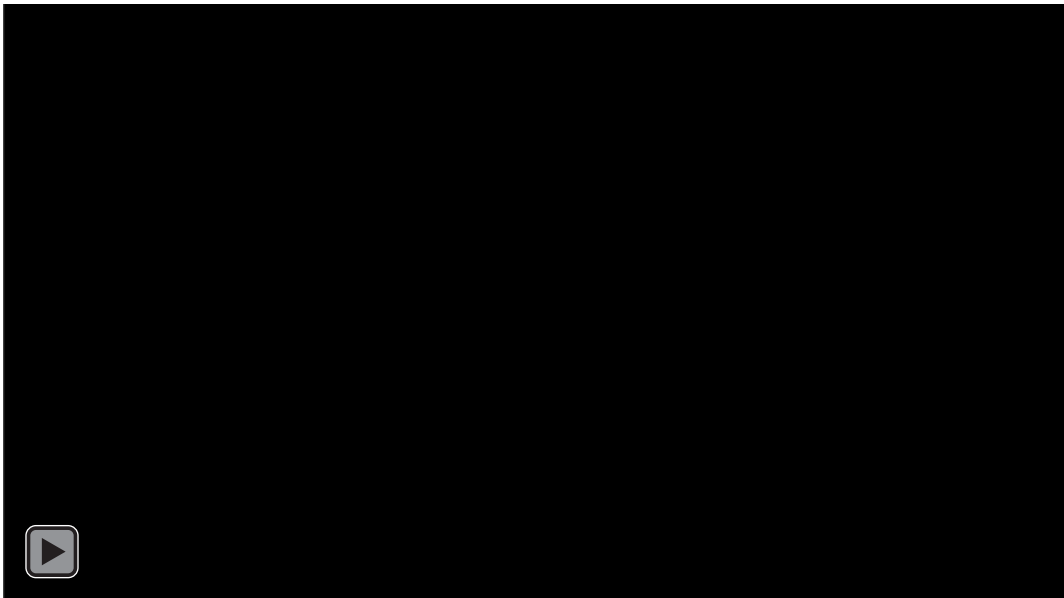
You shall tremble. Vibrate. Mis-figure. Because of air, brought to movement. My name is ... I. **I.** I am so sure about it. There is a drive. Curious questions arise. Can it be used? Can it be made useful, this energy? Can it become important for some reason? *How?* The way I speak to you? The way I look at you? The way I walk towards you? Leaving the altar? Approaching you?

Beings of the sea. Objects all around. Sharing this air. Sharing the space. Sharing the time. Remembering something that hasn't even entered the ears of anyone in the room. Re-mem-bering. *Re-cordare*. Re-cording. Claiming the iron-line of a thick rope. Holding on to those stony rocks. Linked to them. Hidden beneath the water.

For no-one to see ...

L'Aria. Air. *Cuore*. Fire. Stone. *Terra Ferma*. Home.

SCENE/FIGURE/FRAGMENT 3 (FILM 3)



They hate me!!! DiSsss ... DiSsssPrezzzzata ... aaaa sweet yet bitter. Like shots bursting through my body. I am afflicted. And left. Wife. So loving. Once. Ahhhhhhaaha.

Ooooooooooh.

Always the same story. Always destined to be treated like Nothing. And I will prove them to be right. I will make him know that Nothing I am. I taste the words. Over and over. She/I am/was. Will always be. The eeeeeeee travels into his heart. King or common. How did you cry? Accompanied. Cruel. By cruelty. Forced and doomed. At the same time.

In various events. Once doomed. Once forced. Two different forces.
One pushing me back. The other pushing forward. Now the flavour is
salty. Like the sea brought to my face by winds and storms. Carried
by boat across seas. Ending up on a shore. Alone. Dropped off. Left to
contemplate and reflect. Chained to a destiny of being a woman. With
all what comes with this role.

I hold my child. My love. A body brought to life by love and care.

But this body is nothing more than hate itself. Cruelty. Power.

So fierce that even monsters seem out of place.

FORZA. Power. Energy. Forward. Drive.

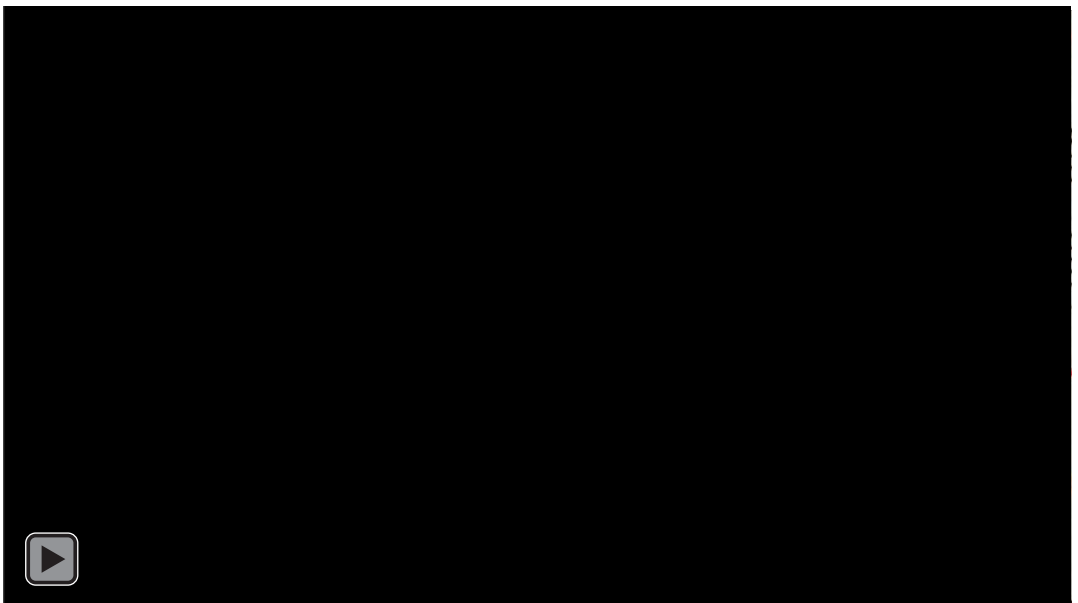
But wait.

