

Mladen Dolar, **A Voice and Nothing More (Short Circuits)**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 224 pp., \$15.71, (paperback).

Reviewed by  
Steven Rafferty  
University of Southern California

In a field as diverse as communication studies, the insights set forth in Mladen Dolar's study of the voice serve as a reminder of the complexities of the phenomena that are the discipline's common concern. Often communication scholarship focuses on the positive, the observable and the empirical. Dolar reminds us that there is always a negative: that which is not said, not meant, not seen. The object voice, the remainder that is produced by, but not reducible to, linguistic signifiers points toward the other side. Whether we study organizational communication or political communication; whether we employ statistical or critical methods, the voice is the point of entry into the complex relationships between individual and society, between social and political, between what is said, the selection, and what that selection is selected from.

The breadth of the topic forces Dolar to move efficiently and strategically through the relevant considerations. Rather than seeing this as a weakness, an incompleteness, which would be ironic considering the argument being put forward in the book, the remainder of Dolar's signification can be read as an invitation to push this exploration forward into other areas. Empirical studies of communication have the potential to make important contributions to pragmatic human projects; recognizing the negative shadow that is the constant companion of positive signification leads into the sorts of questions that all too often remain unasked.

Dolar introduces his investigation of the object voice with a series: an epigraph, a joke, and an anecdote. In the rush to dig in to the "meaty" treatment of the subject, the worst mistake the reader could make would be to rush past these overtures, to dismiss them as mere niceties or stylistic embellishments. The significance of the questions and answers that Dolar works through in *A Voice and Nothing More* are contained within the series.

While the threads of Dolar's inquiry are all present in this series, set forth in a manner that preserves their complex inter-relationships, demonstrating their significance clearly requires that they first be pulled from the fabric and held up for inspection, then considered in terms of the work that they do to hold the fabric together. In the first five chapters of the book, Dolar examines in turn: the linguistics, metaphysics, physics, ethics, and politics of the voice as distinct areas of inquiry. In the last two chapters, attention is turned to "Freud's voice" and "Kafka's voice." Only when the several perspectives from which the voice can be approached have been mapped out can there be a discussion of the psychoanalytic voice, the object voice.

With regard to the linguistics of the voice, Dolar departs from Saussure's linguistics and immediately identifies a gap between phoneme and voice. So the signifier depends on the voice, but the object voice Dolar is pursuing has to be more than a mere phoneme delivery system. This leads into a

discussion of three aspects of the voice that point toward something more: "the accent, the intonation, and the timbre" (20). Whereas the mechanical voice of an answering machine or (early) automated telephone system is jarring, disturbing and uncanny, the variables of a human voice actually "enhances the sense-making effect" (22). Further exploration of this observation is provided via the voice in non-speech expression. The bout of hiccups that sidelines Aristophanes during the *Symposium*, the cries of an infant, "the mythical primal scream" (27), laughter, singing; each of these all too human quirks makes more meaning than the mechanical voice. These quirks are not external to human meaning, nor, Dolar argues, should they be treated as external to the theory of the voice.

In his discussion of the metaphysics of the voice, Dolar identifies Derrida and Lacan as simultaneously-occurring challenges to the logocentrism and phonocentrism of Plato that have been the foundation of most Western philosophy. However, while Derridean deconstruction ties the voice to (self-)presence, Lacan pushes on. For Lacan, the voice is not "the ground of (self-)presence" but rather "an interior obstacle to (self-)presence" (42). The object, according to Dolar, does not point toward a lack but a void; a space in which "the voice comes to resonate" (42). It follows from this that the voice is actually an "intersection of presence and absence" (55). But how can we recognize and understand that intersection?

If the critique of structural linguistics is meant to demonstrate that the best accounting of the voice presently available to psychoanalysis is theoretically inadequate, the admittedly brief review of the treatment of the voice in metaphysics suggests that the remedying of that inadequacy must proceed from the recognition of the voice's "in-between-ness." The physics of the voice is an exploration of the voice as between the body and language. The ethics of the voice is an exploration of the voice as between the self and the Other. The politics of the voice places it simultaneously between *phonos* and *logos* and between *zoe* and *bios*.

