

Peter Ablinger

# The Rustle of Language

for 3 speaking voices

text: Roland Barthes

translation: Richard Howard

duration: 8:14

1997/2022

per line 2 beats M.M.44

The 3 speaking voices should be similar (similar register, similar vocal character); they should be close together and not acoustically separable; speaking style normal/neutral, but above all perfectly balanced so that none of the voices dominates. Due to the offsets of the text, most of the time it should be impossible to follow a single speaker for more than half a sentence. Only the sentence in the middle (highlighted in yellow) is spoken together and thus clearly understandable - without using a different way of speaking than otherwise in the piece.

<p>-terruptedly, the rustle of branches, of springs, of winds, in short, the shudder of Nature, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence. And I -it is the</p> <p>shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language, that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature. Speech is irreversible; that is its fatality. What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it: to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue. In speaking, I can never erase, annul; all I can do is say "I am erasing, annulling, correcting," in short, speak some more. This very singular annulation-by-addition I shall call "stammering." Stammering is a message spoiled twice over: it is difficult to understand, but with an effort it can be understood all the same; it is really neither in language nor outside it: it is a noise of language comparable to the knocks by which a motor lets it be known that it is not working properly; such is precisely the meaning of the misfire</p> <p>-re, the auditory sign of a failure which appears in the functioning of the object. Stammering (of the motor or of the subject) is, in short, a fear: I am afraid the motor is going to stop. The death of the machine: it can be distressing to man, if he describes it like that of a beast (see Zola's novel). In short, however unsympathetic the machine may be (because it constitutes, in the figure of the robot, the most serious of threats: the loss of the body), it still contains the possibility of a euphoric theme: its good functioning; we dread the machine when it works by itself, we delight in it when it works well. Now, just as the dysfunctions of language are in a sense summarized in an auditory sign, stammering, similarly the good functioning of the machine is displayed in a musical being: the rustle. The rustle is the noise of what is working well. From which follows this paradox: the rustle denotes a limit-noise, an impossible noise, the noise of what, functioning to perfection, has no noise; to rustle is to make audible the very evaporation of noise: the tenuous, the blurred, the tremulous are received as the signs of an auditory annula-</p>	<p>-ture, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence. And I -it is the shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language,</p> <p>that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature. Speech is irreversible; that is its fatality. What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it:</p> <p>to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue. 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Thus, it is happy machines</p>	<p>is the shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language, that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature. Speech is irreversible;</p> <p>that is its fatality. What has been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it: to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue. In speaking, I can never erase, annul; all I can do is say "I am erasing, annulling, correcting," in short, speak some more. This very singular annulation-by-addition I shall call "stammering." Stammering is a message spoiled twice over: it is difficult to understand, but with an effort it can be understood all the same; it is really neither in language nor outside it: it is a noise of language comparable to the knocks by which a motor lets it be known that it is not working properly; such is precisely the meaning of the misfire, the auditory sign of a failure which appears in the functioning of the object. 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<p>tion. Thus, it is happy machines which rustle. When the erotic machine, so often imagined and described by Sade, an "intellectual" agglomerate of bodies whose amorous sites are carefully adjusted to each other -when this machine starts up, by the convulsive movements of the participants, it trembles and rustles: in short, it works, and it works well. Elsewhere, when today's Japanese surrender themselves en masse, in huge halls, to the slot-machine game called pachinko, these halls are filled with the enormous rustle of the little balls, and this rustle signifies that something, collectively, is working: the pleasure (enigmatic for other reasons) of playing, of moving the body with exactitude. For the rustle (we see this from the Sadean example and from the Japanese example) implies a community of bodies: in the sounds of the pleasure which is "working," no voice is raised, guides, or swerves, no voice is constituted; the rustle is the very sound of plural delectation -plural but never massive (the mass, quite the contrary, has a single voice, and terribly loud). And language -can language rustle? Speech remains, it seems, condemned to stammering; writing, to silence and to the distinction of signs: in any case, there always remains too much meaning for language to fulfill a delectation appropriate to its substance. But what is impossible is not inconceivable:</p> <p><b>the rustle of language forms a utopia.</b></p> <p>Which utopia? That of a music of meaning; in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say denatured to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuousness, without a sign ever becoming detached from it (ever naturalizing this pure layer of delectation), but also -and this is what is difficult- without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed, in short castrated. Rustling, entrusted to the signifier by an unprecedented movement unknown to our rational discourses, language would not thereby abandon a horizon of meaning: meaning, undivided, impenetrable, unnamable, would however be posited in the distance like</p>	<p>which rustle. 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<p>a mirage, making the vocal exercise into a double landscape, furnished with a "background"; but instead of the music of the phonemes being the "background" of our messages (as happens in our poetry), meaning would now be the vanishing point of delectation. And just as, when attributed to the machine, the rustle is only the noise of an absence of noise, in the same way, shifted to language, it would be that meaning which reveals an exemption of meaning or -the same thing- that non-meaning which produces in the distance a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggressions of which the sign, formed in the "sad and fierce history of men," is the Pandora's box. This is a utopia, no doubt about it; but utopia is often what guides the investigations of the avant-garde. So there exists here and there, at moments, what we might call certain experiments in rustling: like certain productions of post-serial music (it is quite significant that this music grants an extreme importance to the voice: it is the voice it works with, seeking to denature the meaning in it, but not the auditory volume), certain radiophonic researches; and like the latest texts by Pierre Guyotat or Philippe Sollers. Moreover, we ourselves can undertake this research around the rustle, and in life, in the adventures of life; in what life affords us in an utterly impromptu manner. The other evening, watching Antonioni's film on China, I suddenly experienced, at the end of a sequence, the rustle of language: in a village street, some children, leaning against a wall, reading aloud, each one a different book to himself but all together; that -that rustled in the right way, like a machine that works well; the meaning was doubly impenetrable to me, by my not knowing Chinese and by the blurring of these simultaneous readings; but I was hearing, in a kind of hallucinated perception (so intensely was it receiving all the subtlety of the scene), I was hearing the music, the breath, the tension, the application, in short something like a goal. Is that all it takes -just speak all at the same time in order to make language rustle, in the rare fashion, stamped with delectation, that I have been trying to describe? 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