

Article received on : 25th September 2015

Article accepted on: 15th October 2015

UDC: 782:305-055.2

COBISS.SR-ID 223346956

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VOICE AS A MASQUERADE: AUDIBLE GENDER PERFORMANCE IN SEVERAL REPRESENTATIVE THEORETICAL DISCOURSES ON FEMALE IDENTITY

Abstract: Tracing different approaches to the notion of gender masquerade, this study promotes the idea that a female subjectivity can be constituted, represented and socially situated by the means of *audible masquerade*. Given that the masquerade is understood here as an ongoing, recurrent, strategic and creative audible performance, the female voice, either in its real form (singing in opera, for instance) or in its metaphorical sense (*écriture féminine*), is taken as a gender mask *par excellence*. The study aims to shed some light on social and theoretical contextualization of female voice and its oppositions to the paradigm of male word / male voice.

Key words: voice, female voice, masquerade, audible masquerade, voice as a masquerade

In the context of this study, the phrase *voice as a masquerade* is intended to evoke and paraphrase the title of a renowned article *Womanliness as a Masquerade* (1929), written by British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere. It is in Riviere's article that the notion of *masquerade* was, for the first time in theoretical psychoanalysis, used to distinctively and unequivocally name and describe gender – specifically, female – representation.¹ Riviere's article is essentially about women's inability to freely constitute gender and avoid, in language of Louis Althusser, men's/patriarchal interpellation. The author's main argument is that *there cannot*

¹ *Womanliness as a Masquerade* describes gender positions and behaviour of an *intellectual woman* (as many believe, the author herself) in a male-dominated business environment of the late 1920's in America. The businessmen tend to see intellectual women as competitors; therefore, women “put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (Joan Riviere, *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, in: *Formations of Fantasy*, New York, Methuen & Co., 1986, 35) – that is, they *mask themselves into feminine subjects* in order to hide their own masculine characteristics and to be accepted in the working environment. Riviere's female figure, intellectually advanced and with high career ambition, is considered to be a “new” subject-type in psychology and psychoanalysis – a subject on a “verge of identity”, a *masculine female/woman* (there is also the analogous *feminine male/man*).

be a real feminine woman, a woman who's gender resonates with her carnal / sex morphology, but there can only be a female identity constantly shaped through a masquerade. In order to become "visible" – or luminous (Michel Foucault),² or culturally intelligible (Judith Butler) – women put on a mask of womanliness, according to the principles of falo(go)centric system, which posits femininity in the core of female representation.³ Womanliness – so female subjectivity, too – have no foundation in female ontology. They are a kind of "slippery", fantastic categories, constructions of heterosexual culture and performatives for the Men.

Riviere's idea of a woman's constant need to mask in order to appear, to have *something* that she can identify with, differ to,⁴ situate within, or even exist with the help of (in a way that she exists only *through the masquerade*, when her femininity is carnal), inspired and echoed in a number of psychoanalytic, feminist and post-feminist texts, where femininity/masculinity and forms of sexuality were understood as masks,⁵ while the gender identification was taken

² Foucault borrowed the concept of luminosity from astronomy, where it signifies a total amount of energy emitted from a star, a galaxy, or another astronomical object. In Foucault's interpretation, luminosity relates to discourse, visibility and phenomenology: it is a kind of incidence which is visible, but not a part of a discourse (though still dependent upon one). Despite the fact that Foucault favours discursive practices in the process of knowledge-forming, the visible and luminous too, along with the discursive (or, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, articulable) constitute knowledge, behaviour, thought and forming of ideas.

³ Riviere actually erased any difference between femininity and masquerade: "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial. They are the same thing. The capacity for womanliness was there in this woman [the intellectual woman from Riviere's case-study, *A/N*] – and one might even say it exists in the most completely homosexual woman – but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment" (Joan Riviere, *Op. cit.*, 38). Riviere's focus on women's social identifications, and not their biological features and functions, broke off from Sigmund Freud's concept of womanliness, which, undoubtedly, had had an impact on Riviere's theory in many ways (Joan Riviere was famous for being the first significant translator of Freud's texts in English and also she had cooperated with him for some time). Unlike Freud, who saw women as subjects acting according to the Oedipus' scenario and therefore repudiating womanliness for the sake of biological need (the sex act), Riviere found female subjects already partly masculine and driven by the need for social approval, rather than sexual fulfillment.