Dolar's treatment of the physics of the voice is initiated with a discussion of acousmatics and the question of whether every voice is properly understood as acousmatic from the perspective of the relationship between the subject and the other. After the Acousmatics, students of Pythagoras, who for the first five years of their tutelage, had to listen to their mentor speak from behind a curtain, the term has come to refer to a voice for which the source cannot be seen. The God of the Old Testament and the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* are singled out as examples of this common literary device. Dolar notes that "with the advent of new media . . . the acousmatic property of the voice became universal, and hence trivial" (63). This leads to a discussion of Michel Chion's coining of the term "disacousmatization" to refer to the process of revealing the source of the voice, whether that be in a single instant such as the one in *The Wizard of Oz* or in many stages. Freudian fetishism occurs when the revelation occurs in stages but "stops at the last-but-one stage" (68); when one fixes the voice rather than pulling aside the final screen to reveal the object voice. But the source of the voice can never truly be revealed, even when we watch the external surface of a body speak the voice we hear issues from somewhere within, somewhere beyond our view. And, just as the voice we hear issues from an unknown space, the interiority of an other, so to does the voice we speak with speak to an unknown space, the ear of an other. As Dolar observes, "one is too exposed to the voice and the voice exposes too much" (81).

Socrates, Rousseau, and Kant take center stage in Dolar's exploration of the ethics of the voice. The daemon is identified as the origin of the link between the voice and the conscience in the history of Western philosophy. From Plato's writings, Dolar determines that the daemon is a voice that is of divine origin and that Socrates is the agent of that voice. He goes on to say that the voice of the daemon is neither the voice of *logos* nor a source of universal truths, but rather an invitation to philosophy. This brings Socrates to the recognition of what Kant would later discuss as "the opposition between morality and legality" (85). Before taking up the question of the voice in Kant, however, Dolar notes that Rousseau's vicar of Savoy is another instance of "a man of no written work, supported by mere voice and following his own inner voice" (86), this time resulting in an opposition of morality and reason that is "tied up with the overpowering presence of the Other" (89) such as we find in the relationship between the teacher and *Émile*. Thus, when Dolar addresses the treatment of the voice in the work of Kant as the "power of reason" (90), the internal presence of the categorical imperative, the Kantian treatment can be seen as the narrow middle of an hourglass-shaped progression in the treatment of the voice in relation to ethics from Socrates and Rousseau on one side through Kant's reduction to pure reason and into Freud and Lacan. In Freud, it is the superego that corresponds to the Socratic daemon, the sacred voice of nature in Rousseau, or the categorical imperative in Kant; it is in the superego that Dolar identifies a productive tension between the voice and the law.

Dolar argues that, in Freud, it is ultimately the voice that "distinguishes the superego from the law" (100). The voice is the source of the law, but the law has to be written down and thus accessible to the public. The unwritten version of the law, the law's unspoken negative, is the superego. It is the sovereign whose single voice gets to speak what is written into law. In relation to questions of ethics, the voice occupies the void between the subject and the other, but in relation to questions of politics the questions become more complex. On the one hand, there is the question of the relationship between *zoe*, the bare life of the living being, and *bios*, the being as a member of the political community. On the other hand, there is the question of the relationship between *phone*, the mere voice, and *logos*. In this case, the voice that speaks rationally. In the realm of politics, the sovereign is the voice whose speech is written down into law. Yet, the sovereign's voice can also suspend the law. The sovereign, like all subjects, is both *zoe* and *bios*, both the subject of desires and drives and the subject who uses the tools of rationality. At this point, Dolar has demonstrated that before there can be an understanding of the relationships between linguistics, ethics, and politics, we must first understand that elusive quantity that occupies the spaces between them: the object voice. In response to the Aristotelian dictum that man is the "political animal," Dolar is arguing that it is the object voice that links the two together.

In the final two chapters of the book, Dolar turns from the individual threads that had been the focus of the first five chapters back to the questions that deal with the whole cloth. From Freud, Dolar derives the significance of silence as "the negative of the voice, its shadow, its reverse, and thus something which can evoke the voice in its pure form" (152). This is significant in a number of ways: silence is that which makes the signifier recognizable; silence can be made as or understood as a statement, and silence can be strategic. Kafka's voice leads Dolar to three distinct strategies that show how listening and speaking imply their respective shadows non-listening and non-speaking. From these strategies, Dolar is able to point toward what is in Kafka, a "science of freedom" (188), and in Dolar's words – psychoanalysis.

A "science of freedom" has important implications for the critical study of communication. The freedom to choose sound or silence, to listen or to merely hear, offers an alternate perspective on human agency. It is a perspective that recognizes the inherent risks of exposing and being exposed through the choices made. It reminds us that despite the fact that, at times, it "might not look like much . . . might actually look wretched," it is "there at all times" (188).