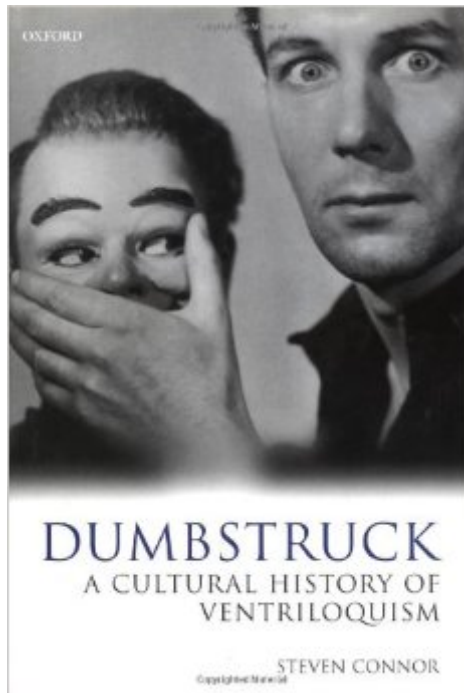


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Dumbstruck: A Cultural History Of Ventriloquism



Synopsis

Ventriloquism, the art of "seeming to speak where one is not", speaks so resonantly to our contemporary technological condition. We now think nothing of hearing voices--our own and others'--propelled over intercoms, cellphones, and answering machines. Yet, why can none of us hear our own recorded voice without wincing? Why is the telephone still full of such spookiness and erotic possibility? And why does the magician's trick of speaking through a dummy entertain as well as disturb us? These are the kind of questions which impel *Dumbstruck*, Steven Connor's wide-ranging, relentlessly inquisitive history of ventriloquism and the disembodied voice. Connor follows his subject from its early beginnings in ancient Israel and Greece, through the outcries of early Christian writers against the unholy (and, they believed, obscenely produced) practices of pagan divination. Surprisingly, he finds that women like the sibyls of Delphi were the key voices in these male-dominated times. Connor then turns to the aberrations of the voice in mysticism, witchcraft and possession, and the strange cultural obsession with the vagrant figure of the ventriloquist, newly conceived as male rather than female, that flourished during the Enlightenment. He retells the stories of some of the most popular and versatile ventriloquists and polyphonists of the nineteenth century, and investigates the survival of ventriloquial delusions and desires in spiritualism and the 'vocalic uncanny' of technologies like the telephone, radio, film, and the internet. Brimming with anecdote and insight, *Dumbstruck* is a provocative archeology of a seemingly trivial yet profoundly relevant presence in human history. Its pages overflow with virtuoso philosophical and psychological reflections on the problems and astonishments, the raptures and absurdities of the unhoused voice.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this text, recommended by a colleague, for other reasons, but thought of it immediately when the possibility of George W. Bush's use of a wire and "ear" during the first debate with John Kerry began to surface on the internet in the last day or so. Talk about the "vocalic uncanny"! Is "wiregate" merely(!) a part of the trend of increasing technological possibilities for problematizing the relation between voice and body? Are you talking to me? Is this thing on? Steven Connor should write the next chapter. Meanwhile, read his deft connections and analysis of diverse phenomena associated with "cultural ventriloquism" and think about the (alleged) voice in our president's ear, and what that does to the (alleged) significance of his speech as he (allegedly) addresses the citizenry. Is ventriloquism more acceptable if we are in on the trick? Are we in on this (alleged) trick, anyway? I mean, we all know how packaged and predicted and rehearsed the responses to the questions posed in the debates are anyway--but a line has been (allegedly) crossed here, and that's the line Connor's book charts. Good stuff, and timely.

This book is an example of pseudo-intellectual overthinking of the highest order. It's dense, wordy and unreadable in every way. Why would any writer spend what appears to be LOTS of time and energy on this of all subjects: Ventriloquism's effect on CULTURE?! The resultant product amounts to little more than an uninteresting mess. Skip it.

Fearful attitudes toward ventriloquism may be fascinating as well as frightening. Ventriloquism as metaphor for certain cultural absurdities, demonstrates both comedic and frightening aspects that have been attributed to the unhoused voice. Dumbstruck is a masterful distillation of such organised phenomenon. In modern entertainment, a speech act, while over the course of history, ventriloquism, speaks from a complex logic of its own. It expresses its own form of logic to the world around it. Dumbstruck, has a treasured place on my library shelf. I found it well written. It tells the tale of voices that might have otherwise remained silent.

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