

*The Dreamwork of Hearing in the Age of the
Technological Reproducibility of Secrets:*
Prefatory Remarks on the Recording

Mischa Twitchin

To quote Benjamin¹ (himself quoting Kafka²): *Kafka's Sirens are silent; they have "an even more terrible weapon than their song... their silence."* In this modern myth of the pre-modern, the citation of citation proposes both a theme—silence—and a method. Among them echo the relations between microphone and page, electronic oscillations and writing, transference and hearing; indeed, between the unconscious and technology. These are the relations proposed by Freud to describe a new experience of hearing, that between psycho-analyst and patient—with the position of the former “as a telephone receiver... to the microphone” of the latter.³

It is curious that for the pioneer of what one of his patients called “the talking cure,” there is little critical discussion of Freud’s apparent dislike of the telephone as a medium of hearing

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¹ Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings II.2*, eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland & Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

² Franz Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens,” trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in *Kafka, the Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (London: Minerva, 1992).

³ Sigmund Freud: “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-analysis,” trans. James Strachey, in the *Standard Edition* Vol. XII (London: Hogarth Press, 1958) 115-16.

contemporary with his own research. Despite—or perhaps because of—his use of its technology in the critique of the ego in the transference, the telephone “was a connection to the external world that Sigmund Freud detested and refused to use...”⁴ Where Freud highlights the anonymity of the machine to exclude the lure of the voice, Walter Benjamin, by contrast, concludes his brief history of the telephone’s domestication, “around 1900,” by evoking precisely its suggestive power over hearing.⁵

What might it mean to hear voices—precisely, “in absentia” (the emblem of transference)⁶—after both Freud and Benjamin? The *Dreamwork of Hearing* recording poses the question again—but in a collage (the very principle of the “dreamwork”) which itself testifies to the changed experience of hearing owing to the technological reproducibility of the voice.⁷ The work of cultural memory in this instance contrasts with the traditional relation between “silence” and method evoked by Ernst Freud in his recollections of his grandfather, where he offers as the reason for the “banishment” of “Aunt Minna to the most remote part of the apartment” [Bergasse 19] that she “liked to listen to... gramophone music as well as to music on the radio.” The condition for his grandfather’s work was, rather, “perfect silence.”⁸ The question of this essay—“prefatory” in its remarks

⁴ Inge Scholz-Strasser, “Introduction,” trans. Lonnie Johnson, in Edmund Engelman, *Sigmund Freud: Vienna IX. Bergasse 19*. (Vienna: Christian Brandstätter Verlag, 1998) 11. Scholz-Strasser does not, however, give a source for this assertion.

⁵ “...it obliterated my consciousness of time, my firm resolve, my sense of duty. And just as the medium obeys the voice that takes possession of him from beyond the grave, I submitted to the first proposal that came my way through the telephone.” Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006) 50.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Dynamics of Transference,” trans. James Strachey, in the *Standard Edition* Vol. XII (London: Hogarth Press, 1958) 108.

⁷ Here the extraction and displacement of the sound sources, as found material, occurs through a work that is itself a sound source, one that is “silently” mediated by the technology of digital sound editing (popularly available today on any Apple Mac computer). This possibility of fragmentation and displacement offers a material analogy to the object of research here, the “dreamwork.” Besides Kittler (cited below), the thought of this project owes a fundamental debt to the writings of Roland Barthes, Gregory Ulmer and Allen Weiss.

⁸ Ernst Freud, in Engelman, p.75. Academic libraries are one of the few places that still aspire to this condition for work.

(citing the Dora case study)—is, then, what does it mean to think through the materiality of its own publication, when this concerns the concept of the unconscious in “the age of technological reproducibility?”⁹

In the first of his *Introductory Lectures*, Freud distinguishes the “new science” of psychoanalysis from the established sciences in terms of its medium of research: not the eye, but the ear.¹⁰ He remarks, further, on a difference in practice, or method, for this research (whilst nonetheless insisting on the common premise of causal determination) as it relates to the understanding of its object, the unconscious. This difference concerns a “free-floating” listening, or mode of attention—as distinct from a focused, observational recording of what is already thought, or supposed, to be “meaningful” in vocal communication.