CONSTRAIN. Forced to hold back. Passion. Any act of lust and will.
Women. Behave and rest in the seats you have been given! Re-turn.
Stand in silence. Bow and accept. Your destiny. You desperate woman.
Hysterical.

Stay. Remain. Re-turn. And turn again. Back and forth. Queen. Never
mind. Queen or simple female. Like an animal. Who cares.

No point. Any more. No. More. No.

SCENE/FIGURE/FRAGMENT 4 (FILM 4)



You. Her. Arms. Legs. Bodies. Heat. Love. That you enjoy.

And I. Here. In tears. Sobbing. Sighing ...

Without rights. To remain in silence.

But how can I leave? Like this? How can I just be thrown away?

I can reason and say that I don't care. I can choose to ignore your decision and just go on. Doing what I was once told to do. And do it well.

Sing. I can choose to sing. Louder than ever. BECAUSE I am a woman.

With a right. To a voice. Actively I complain. And scream.

But nothing. You don't hear anything. Nothing.

Because I do as I am told. I stand here looking at you. Your Love. For her.

I don't care about her. Only about your behaviour and your body. Hurting me. Could you even remember? The ties we created together. Strong lines of love and passion. Once. We had them. Tied around our bodies. Now abstract and absent. No-thing? Can we feel? No reason to search for. Because your love re-turned to another. Changed direction. Crashed into another. Mixed itself with other forms. Other meanings. Other liquids. Other tears. My blood. An empress transformed to tears. A rejected body. Any body. Anybody. No body. No/body. No/thing. No matter. Nothing.

EPILOGUE

In that period, which critics generally consider the beginning of the Baroque, many literary genres lost their internal balance, their classic decorum and equilibrium [...]. The Incogniti philosophy of nothing, with its distrust in the power of verbal language, may well be considered the philosophical premise of these stylistic extremes. [...] Distrust of the meaning of language is compensated by trust in the power of voice.

(Calcagno 2003: 472)

Through the process of creating this 'Voicing', voice comes to power. It knows and has confidence in its own ability to rule. But, more importantly, verbal language, written symbols and a sounding nature/cultured voice have entangled and devised themselves through one another. They have become part of the same event. They have been *cut together-apart* (Barad 2014), producing a strange and mad style dominated by an inability to write or speak normally. Completely in line with an aesthetics of the Accademia degli Incogniti for whom 'words [...] are as unsubstantial as the outside world which they mirror and to which they refer. The Incogniti skepticism affects *in primis* the status of written texts' (Calcagno 2003: 471). The battle between text and sound has become an inferno and a chaos. Two, being one, being an event of its own, 'a chaotic multiplicity' (Deleuze 2006: 86), a

Dis-cursus – originally the action of running here and there, comings and goings, measures taken, 'plots and plans': the lover, in fact, cannot keep his mind from racing, taking new measures and plotting against himself. His discourse exists only in outbursts of language, which occur at the whim of trivial, of aleatory circumstances. These fragments of discourse can be called *figures*.

(Barthes 2002: 3, original emphasis)



Figure 2: *Glories to Nothingness scenography*, 3 December 2015, *Koncertkirken, Copenhagen*. Photograph by Björn Ross.

Troublesome figures, events and stories. Dissonances, blurring, all extremes exposed as unclear as possible. In the end, music dies. Voice disappears. Leaving verbal symbols scribbled on a computer screen or on a printed paper. What was lost in the vocal line has been regained in written words. Senseless to some. Real to others.

What can be learned from this Voicing? My answer: the beginning of an adventure, set in motion by an exhibition of a mad vocal learning-process-in-progress. A wondrous event that shocks with its difference. Or maybe not. You decide for yourself. The only fact is that words have been sung *and* written. New situated knowledge has been pronounced. What more can be said? Was it not all but a dream? Is voice gone forever?

CODA

Yes, Voice is gone. Silence remains. Nothing is left. Yet the vibration of motion will continue to live in every one of us, in all our daily commitments. In words. No matter what. A Dio! To God! A Dio ...

She had returned to the altar. Back to sighs and sleep. Soundings. On her way.

Farewell ... friends. Don't be sad. I am leaving. Mourning. To death.

Just as if all this never happened. Never occurred. Forgotten. Silenced.

A Dio ... Amici ... to God ... to Nothing ...

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