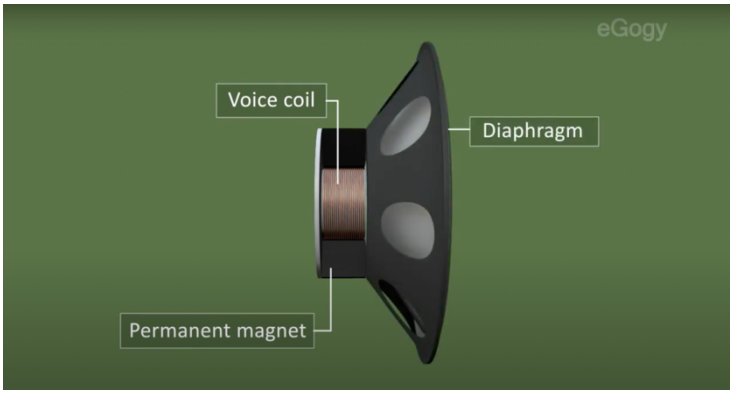
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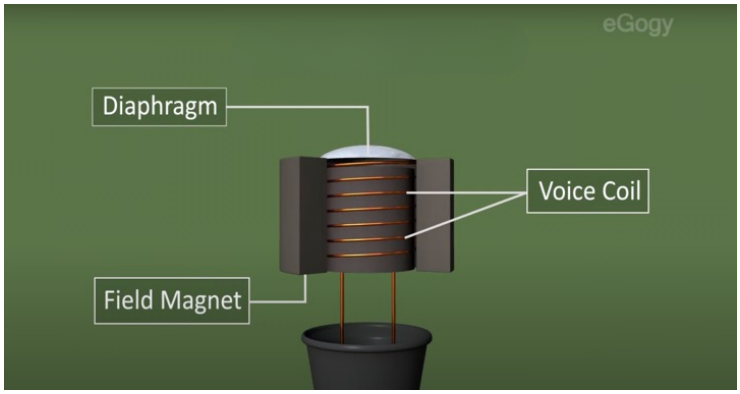
Deadbots. Towards the Unvitalism of Voice[1]

The world is interspersed with little copper coils in local magnetic fields. They are for the most part hidden away behind grids and electronic device surfaces, but if you were to put your finger on them or otherwise touch them, you'd find that at these locations, the world *vibrates*.

Moving to the delicate forces of electrons in magnetic fields – electrons patterned by information stored on hard drives made of Earth's minerals –, they are little orifices, wells: something emerges from them. They emanate into their environments like a scent, spilling out of grids, gardens, and cities.

'Voice coils,' as they are commonly called. But their vibrations make pockets of the world vibrate in ways that often share no resemblance with a human voice.





These clandestine vibrators also come as sinks and drains of sound when used as microphones, where they absorb

vibrations from the air into their own movement, and back into electron movement inside the coil – and into some digital storage device. The sound may long have faded away, but a trace of it has been transduced into Earth's minerals – now informs the content of a tiny digital cervice. It may sit there all quiet for ages, but if you plug a speaker into it and get the coil moving, the sound is back in the air.

The 'scent' is back. Such are the beauties of moving coil microphones and speakers.

Again, the latter may be called 'speakers' – they have nothing to do with human speech as such.

Hundreds of millions of microphones and speakers are added each year to an Earth already covered in sensors and effectors.

The moving coil is the icon and operator of the two intersecting vectors I want to address:

Our lives fall into a time when sound-making beings disappear at record speeds while unprecedented amounts of recordings are made of them before they are gone.

Wild animal populations have been contracting in number for decades now, endangering the continued existence of many species in a looming 6th Mass Extinction that is caused by the expanding human presence on this planet. At the same time – and by the same token of the ubiquitous presence of humans on Earth –, an unseen number of animal and plant species are

today registered, named, documented and analyzed by thousands of human biologists penetrating every ecosystem with their excursions and observational devices. They record bird songs and assemble the recordings into large databases, e.g. the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.[2]

Another thing contracting in number are the speaker communities of many of the 7000 or so extant human languages, threatening their extinction already in the short-term. Following to a 2022 study in *Nature*, almost 25% of human languages could be gone already by 2100[3] – a shorthand for the broader process of cultural mass extinction that comes with the increasingly homogenized global habitat of humans today. This current language extinction event will be the provisional end point of three major waves of language loss that have come to ravage the linguistically hyper-diverse pre-Neolithic world of hunter and gatherer bands: First, the colonization of nomadic peoples by expanding agriculturalists in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas; second, the colonial ‚spillover' of Europeans and their settler-colonial conquest of substantial parts of the world; third, ongoing ‚modernization', urbanization, and globalization processes that keep driving people away from their native languages.[4] Again, however, even the bookkeeping regarding this loss is premised on the reality that all human languages have been cataloged by human linguists and anthropologists, historically often from the Global North.

Especially endangered languages are today recorded in the thousands – in projects like The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) based at SOAS University of London.[5]

Speakers of majority languages, conversely, self-document their vocal performance by daily uploading vast quantities of video onto social media platforms: every minute 500 hours of new material just on YouTube alone.[6]

The intersecting vectors that I have sketched lead to a fundamental re-organization of presence and absence vis-à-vis voice.