⁴ The patriarchal world relies on – and dialectically constitutes – gender binary. Despite the attempts of many new theories to overcome the polarity of gender roles (and the related binary concept), very few discourses indeed do so (these rare discourses mention androgyny, hermaphroditism, transsexuality, pansexuality, and cyborg or entirely virtual identities).

⁵ It is important to note that Riviere had evidently promoted masquerade as a highly important and effective concept in gender studies, no matter the particularities of scientific disci-

as a primary self-determination. For most writers who deal with these themes, a masquerade is a *representative phenomenon*, conceived of *visual and behavioural elements* and in this respect close to Rivier's idea of womanliness: a mask is an appearing image of a woman, whose appearance and performance denote various social, cultural, political, ideological and other meanings (such is, for example, the so-called sartorial mask/masquerade).⁶ Certain authors, however, see the mask of femininity and the female masquerade generally in relation with *woman's audibility*. An eventual public consolidation of *female voice* in fact signifies a breakthrough of female subjectivity outside its patriarchal predestination: the private domain.⁷ As a distinctive means of identification and emancipation, the female voice is relevant on two levels: metaphorical – pertaining the so-called *feminine discourse (writing – écriture féminine)*,⁸ and the other literal

plines which the concept could have occurred in. Some of the later writers undoubtedly had this concept in mind while examining different aspects of identification; however, not many used the term “masquerade” explicitly. The notion of masquerade still goes through the process of academisation (and so this text should be perceived in the context of that process).

⁶ The performative aspect – that is, the mechanisms – of masquerade is of interest especially to Jaques Lacan and Judith Butler. Lacan revived Joan Riviere's study in an article titled *The Signification of the Phallus* (1958), where he explored gender identification and female masquerade within the concepts of Imaginary and Symbolic. It is his belief that both women and men participate in the gender masquerade: men pretend to “have a phallus”, while women pretend to “be the phallus” and thus serve for the men to identify as dominant subjects. According to Lacan, gender articulation begins in the pre-ontological state of desire and then develops mainly in the Symbolic domain (in language).

Judith Butler considers Riviere's view on femininity / masquerade as one of the most significant theories of gender-forming in specific social contexts and in relation to sex and taboo. For Butler's investigation, the problem of *social enforcement* seems to be far more important than the individual identity: she looks at how the society evaluates the “quality” and suitability of performed identities. She is also interested in the possibilities of subversion of social mechanisms which, in Erving Goffman's words, designate and stigmatize the *spoiled identities*. Butler's interpretation of Riviere's study actually greatly contributes to the readings of *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, because Butler pointed out that the text was less on women's business problems and more on women's homosexuality: it was the lesbian aspect of that intellectual woman that had actually been masked.

⁷ Understanding masquerade in predominantly visual / behavioural terms does not exclude the possibility of understanding it as an audible performance (as well). It will be shown later in the study how some writers, for instance, take sartorial and audible / singing masquerade as mutually dependent and compatible. Different kinds of masquerade can carry out the exact same meanings, individually or in a kind of mutual cooperation.

⁸ It is widely accepted that the “female discourse” originated in terminology, epistemology and methodology of feminist studies, especially in the writings of “French feminist theoreticians of discourse (Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Catherine Clement, Helene Cixous, etc.), who dedicated themselves to forming the *écriture féminine*, which is directly a project of

– meaning real, audible voice, materialized in *public speaking* and especially in *public singing*.⁹ The relevance of female voice in public domain resonates with the relevance of female subject in social, political, cultural, academic and creative spheres; in other words, it connotes *female power*.

In her feminist concept of female subjectivity, Luce Irigaray intriguingly connected the voice, the masquerade and the power, arguing that a woman could become a public subject only if she used her voice carefully and creatively in a kind of a double-masquerade:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the ‘perceptible’, of ‘matter’ – to ‘ideas’, in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means ‘to unveil’ the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere: another case of the persistence of ‘matter’, but also of ‘sexual pleasure’.¹⁰

Differently put, in order to constitute her gender, a woman needs to become a speaking individual (so, the language becomes her mask), and at the same time to shape her speech so that she seemingly stays the Other (the exploited one). Depending on how she would have her moves calculated in this “imitation game”, she might gain certain power. Still, according to Irigaray, the subjectification will always remain within phallogentric boundaries: it will be limited and incomplete. Such an argument – that a woman needs to play cleverly – places Irigaray close to the authors such as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, who ascribed certain powers to women (and reduced men’s power as well), but did not open up to the possibility of exceeding the phallogentrism and also did not debate why such exceeding would or would not be achievable.¹¹

raising the value of female with its historical connotation and subversive potential” (Eva Federmajer, *Nova Crnkinja i maskarada / The New Black Woman and the Masquerade, Ženske studije / Women’s Studies*, 2015, 10, <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/izdavastvo/elektronska-izdanja/casopis-zenske-studije/zenskestudije-br-10/190-nova-crnkinja-i-maskarada>, accessed 2. 3. 2015).