Unlike the surrealists, for instance, Freud seemingly had no intention of taking this “new” technique of hearing into his own practice of writing—that is, for publication. For Freud, the prose of science, including its “figures of speech,” resists these new possibilities in literature (themselves inspired by this same “new science” of psycho-analysis and its methods of research). Indeed, in a letter to Breton, Freud describes himself as one who is “distant from art” and therefore “perhaps not destined to understand” either what surrealism is or what it wants.¹¹ For Freud the “dreamwork” is not so much the expression of the unconscious as of repression, reproduced through transference rather than literature. We might wonder, though, which is the more “surreal”—such intriguing suggestions of the new art as a lobster telephone, or Freud’s preferred analogies for his practice

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” trans. Harry Zohn & Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings IV*, eds. Howard Eiland & Michael Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

¹¹ Freud to Breton (26.12.1932): “And now a confession, which you will have to accept with tolerance! Although I have received many testimonies of the interest that you and your friends show for my research, I am not able to clarify for myself what Surrealism is and what it wants. Perhaps I am not destined to understand it, I who am so distant from art.” In Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, tr. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey Harris (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) 152.

with archaeology,¹² and the fact that he devotes more thought to telepathy than to telephony.

Cutting across the fantasy scenario (once beloved of cultural historians) of “Vienna 1900”¹³ is what Friedrich Kittler has called the “Discourse Network, 1900”—limited neither to this place and time, nor to any particular one of its scribes. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the transmission of knowledge about psychoanalysis is also distinguished in the *Introductory Lectures* from that local condition of tele-phony as gossip, as “hearsay.” Hearsay is generated within, and between, the various circles of communication, both professional and private, that characterise the bourgeois “society” of Vienna—within which Freud’s reputation (whether as listener or writer) had its transferential effects.

Freud insists that writing be absent from the practice of listening within the analytic session.¹⁴ This offers an inverse of the condition that any subsequent account of what is heard in an analysis excludes the very experience to which it refers: the voice. As Kittler has observed, “psychoanalysis selected from the flow of the voice only what it could transpose into signifiers.”¹⁵ Here the voice is replaced by “thought,” as abstractable and then publishable in another’s name. Indeed, detailing the technique of hearing in psychoanalysis largely replaces any account of the experience of it—save as it relates to ethical questions concerning whose “voice” is reproducible by publication. While Freud often refers to scenes of his own speech, not least in the analysis of his

¹² Appropriately enough (in terms of that classic topos of European cultural history, “Vienna 1900”), Carl Schorske repeats this Freudian analogy for thinking (for instance, in the first chapter of *Civilisation and its Discontents*) in an essay that concatenates Freud’s name with its topic—“Freud: the psycho-archaeology of civilisations.” More pertinent here would be Benjamin’s extraordinary short note “Excavation and Memory” (written in 1932, but unpublished in his lifetime), in which the Freudian paradigm of the unconscious as repository of verbal fragments is also elaborated through the archaeological metaphor.

¹³ This particular production of cultural memory was made widely popular by a series of huge exhibitions in the 1980s. Steven Beller, “Introduction,” *Retinking Vienna 1900*, ed. Steven Beller (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001) 5.

¹⁴ Freud, “Recommendations” 113-14; and *Dora*, trans. Alix and James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977) 38.

¹⁵ Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 288.

dreams, the question of “hearing” in this case becomes the very question of its subject, including its silence.¹⁶

The question of memory is one of record, in which Freud directs the analysand to repeat certain phrases for the benefit of their being subsequently written up while still “fresh in the mind.”¹⁷ The interruption here of the “free floating” or “automatic” (“tele-phonic”) mode of hearing has a parallel in Freud’s resistance to another analogy from technology: the phonograph.