The moving coils play a key role in this.

Before their invention 140 or so years ago in the context of constructing the telephone, in order to hear a being's voice you had to be in the physical presence of that being. Voice was linked to a living body. I call this a vitalism of voice – voice could even be seen as a quintessential expression of the living presence of that being's spirit or soul, of its spontaneity, its vividness. Many philosophers therefore preferred the immediacy of voice over mediated nature of writing, an attitude French philosopher Jacques Derrida later dubbed 'phonocentrism.'

Derrida would go on to deconstruct this very attitude as untenable 'metaphysics of presence' – as self-contradictory privilege granted to presence and immediacy over mediation – by way of a series of linguistic arguments.[7]

In our context, I simply point to the fact that already the living presence of a voice requires forms of storage. The capacity of vocalization must be stored in a living body, and since each body is finite, it requires the reproduction of bodies that bear that capacity. Being able to hear an animal's voice or hear a person speak in a certain language at a given moment in time presupposes a series of reproductions. If no generational ladder leads up to this moment – if this voice or language is not stored in a continuous chain of bodies –, you will not be able to hear that voice or language. If the last living specimen has passed away before you happened to listen, you will never hear its voice.

Today, this is no longer true.

„More images of Asian tigers than Asian tigers left in the wild", writes artist Katja Novitskova,[8] and similarly, the number of recordings of the song of an endangered bird species will at some point inevitably outnumber the exemplars of that species that are still alive.

But just as the songs of many bird species will outlive the time of their extinction, so, too, the world will soon be full of human voices in languages that only exist on tape.

This violent destruction of the metaphysics (and reality) of presence ties in with the fundamental re-organization of the relation of speech to aliveness and presence that we currently observe.

The share of words that are being said and listened to face-to-face is rapidly decreasing – given people's mediated real-time communication on phones and screens, and given the recorded sounds and images they consume.

As we listen to the vocal performance of absent people virtually at all times, the former vitalism of voice makes way for its unvitalism as a new paradigm.

People have of late also started to verbally interact directly with machines capable of speech, i.e. with non-human, non-living sources of spoken words – from earlier voice assistants to Open AI's latest 2024 GPT 4o model that comes with a whole selection of voices. Voice cloning technology and the possibility of ‚fine-tuning' Large Language Models on someone's personal communications can make chatbots sound like real existing people.

Once these people die – thereby rendering themselves absent in the ultimate way –, the chatbots modeled after them are called deadbots.





Deadbots take the emergent unvitalism of voice to its logical conclusion – they are the epitome of the unvitalism of voice:

Deadbots allow you to continue your conversation with a person after their passing – if required, even in an extinct language, and hundreds of years later. Millions of such deadbots will be among the heritage of the 21st century – which is a new form of heritage: a population of voices that talk back to you.[9]

Deadbots of extinct bird species allow you to witness their communications and courtship rituals live – in a world in which they no longer exist. Place them out in the woods, and interspecies communication will ensue despite extinction.

All this, however, works only through the moving coil.

And this is my point here.

The coil is where the magic happens.

I think I hear that dead person – their singular tone of voice, their laughter oh so beloved, their breath close to my ear. I think I hear that extinct language or birdsong. But all I in fact hear is the coil under the speaker's cover, moving inside a magnet.

I touch the coil, its vibrations.

Honestly, I cannot stop touching these coils.

I cannot stop touching the speakers.

Their vibrations make me *feel* the unvital life that voice has taken on. Vibrations – the touchable and touching spirit of voice's new body.

Images:
1, 2: Screenshot, *Moving Coil Microphone & Loud Speaker*, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y585z2XRFFs.
3: Screenshot, Jakob Kudsk Steensen, *Kauai'O'o Mating call* (2019), accessed July 9, 2024, http://www.jakobsteensen.com/re-animated
4: Screenshot, *Simulate the Dead - Project December*, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgyOAWt3d1M.

[1] Text for „Fragments of Sonic Extinction“, curated by Kalas Liebfried at NEBYULA, July 2024, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.sonicextinction.net/v3

[2] Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, accessed July 9, 2024, https://www.macaulaylibrary.org/about/

[3] Bromham, L., Dinnage, R., Skirgård, H. *et al.* “Global predictors of language endangerment and the future of linguistic diversity,” *Nat Ecol Evol* 6, 163–173 (2022).

[4] Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 2000, 99ff.

[5] Endangered Langauges Archive, accessed July 9, 2024, https://eldp.access.preservica.com

[6] Viraj Mahajan, “100+ YouTube Statistics in 2024: Users, Revenue & More,” online unter: https://www.notta.ai/en/blog/youtube-statistics

[7] Jacques Derria, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997

[8] *Extinction Marathon 2014: Katja Novitskova*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Qblup9qx5U, accessed July 9, 2024.

[9] Vgl. *Eternal You*, Film, Regie: Hans Block, Moritz Riesewieck, Germany/USA 2024