CORE | Texts & Ideas

Matters of Voice

TR 2:00-3:15pm

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According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the “voice” is a “sound produced by the vocal organs, especially when speaking or singing, and regarded as characteristic of an individual person.” While the definition sounds clear, its cultural, social, and political implications are complex. Indeed, the spectrum of meanings (literal and metaphorical) across which the notion of voice moves is wide and raises many questions: to what extent is the voice truly peculiar to the individual? What is the voice an index of? How does one’s given voice differ from someone else’s? What does it mean for an individual or a community to “have a voice” and make it heard? How does the embodied experience of vocal expression relate to metaphorical uses of the voice? How does vocal expression relate to issues of gender and identity? Is there a “matter” voice is made of? Is it truly possible to capture a voice? Does the voice leave traces in a written text? In order to tackle these questions, this course explores the notion of voice across time and space. From ancient texts to modern and contemporary narratives about the voice through a variety of medieval and early modern sources, both literary and philosophical, we will chase the elusive nature of the voice and reflect on its consequential role in the human experience. Course materials will include works by Homer, Plato, Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Balzac, Verne, Calvino, Rice, McNally, Powers, and a selection of case studies from the performing arts.

After an introduction that moves from the anecdote of the “frozen words,” in the first part of the course (Philosophical Perspectives) we will explore philosophical questions about the voice. We will begin with a reflection on the interplay of voice and (dis)embodiment by reading Homer’s account of the sirens in the Odyssey and Italo Calvino’s dystopian short story “A King Listens” – discussed in the light of philosopher Adriana Cavarero’s feminist interpretation of the work and her “philosophy of vocal expression” – before moving backwards to the roots of any philosophical narrative about the voice: namely, Plato (specifically his account of the “myth of the cicadas” in Phaedrus) and Aristotle. Plato's idiosyncratic use of mythology will function as an introduction to the second part of the course (Mythologies of the Voice and their Afterlives), in which we will look at seminal myths about the voice in order to measure their impact on modern and contemporary cultures. We will read about Orpheus, Echo and Narcissus, Ariadne, Polydorus, Philomela. Texts by Homer, Ovid, Virgil and Catullus will be studied alongside rewritings by authors such as Dante, Shakespeare, Karen Blixen, as well as adaptations ranging from the inception of opera around 1600 to Tim Buckley, among others. We will then move onto the third part of the course (Vocal Identities and the Experience of the Voice), which focuses on the ways in which the voice is involved in the construction of cultural, social, and political identities and on the ways in which voices are received and experienced. The intersections of vocal expression, gender and race will frame case studies concerned with the place of the voice within the workings of memory. We will read about the androgynous vocality of the castrati and we will deconstruct assumptions about the “color” of the voice in the light of the civil rights movement and its ramifications in our own times. Key to this part of the course is the variety of implications and anxieties triggered by the mechanical reproduction of the voice.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Familiarize with the notions of voice and vocal expression in relation to the place they hold within the literary tradition;
- Familiarize with philosophical questions about the voice and their place within the workings of cultural memory;
- Familiarize with a transhistorical approach to vocal expression and its relevance to cultural, political, and social phenomena;
- Develop and/or refine close-reading skills to be applied to textual sources as diverse as poetry, short fiction, novels, philosophical essays;
- Develop and/or refine analytical skills to be applied to inter-media textuality;
- Reflect on the intersections of media in the making/production of cultural products (e.g. the intersections of words and music in the performing arts, etc.);
- Become acquainted with basic critical tools in scholarly areas such as reception studies, textual analysis, voice studies;
- Reflect creatively on the ways in which the voice and vocal expression permeate textuality;
- Reassess the place of the voice and vocal expression in the study of textual sources.

Text and Ideas classes introduce students to the ideals of liberal education and the central role of humanistic study in the liberal arts and fosters appreciation of the importance of humanistic learning for society at large. Students become acquainted with some of the literary and philosophical works that have been most influential in shaping the contemporary world and with significant instances in which the ideas in these works have been debated, developed, appropriated, or rejected. Texts and Ideas is not a survey but, rather, an examination of how texts influence subsequent thinking, create traditions, and reflect societal ideals. Texts and Ideas thus aims to provide a richer understanding of how cultures are constructed, modified, and represented.

INSTRUCTOR’S CONTACT DETAILS

Professor Eugenio Refini (eugenio.refini@nyu.edu)
Casa Italiana, office 301
Office Hours: immediately after class or by appointment

Teaching Assistants:
Marco Battaglia (mcb767@nyu.edu)
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Office Hours: TBC

REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and participation are required at all lectures and all recitation meetings. Students are expected to do the weekly readings ahead of each class, be prepared to contribute to discussions during the lectures and participate actively during the recitations.

Students must notify the instructor(s) by email if they will not be able to attend a class because of illnesses/emergencies or religious holidays. A total of three unjustified absences from lectures and/or recitations will result in failing grade.
Assignments for a given recitation must be submitted before the beginning of the session. If students are unable to submit their assignment of time, they must contact the relevant instructor. No late work will be accepted without prior clearance.

Students should contact the instructors if they feel that factors internal or external to the course are affecting or compromising their academic work. Issues should be addressed as soon as they come up, without waiting for when they are too late to be solved.

