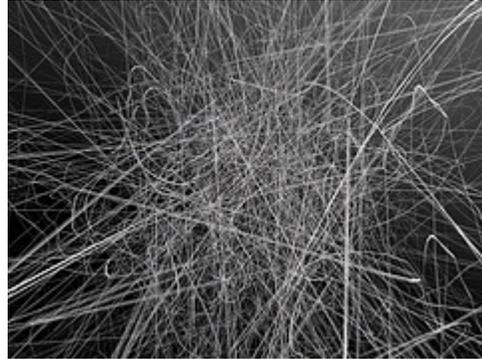


## 1. Sonic Eloquence

Upon reading George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* and Cicero's *De Oratore*, two common terms almost instantly reveal themselves: nationalism and wit. In his account of how the rhetor can most effectively persuade, Campbell argues for attending to "reputable, national, and present use" (237). If we are seeking out models for imitation, Campbell believes that the rhetors closest to us (both spatially and temporally) are our best bet. Similarly, Cicero frames his dialogue between Antonius and Crassus with an argument for the



superiority of the Roman orator. (While some students and followers occasionally interject, the bulk of *De Oratore* is a debate between these two—Antonius and Crassus.) Cicero addresses the text to his brother, telling him that while he doesn't "despise what the Greek craftsmen and teachers of oratory have left us," he does prefer "the authoritative judgment of those to whom the highest honours in eloquence have been awarded by our fellow-countrymen" (I.23). This focus on the nation is not surprising. Both Cicero and Campbell would have been trying to persuade particular audiences, and their sense of rhetorical situation is commendable. However, given that the project of contemporary rhetoric—digital or otherwise—must contend with the fuzzy boundaries and fluid audiences of networked life, this particular resonance is not necessarily the best fit for a contemporary rhetorical concept. Both thinkers also spend a great deal of time discussing "wit," and I briefly considered an essay about comedy. Given the contemporary "comedy boom" (podcasts and comedy specials seemingly emerge on a daily basis), Cicero and Campbell might offer digital rhetoricians a way to theorize wit in the production and critique of digital objects.

Instead, this essay zooms in on a different link between Cicero and Campbell. Both texts discuss sound and the voice. In addition, both texts address the "rules" of rhetoric. Given that *Making Machines* is an explicit engagement with rules and that the project attempts to both analyze and produce new procedures for digital rhetoric, it is perhaps not surprising that I picked up on this resonance. These two texts both offer striking examples of the rhetorician's conflicted relationship to rules. Does the rhetor learn and follow rules, or does s/he immerse herself in rhetorical training to learn certain principles that can then be applied and tweaked based on various rhetorical situations? But these discussions of rules also intersect with the questions these two rhetoricians ask about sound and persuasion: How does one use the voice effectively and eloquently? If the voice is an instrument, does one follow certain rules to tune that instrument?

Campbell is certainly not interested in writing a rulebook, at least not one that the rhetor would follow rigidly. During his discussion of how to operate on the passions, he says that it "is impossible with any precision to reduce these effects to rules; so much depending on the different tempers and sentiments of different audiences. Personal relations are of various kinds" (111). While addressing how "the consideration which the speaker ought to have of himself," Campbell makes it clear that no set of rules can be helpful in every situation: "Different rules are given by rhetoricians as adapted to different circumstances. Differences in this respect are numberless. It is enough here to have observed those principles in the mind on which the rules are founded" (121). As Campbell sees it, one who only knows the rules could only ever be a "manual operator," whereas the orator should aim to be "the well instructed mechanician" (13). This mechanician learns by experimentation, not by following hard-and-fast rules.

In a section of Book III called "Words as Sounds," Campbell brings this skepticism regarding rules to a discussion of sound and eloquence. He describes both how language can imitate certain sounds and "in what cases it ought to be attempted" (339). Campbell's sonically astute rhetor will be a well instructed mechanician, aware of how to best experiment with the sounds of language. He suggests that the sonic qualities of language are best evinced by attempts to imitate nature, and he offers examples: "the terrible thunder, whirlwind, and tempest, or of the cooling zephyr and the gentle gale, or of any other thing

that is sonorous” (339). In these cases, language imitates that which it describes. Such descriptions are an apt use of language’s qualities, and they are more effective than descriptions of the “visible or tangible.” But the resemblance between these words and the things they describe is still “very faint” (339).

Campbell argues that the human voice is “capable of imitating, to a considerable degree of exactness, almost any sound whatever,” but he is interested in a somewhat narrower consideration of the voice. Given that the orator is tasked with making not “any sound whatever” but rather “articulate sounds,” s/he must focus on what is possible “without uncommon effort” (339). He is not interested in how one could contort the voice or imitate various sounds. The orator must be focused on being understood by the audience. Campbell argues that “articulation greatly confines the natural powers of the voice,” meaning that the need to make sense filters out of an entire set of sounds that, however interesting, would only impede communication.