⁹ No matter which one of these two levels might be emphasized in a particular inquiry, the other meaning is always leastways implicit. Both are based on a presumption that audibility – be it a public speech, singing, or writing – equals illumination of a female subject in (previously) male-dominated territory.

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, 76.

¹¹ As already noted, in Lacan’s interpretation, both men and women take part in gender

Judith Butler, on the contrary, persistently questions the limits of phallogentrism and the possibilities for “gaming up” the patriarchal myths, especially the heterosexual (gender-binary, but sex-binary as well) narratives.¹² The gender matrix is so omnipresent and repetitive that the gender division and polarization seem entirely natural, comprehensive and *invisible*. However, this continuity of self(re)production of female identity can in a way subvert the heterosexual conformation: if a female masquerade repeats – it shall counterbalance the common cultural state and, even though it may not overturn and truly invert social relations,¹³ it will produce a *parodic effect*.¹⁴

masquerade and play for having or being a phallus respectively. While Sigmund Freud had understood the phallus in terms of a real, positive signifier, Lacan saw it as a symbol of absent and impossible identity: no one indeed ever owned or was a phallus. A woman would try to “acquire” it for a man; she would enter the masquerade and lose her self in the play (cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Signification of the Phallus*, in: *Écrits*, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, 583). A man would join in and share the experience of having no stable or positive identity.

Derrida’s theory of gender is typically deconstructive, based on re-readings of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of a woman, which basically questions the conventional understandings of common terms, such as “subject” and “identity”. For Derrida, Nietzsche’s observations about women’s absence of identity and personality were not chauvinistic, but in fact a daring subversion of the very notion of the subject – its actually non-existing statics, power, preconceptions and constancy.

¹² Binariness is created and nourished in heterosexual systems of power. These systems “seek to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality. The force of this practice is [...] to restrict the relative meanings of ‘heterosexuality’, ‘homosexuality’, and ‘bisexuality’ as well as the subversive sites of their convergence and resignification” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble – Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, London, Routledge, 1990, 42).

¹³ Still, gender performance is ruled by gender policy: “In effect, gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, *Theatre Journal*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, XL, 4, 528).

¹⁴ As Butler points out, “practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186).

The fundamental power of masquerade, and the strongest effect that it can achieve, therefore lies in the very fact that it is an *ongoing, recurrent, strategic and creative performance*; in this respect, following Judith Butler's and Luce Irigaray's arguments, gender masquerade – including the audible / voice masquerade – should be viewed in terms of its repetitiveness, publicity and causality according to which the voice “distribution” depends on the common rules of tradition and patriarchy. Efrat Tseëlon, an English contemporary theoretician of gender, seems to have exactly these features of gender masquerade in mind when she elaborates the connection between various forms of female voice, especially in opera, and the socio-cultural relevancy of a female subject. In her study *On women and clothes and carnival fools*, Tseëlon explicitly points out that *the voice is a gender mask par excellence*. In the core of female representation there is the singing, seductive, erotic voice – *the femininity itself is audible*.¹⁵ The voice – twofold as it is: material (denoting the body)¹⁶ and symbolical – is always heard from the social (and it really means *male*) perspective.¹⁷ With respect to how it appears in various contexts, Tseëlon distinguishes *proper, provocative* and *mute* female voice and finds their responding, illustrative cultural embodiments:

– *the proper voice*: lady's voice – “the polite, gentle, non-challenging voice, [...] described in the Renaissance courtesy manuals, and the religious and

¹⁵ Woman's lips, mouth and voice have been symbols of sexuality for centuries (cf. Efrat Tseëlon, *On Women and Clothes and Carnival Fools*, in: *Masquerade and Identities: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, London, Routledge, 2001, 155).

¹⁶ Cf. Efrat Tseëlon, *Op. cit.*, 156.