**ASSESSMENT**

15%  Attendance (lectures and sections) and class participation
20%  Recitation exercises (forum assignments, assigned weekly, based on the readings). Students will also be asked to initiate the discussion of the readings once in the semester through a five-minute oral presentation.
15%  Mid-Term Exam (take-home exam: students will be asked to answer an essay question based on the close-reading, analysis and discussion of a set of materials provided by the instructor).
20%  Final Paper (6-8 pages, comparative analysis of any two of the sources studied in the course). Draft required two weeks before the final assessment submission date. All students must meet individually with their recitation instructor for feedback and comment.
15%  Creative project (written/audio/visual assignment; 4-5 pages / 3-5 minutes, or other format to be discussed and approved by the instructors). Students are expected to use this opportunity to reflect creatively on any aspect of the course. The instructors will provide a list of activities that students may use as prompts for the projects (e.g. visits to museums and galleries, performing arts events, etc.). Students are encouraged to make the most of the opportunities available in their respective locations.
15%  Final exam (same format as the midterm).

**EXAM DATES**

Midterm: week of mid-March long weekend.
Final: May 12

*Specific time-windows and relevant submission deadlines will be confirmed.*

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS DEADLINES (not including recitation papers)**

Creative project: April 10
Final paper draft: April 23
Final paper: May 7
**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY**

Academic integrity means that the work you submit is original. Obviously, bringing answers into an examination or copying all or part of a paper straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. But there are other forms of plagiarizing which are just as serious — for example, presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written); writing a sentence or paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else’s idea(s) without a reference to the source of the idea(s); or submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance). Receiving or giving help on a take-home paper, examination, or quiz is also a violation of academic integrity, unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects). For more information, consult CAS’s website at [http://core.cas.nyu.edu/docs/CP/4321/AcademicIntegrity.pdf](http://core.cas.nyu.edu/docs/CP/4321/AcademicIntegrity.pdf)

**DISABILITY DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**MATERIALS**

**Readings**

Most of the readings will be made available on the course website. In some cases, we will be using electronic editions available through the NYU library catalogue. While most readings are assigned on a weekly basis, students should be aware that in two cases (Rice, *Cry to Heaven*; and Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*) they are expected to read the novels on their own by the dates of the classes in which those texts will be discussed (see schedule). The two novels by Rice and Powers are the only books that students should buy, since they won’t be made available online. The following list includes all the complete bibliographical references for the course readings covered in class. The symbol ü indicates that the title is already available to NYU students, either on the web or through the library catalogue. The symbol □ indicates that the title will be made available by the instructor.

Alighieri, Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Transl. by A. Mandelbaum ü [digitaldante.columbia.edu]
Monteverdi, Claudio, and Ottavio Rinuccini, Lamento d’Arianna [Ariadne’s Lament]. Transl. J. Whybrow (Girolamo Musikverlag, 1998). ü
Monteverdi, Claudio, and Alessandro Striggio, Orfeo [Orpheus]. Transl. by G. Blin (2012) ü [earlymusic.bc.ca]

Further sources that will be referred to throughout the course:

Cavarero, Adriana. For more than one voice: towards a philosophy of vocal expression. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). ü
Gluck, C.W. and Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, Orfeo [Orpheus]. Transl. by K. Anderson (Naxos Music Library, 2002). ü

Audiovisual materials

Throughout the course, students will be asked to integrate their readings with a selection of tracks and clips from films, video-recordings of operas, theatrical performances. All these materials will be made available through the course website.
Introduction

Frozen Words:
The Ephemeral
Matter of the Voice


Part 1 | Philosophical Perspectives

Disembodied Voices and the Body Politics

Feb 2  §  Homer, Odyssey, book 12 (Odysseus and the Sirens).

Feb 4  §  Italo Calvino, A King Listens [1986].

What is the Voice?
Perspectives from Classical Philosophy

Feb 9 - 11  §  Plato, Phaedrus.

Part 2 | Mythologies of the Voice and their Afterlives

Orpheus:
Art and Empathy beyond Death

Feb 16  §  Ovid, Metamorphoses, books 10-11.

Feb 23 - 25  §  Claudio Monteverdi, Orfeo [1607], opera and libretto.
Echo and Narcissus: The Voice in the Mirror

March 2 § Ovid, Metamorphoses, book 3
March 4 § Karen Blixen, Echoes [1957].

Ariadne: Performatives and Synesthesia

March 9 § Catullus, Poem 64.
§ Ovid, Ariadne’s epistle to Theseus.
March 11 § Claudio Monteverdi, Lament of Ariadne [1608].

Polydorus and Philomela: Mutilated Voices

March 16 § Dante, Divine Comedy, Inferno 13 [ca. 1314]
March 18 § Ovid, Metamorphoses, book 6.
March 23 - 25 § William Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus [1594]

Part 3 | Vocal Identities and the Experience of the Voice

Gendering and Un-gendering the Voice

March 30 - April 1 § Honoré de Balzac, Sarrasine [1830].
April 6 - 8 § Anne Rice, Cry to Heaven [1982].
· Farinelli (dir. G. Corbieau, 1994).
Identifying with Someone Else’s Voice

April 13 - 15 § Gaetano Donizetti, Lucia di Lammermoor [1835], opera and libretto.

Voice and the Anxiety of Mechanical Reproduction

April 20 § Jules Verne, The Castle of the Carpathians [1892].
April 22 § Jean Cocteau, The Human Voice [1930].
   · Selection from filmic and musical adaptations.
April 27 § Terence McNally, The Lisbon Traviata [1989].
   · Philadelphia (dir. J. Demme, 1993).

Sounds and Colors of the Voice

April 29 § Nina Sun Eidsheim, The Race of Sound, first section [2019].
   · Selection from films and documentaries about Marian Anderson.
May 6 § Cycles of My Being, lyric poems by Terrance Hayes, music by Tyshawn Sorey (musical settings composed for and premiered by tenor Lawrence Brownlee, 2018).