On the two occasions that I am aware of (so far) in which Freud mentions this device for the “automatic” recording of voices, and thus for their automatic “remembering” beyond the time and place of their inscription, the association is made to dissociate his thought from it. Of these, one is in his *Prefatory Remarks to a Case of Hysteria* [“Dora”], where he notes that his record of the case (the pun works only in English, not in German) “is not absolutely—phonographically—exact,” despite its claim upon the reader’s sense of its “trustworthiness.”¹⁸ As this is the material of the audio-essay, I will discuss here the second instance, which occurs in the preface to his *New Introductory Lectures* (written in “Vienna 1932”).¹⁹

Here Freud again addresses the key issue of speech and writing. Having explained that “a surgical operation had made speaking in public impossible for me,” he writes there: “If, therefore, I once more take my place in the lecture room during the remarks that follow, it is only by an artifice of the imagination; it may help me not to forget to bear the reader in mind as I enter more deeply into my subject.” This “artifice of the imagination” can, of course, be read as its own subject or topic. It takes its place within the play of transference, as Freud, seeming to situate his own presence, situates the absent reader.

¹⁶ One could compare this with the paranoiac sensitivity to the “Jewish voice,” as an index of the threatening presence of “degeneracy” in “Vienna 1900,” in such contemporaries of Freud’s as Max Nordau and Oskar Panizza, recalled from obscurity by Sander Gilman, in *Freud, Race and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 105-6 & 163-4.

¹⁷ Freud, *Dora* 38.

¹⁸ Freud, *Dora* 38.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973).

This echoes the scene evoked by Benjamin—and refused by Freud—concerning the telephone. Freud’s fiction of time and place in the lectures draws its plausibility from the very facts concerning the voice that it negates. As the reader finds him or herself bearing the author in mind, the transferential authority of speech becomes the fictional vehicle for the “artifice” of its writing.²⁰ The scenario here contrasts, Freud writes, with his earlier “Introductory” lectures, which had been “delivered word for word” from written drafts when he “still possessed the gift of a phonographic memory.” This dissociation from the memory of the phonographic is not simply a question of age, however. For, as with the submission to transference by tele-phone, by the voice “in absentia,” to be possessed *by* such a memory would be the very analogy of madness.

How different—in writing—is Freud’s “confidence” in his own “voice” from that of his patients, who “would never have spoken” (he writes) had they known that their “secrets” would be published. The voices in the accompanying audio-essay could not have imagined their displacement into this new context, having become themselves “writing” in their technological reproducibility. The singers performed at the Vienna Court Opera, and were recorded during the years in which Freud was pre-occupied with publishing the text of “Dora” (1900-1905). Their voices—their paradoxical “corporeality”—evoke the scenes of seduction, betrayal, and “secrets” that we listen to as “art.” Here the voice has been written for, its “pitch” (if not its “grain”) has been composed. It thus appears as the instrument of an “artifice of imagination” in which—as recording—the very sound of its reproducibility, amidst the “residues” of cultural memory, begins to haunt us as a question of modernity.²¹ Between the Freudian cough (that is no less expressive than the expression it interrupts) and the sound of the word “gramophone,” that once alerted listeners to the presence of the Sirens, there is perhaps an echo of

²⁰ This evidences the paradox that, despite the materiality of the “technologically reproducible,” the essay still works with the ideality of authorship. The essay is constructed with attributed citations rather than with a montage of the citations themselves, as in the audio-essay.

²¹ The first volume of this year’s *Documenta* magazine, for instance, takes up Benjamin’s topic – following Baudelaire – of the “antiquity” of the modern, simply adding a question mark to the title concept of “modernity?”

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what remains unheard in the analogies of Freud's new science—
analogies which offer a record of the modern sense of hearing.