¹⁷ The phallogocentric discourse has always interpreted female voice as “troubled” – dangerous, sensual, sexy, shallow, trivial, poisonous, labile, hysterical, inconsequent, illogical – “as in soap operas, romantic novels and women's magazines” (Efrat Tseëlon, *Op. cit.*, 158). “The historical trajectory of the female voice is overlaid with its relationship (both as metonymy and metaphor) to sexuality. Exposure of female voice produced cultural anxieties and suppressive mechanisms equalled only by the suppression of the display of naked female flesh” (Ibid.). In its end there is a voice in the form of aforementioned female discourse / writing, then Jacques Lacan's “mother's voice” which constitutes a lost object of desire, or, close to that, a voice as a fetish representation (that which replaces the desired object). “Functioning like the sartorial fetish, the vocal masquerade of ‘proper’ femininity veils the fantasy of strong (phallic) femininity” (Efrat Tseëlon, *Op. cit.*, 157).

As opposed to loud voice, the mute voice has often been taken as “ladylike”, a sign of politeness and well-behaving. A Renaissance lady, or the salon lady of the 19th century, for instance, represent concepts put before women almost as recipes for social acceptance: a lady should be asked to marry and can fulfill the usual expectations, such as to have children. According to Tseëlon, the lady-narrative “inaugurated” the sartorial masquerade as a distinctive substitution for the voice masquerade: in situations in which women lost the right to speak, a need for the sartorial masquerade occurred and this type of masquerade in a way replaced the voice with a certain look, clothes or make-up.

moralistic teachings from the Early Church through the Middle Ages”;¹⁸ it also appears in fiction literature – in stories describing women who get rewarded for their noble and decent behaviour;

- *the provocative voice*: “[it] is manifested in erotic and sensual forms of feminine expression. It is found, for example, in the mythological sirens whose enchanted voices lure sailors to their ruin, or in the mythical Eve whose alluring voice is held responsible for Adam’s Fall”;¹⁹ it is also epitomized in bad language, functioning like fetishism and “naked power which, in the case of dirty words, means the power to dare defy social conventions”;²⁰
- *the mute voice*: a voice with potentially most meanings, from subordination to hidden aggression; “lacking the edge of an open confrontation it causes tension, creating a foil on which the other’s reactive response can be projected”;²¹ “Mute voice is marked as a feminine register in nineteenth-century folk-tales and contemporary fiction. The figure of the woman who surrenders her voice is a common motif in The Grimm Brothers’ tales and also appears in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Wild Swans*”;²² while Cordelia’s dumbness, as perceived by King Lear in Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*, bears a sign of aggression.²³

Singing, usually taken as a female domain of expression, stands in opposition to the “masculine”, authoritative speech (the *logos*, God’s word). The most significant form of feminine expression, in which a female subject is glorified through a powerful and intensive voice exposure, or, otherwise, disintegrated through silencing, is, in Efrat Tseëlon’s opinion, the *opera*. Tseëlon argues that

¹⁸ Op. cit., 163.

¹⁹ Op. cit., 164.

²⁰ Op. cit., 165.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid.

²³ The voice masquerade and the body masquerade identify the same modes and strategies throughout the history. Later in her study, Tseëlon designates forms of sartorial masquerade which she sees as analogous to here previously stated modes of voice masquerade. Formal clothes (uniform, for example), deprived of creativity and individuality, play the same social, conventional role as the proper voice. Provocative voice parallels the extravagant clothing, i.e. sexy dressing and subversive styles like punk or grunge styles with lots of piercings and tattoos, “designed to shock, to stir, to antagonise, to draw a smile – or simply to provoke a reaction, any reaction” (Efrat Tseëlon, Op. cit., 166). Mute voice “signals the desire to be present and absent at the same time; the wish to suppress a desire the wearer dare not display. It wears baggy shapeless clothes that do not define the body contours (and in some societies these include veils) and do not call attention to bodily presence” (Ibid.).

the operatic masquerade could be viewed as a paradigmatic female masquerade: the history of opera as an art form and institution, in the West as well as in the East, is the history of gender opposition on a smaller scale. *Women's struggle to sing publicly* lasted long, happened in stages, and ended in *social recognition of female subjectivity*.²⁴ Although Tseëlon does not pay a closer attention to the ways in which the female voice materializes in opera, her belief that the *voice in operatic masquerade is the primary "criterion" of identity*²⁵ reveals her awareness of the fact that all the "information" on characters (their mental states, narrative features, etc.) are contained in their musical parts (melody, rhythm, tonality, register, and timbre). When off the stage, outside the musical setting, the voice loses its capability to absolutely identify and affirm gender.²⁶