In order to trace out the sonorous affordances of the voice, Campbell offers numerous examples of how language might be used to imitate. For instance, when using language to imitate size, “things grand may be imitated by long and ill-sounding words; things little by short words” (345). Further, he offers an account of the sonic qualities of particular letters, describing various letters and sounds as softer or “more sonorous” than others and noting that certain linguistic sounds are “unmusical, and, consequently, when too frequent, offensive, but may, nevertheless, have a good effect when used sparingly” (350). But Campbell does not only describe the operations of sound in language. He also takes up how such sound might be deployed by the rhetor. He grants that appreciation of such sounds is highly idiosyncratic: “often a beauty of this kind is more the creature of the reader’s fancy than the effect of the writer’s ingenuity” (351). Still, this does not prevent him from offering some rules for the sonically attuned rhetor.

For instance, he argues that the occasions upon which the rhetor should use “similitude in sound” are few. While pathetic appeals might call for such strategies, “the critical style, the argumentative, and the didactic, by no means suit it” (352). The sonic beauty of language is not analogous to “dress, by which the whole person is adorned” but should rather be considered akin “to those jewels which are intended solely for the decoration of certain parts, and whose effect depends very much on their being placed with judgment” (352). Campbell suggests that the absence of this aural dimension of eloquence can easily go unnoticed: “We never miss it; we never think of it; whereas an ambiguous, obscure, improper, languid, or inelegant expression, is quickly discovered by a person of knowledge and taste, and pronounced to be a blemish” (351). The sound of language slips under the audience’s radar and “runs more risk of passing unheeded than any other species of beauty in the style,” and this is something to take note of, for it also appears in Cicero’s discussion of sound (351). Sound envelops persuasion, making it difficult for us to track its effects and uses.

Like Campbell, Cicero seems suspicious of devoting oneself to a rulebook, and he uses the dialogue between Antonius and Crassus to consider the place of rules in rhetorical study. Antonius offers his view of the rhetorician’s rules and maxims by paraphrasing an argument made by the Athenian philosopher Charmadas:

If those teachers of rhetoric embraced within their art so vast a multitude of the noblest themes, how was it, he inquired, that their books were stuffed full of maxims relating to prefaces, perorations and similar trumpery...while concerning the organization of States or the drafting of laws, or on the topics of fair-dealing, justice, loyalty or the subduing of the passions or the building of human character, not a syllable was to be found in their pages. (I.86-87)

A rulebook might give us a series of templates, but it’s not of much use when the rubber hits the road. For Antonius, “some very clever rules may be laid down for playing upon men’s feelings and making prize of their goodwill,” but these rules are best extrapolated from experience and rhetoricians too often overcomplicate matters by making the obvious seem mysterious (II.32).

This skepticism with regard to rules is also present in Antonius' discussion of sound and the voice. He does not deny the importance of sound, and he even compares oratory to music: "Can any music be composed that is sweeter than a well-balanced speech?" (II.34). However, he is concerned that the rhetorician's attention to voice will make it mechanical and silly:

Who would deny that in his movements and carriage the orator must have the bearing and elegance of Roscius [a famous Roman actor]? Yet no one will urge young devotees of eloquence to toil like actors at the study of gesture. What is so essential to an orator as intonation? Yet no devotee of eloquence will become, by my advice, a slave to his voice, after the manner of the Greek tragedians, who both for many a year practise declamation from their chairs, and every day, before their performance on the stage, lie down and gradually raise the voice, and later, after playing their parts, take their seats, and bring it back again from the highest treble to the lowest bass, and in a way regain control of it. (I.251)

The orator should no doubt be aware of how the voice is being used to persuade, but the vocal exercises of actors would be of no use. While the rhetor is "warming up," the real world of persuasion and argument will pass him by.

Crassus is also skeptical of rigid rules, though he sees less danger in devoting time to understanding rules in the interest of honing one's craft. This is apparent in his more detailed account of sound and how careful study might help one better attend to the rhythm and shape of words both written and spoken. Unlike Antonius, who worried about the orator devoting too much time to vocal exercise, Crassus argues that the orator should learn rules that will help him tune his instrument:

For the tones of the voice are keyed up like the strings of an instrument, so as to answer to every touch, high, low, quick, slow, forte, piano, while between all of these in their several kinds there is a medium note; and there are also the various modifications derived from these, smooth or rough, limited or full in volume, tenuto or staccato, faint or harsh, diminuendo or crescendo. For there are none of these varieties that cannot be regulated by the control of art, they are the colours available for the actor, as for the painter to secure variety. (III.216)

This variety is crucial since frequent change of tone is helpful to the orator and because "nothing [is] more detrimental than continuous uninterrupted exertion" (III.224-225).

Crassus argues that rhythm is "designed to give pleasure to the ear," but he is also careful to note that one must straddle the boundary between prose and verse (III.174). A rhythmic speech is no doubt effective but it can be "a fault in oratory if the connexion of the words produces verse" (III.175). While these rhythms first emerged from a "scantiness of breath," which is why we speak and write in sentences, these patterns have now become desirable: "even if a person were endowed with breath that never failed, we should still not wish him to deliver an unbroken flow of words; for our ears are only gratified by a style of delivery which is not merely endurable but also easy for the human lungs" (III.181). And as we saw with Campbell, the desire for a certain rhythm or sound is an unconscious one, meaning that these dimensions of oratory can "make an impression on the unlearned crowd" (III.195). In fact, one need not know the rules of rhythm or the arrangement of words to have an expert ear: "For what proportion of people understands the science of rhythm and meter? Yet all the same if only a slight slip is made in these, making the line too short by a construction or too long by dwelling on a vowel, the audience protests to a man" (III.196). This ability is "rooted deep in the general sensibility" (III.196).