The turbulent history of women in opera shows how the voice masquerade has the power to constitute a coherent female subject and / or shake the established gender hierarchies. When women began to perform and even dominate the opera scene – performing in all female, and even some male roles (trouser roles,

²⁴ The histories of opera and theater encompass a vast variety of official attitudes towards women, including their absolute exclusion from theatrical life and, quite the opposite, their eventual rise into true acting and singing stars. As for the Western theater, women started to appear on professional stage as late as the 16th century, with the emergence of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, while in England, for instance, it happened even later (in Restoration). In the East, women entered professional troops of kabuki and noh (nogaku) theaters and chinese opera only in the 20th century. In many parts of Italy, where Western opera had made its first steps, women were banned from the opera houses, or were more rarely selected to play important roles than males with high-pitched voices (preferably *castrati*, whose voices were considered more beautiful and powerful than that of women, boys, or falsettists). By the second half of the 18th century, the castrati had ruled the Italian opera scene, but then the medical and artistic validity of castration became questioned more and more often and "the age of castrati" gradually declined.

²⁵ The main way to identify a gender of an opera role is by its sonority, while the corporeality is of a lesser importance. A good example is the castrato, who was always taken as a woman because of the high-pitched voice, and not (certainly not primarily) because of the costume, hair or gestures, which do complement the overall representation, but do not designate the role unambiguously. The castration resulted in a physical prerequisite for high singing, but did not specify "a woman" *per se*, as already noted.

²⁶ Turning to the notion of the castrato one more time, the castrato does not symbolize a ready-made gender situatedness, but rather a gender hallucination, raising questions about the nature, social status and evaluation of *the otherness*. By introducing the castrati, baroque opera promoted – moreover, required – a "replacement" of a whimsical, elusive and ephemeral woman with similarly incoherent and incomplete subject: a man deprived of his masculinity. This further complicated the possibility for a female identity to be stable. A woman was hidden by a deviant man who's deviance was labelled by the same culture which labelled female otherness.

hosen rolen) – the female subject became a publicly exposed entity with its own vocal power. Nevertheless, the erotic power of a woman's voice, the most intense in operatic arias, remained within the framework marked with vocal polarization (lyrical vs. spoken, aria vs. recitative) – while the female figure itself failed to overcome her predetermined otherness. “Neither the presence of the ‘strong woman’ of the opera, the Prima Donna, nor the subversive manipulation of feminine traits in comic opera undermine the masculinist fantasies of the desirable woman depicted through a rather limited range of female characters and plots”.²⁷

So, the female subject in opera actually shared experience with the female subject in general and never escaped the old scenario of otherness, which Angela McRobbie pointed out describing a *contemporary, neoliberal, seemingly self-confident female representation*.²⁸ Sexy heroines – phantasmic objects of phallocentrism, objects for the men and objects for the audience – appear and disappear for the sake of maintaining order: the heroine “dies singing the aria of her death dictated by her score or script, only to be endlessly resurrected to enact a dialectic of undoing and victory”.²⁹ Each identity stems from a permanent need for the gender binary, rooted in a vast socio-political context which motivates almost every operatic play from the beginning of the form until today.

The notion of audible / voice masquerade seems as a potent category to be used and explored in a wide scientific range of gender studies, theory of discourse and theory of arts, where it appears as a kind of a generic or proto-concept and relates to a number of gender compositional and representational tactics. As a specific mask, the voice, either in its material form, or as a systematic speech / discourse, has a cultural, political and ideological relevance: it is a distinctive medium for forming and shaping of interpersonal, social, gender, class and other relationships and hierarchies. The portal features of the voice – its ability to transform the nonverbal into verbal and transmit information through verbal communication – are at the same time the features of the masquerade itself,³⁰

²⁷ Efrat Tseñlon, *Op. cit.*, 157.

²⁸ According to this post-feminist writer, women want to appear self-confident, independent from the men. In recent times, as McRobbie elaborates, they pursue their luminosity as active consumers of popular culture, but men still operate within the Symbolic domain as the creators of the “beauty-fashion system” in which women engage.

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³⁰ The portal feature of the mask and masquerade in its figurative meaning arose from the ritual belief that a mask wearer can transcend into another, supernatural world, or convert to someone else.

and that is why the phrase *voice as a masquerade* has a certain tautological quality. It is – Luce Irigaray would perhaps add: cleverly and in a female fashion – adopted in academic discourse for the purposes of illuminating mechanisms of women's subjectivization and identification.

Translated by the author