But it is the very end of *De Oratore* that offers the clearest and most useful articulation of what I will call sonic eloquence:

‘In every voice,’ said Crassus, ‘there is a mean pitch, but each voice has its own; and for the voice to rise gradually from the mean is not only agreeable (because it is a boorish trick to shout loudly at the beginning) but also beneficial for giving it strength; then there is an extreme point of elevation, which nevertheless falls short of the shrillest possible screech, and from this point the pipe will not allow one to go further, and will begin to call one back from the actual top note; and on the other side there is similarly an extreme point in the lowering of the pitch, the point reached in a sort of descending scale of sounds. This variation and this passage of the voice through all the notes will both safeguard itself and add charm to the delivery. But you will leave the piper at home, and only take with you down to the house the perception that this training gives you.’  
(III.227)

Sound is made up of frequencies, which can be mapped to notes, and tracking those notes—the “extreme point of elevation” and “the point reached in a sort of descending scale of sounds”—might reveal something important about sonorous persuasion.

Together, Campbell and Cicero offer us a theory of sonic eloquence, a term that would help us consider eloquence not only in terms of words and meaning but also in the tones and musicality of the voice. These two texts offer detailed accounts of how the human voice persuades and even how it does so in a way that sneaks underneath our cognitive radars. Thus, sonic eloquence operates at various registers, at both conscious and unconscious levels. Their focus is on the human voice, but we could extend Cicero and Campbell’s discussions to other realms of sound. Sonic eloquence need not be confined to the conscious choice of the orator or even to human voices. Various frequencies might be persuasive, suggesting that sound itself can be eloquent or ineloquent, persuasive or unpersuasive. Thus, sound is not only a tool we use but is also a force that operates on us. That force can take many forms. A study of sonic eloquence would focus on the persuasive nature of sound and on the rhetorical dimensions of any collection of frequencies. This means that even what we call “noise” might be sonically eloquent. Eloquent and persuasive sounds need not be pleasurable. While Campbell and Cicero are indeed focused on what is pleasing to the ear, we can imagine a clang or a buzz as being persuasive and rhetorically effective.

The “rules” of sonic eloquence can be followed or extrapolated. We can glean them from experience, or we can determine them prior to attempts at persuasion. In fact, this is one way that we might begin to think of the digital rhetor’s use of sound—we can program a machine (write rules) to deploy sound in certain ways. We could program a videogame to use certain sounds in certain instances, meaning that our machine would be responding to a rhetorical situation. Further, just as a human can imitate sonic eloquence by, say, imitating a rhetor that seems to have a particularly impressive command of her vocal instrument, a computational machine might listen to and imitate sound. We would have to consider whether such a machine is, in Campbell’s words, a “manual operator” or a “well instructed mechanician.” Or perhaps this machine would trouble Campbell’s boundary altogether. Regardless, digital technologies offer the possibility of making the rules of sonic eloquence explicit—bringing sound into the foreground. The argument is not that such technologies would not get at the “truth” of sonic eloquence but rather that computing or composing sounds would attune us to rules that we could extrapolate and/or follow.

In the production and composition of speeches, of audio, of video, this concept helps the rhetorician consider how sound operates alongside and within other registers. What sounds or voices or rhythms are persuasive for this audience, in this composition, and at this moment? A consideration of sound’s eloquence and of how sound might be deployed persuasively would consider sound not as a medium through which content travels but as a persuasive force. However, sonic eloquence might also aid in the analysis of persuasion. What is happening at the level of frequency in a given rhetorical ecology? How might we analyze such frequencies (which can then be translated into notes) in order to understand how sounds are being used to persuade or how sound is using persuasion?

In addition to listening differently or more carefully to voices, noises, songs, and sounds, we might collaborate with computational machines to extrapolate the rules of sonic eloquence. We can create

machines that would then be used to analyze sound. Such tools could be used at a micro-level (analyzing a single speech, a single song, a single soundtrack) or a macro-level (analyzing a corpus of sounds and looking for patterns). Regardless of how these computational machines are deployed, they would signal why sonic eloquence should not be confined to the human realm. If we can track sonic eloquence with such tools, it means that all manner of things become our partners in both producing and absorbing sound.

**Image Credit**

“Sounds of Complexity9.jpg” by Enzo Varriale (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/zeno77/2236396973/>). A visual representation of one second of brain activity, “derived from the analogic recording of brain activity, carried out by an electroencephalograph (EEG recorder).” Visit Mattia Casalegno and Enzo Varriale’s “Sounds of Complexity” website for more details:  
<http://www.kinotek.org/soundsofcomplexity.html>

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