

This essay probes the topical emphasis on acoustic concerns within Marcel Beyer's 1995 novel, *The Karnau Tapes*, in order to demonstrate how transitory, auditory elements are repeatedly documented by visual and ostensibly more permanent models that fail to contain them.

Invisible Voices: Archiving Sound as Sight in Marcel Beyer's *Karnau Tapes*

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Marcel Beyer's novel *The Karnau Tapes* begins with a voice breaking the morning silence and a parade of deaf-mutes at a Nazi rally. The narrative perspective is that of Hermann Karnau, a sound engineer charged with bringing the speeches and cries of this assembly even to the deafest ears in the back rows. Karnau, from the novel's opening pages to its final sentence, is obsessed with sound and driven by a desire to record and chart every possible human utterance in an archive that he secretly assembles throughout the course of the book. The novel traces his relationship with Joseph Goebbels's children, for whom he becomes a kind of caretaker during certain periods of World War II, and in whose deaths he is ultimately complicit. Central to the climax of the novel is Karnau's decision to record the voices of these children, although initially he thought them too precious to be documented in such a way. Early on, he asks, "Is my map of vocal nuances subject to any limitations? Is there

anything I would *not* record? Yes, the voices of these children while still defenceless, as they are now, because they believe themselves to be alone and unobserved” (47).¹

Yet Karnau’s intended omission is, in the end, overruled by his scientific drive towards totality and omniscience. In an act he long represses, he records the final words of the children. Listening to the tapes decades later, however, he somehow fails to recognize himself as the children’s likely murderer. Karnau, the dubious protagonist who narrates the better half of the novel, longs to fill his acoustic “atlas” by witnessing and providing testimony to every cry, no matter how damaging, that can be produced by the human vocal apparatus. Scholarship on *The Karnau Tapes* has paid much attention to the startling shift from the predominance of the visual to the emergence of the acoustic within the archivist drive that forms the core of the narrator’s enterprise and moral ambivalence.² I will argue, however, that Karnau’s consistent attempts to subjugate sound to visual constructs ultimately compromise its essential auditory qualities and render problematic the distinction between sound and sight.

The initial shift from sight to sound is manifestly problematized, both provocatively and evocatively, within Beyer’s text. Yet any technological or paradigmatic shift as strong as the sensory modulation presented in *The Karnau Tapes* has inherent political and ethical ramifications. Driven by his encyclopedic urge, Karnau willingly records the plaintive moans and screams of dying soldiers and the guttural cries of tortured victims. Whereas the narrator’s inclination is to assign sovereignty to the corporeal status of the voice as earnest and immediate—the type of valorization convincingly dismissed by Derrida in *La voix et le phénomène*—his attempted archivization of sound is ultimately no less adherent to the linguistic, symbolic order it appears to reject. Beyer thereby undermines and subverts Karnau’s own problematic reliance on what Ulrich Schönherr identifies as ephemeral experiences that the narrator believes “lie beyond the linguistic order and its meanings and refer to the body” (332).

In his article on *The Karnau Tapes*, Schönherr argues that Derrida’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition errs insofar as it still submits the voice to logical ordering. In a sense, as Schönherr intimates, this is exactly what Karnau does: he attempts to subordinate the voice to mnemonic constructs that cannot support it and instead deprive it of its transitory character. In what follows, I therefore demonstrate that Karnau’s mnemonic enterprise attempts to subject these purportedly immediate elements to precisely the same type of linguistic-semiotic constructs that he initially desires to supersede. This attempted subjugation is manifested chiefly through a thoroughly problematic representation of the acoustic by visual means.

Schönherr’s seminal article makes a significant and insightful contribution to the discussion of this gap between experience and mnemonic representation, but

unfortunately does so partially on the basis of an assumption that the work in question is fictionally meant to correspond to notes *written* by the narrator. Schönherr initially postulates this theory of Karnau's narration as a question, but by the following sentence already appears to state it as a certainty: "Are we confronted with diaristic sketches, a fictitious autobiography of a scientist and murderer, a fragmentary confession of guilt, or a document of a failed work of mourning and/or individual repression? It is indicative of the novel that it does not reveal the protagonist's motivation for *writing*" (331, *emph. mine*). Later, Schönherr similarly assumes that Helga's narration consists of "diaristic writings" (332), without providing any evidence thereof. There is, however, no indication within the novel that the narration constitutes a written account. Indeed, even if the postulated mediality of journal entries might seem a convenient explanation of Karnau's voice within the text, it cannot so readily be accepted as the form taken by the other principal narrative voice: that of Goebbels's young daughter Helga. These perspectives are interspersed with careful temporal overlap—with the same event sometimes narrated from both viewpoints—indicating that both voices occupy the hazy realm of interior monologue, or what Roman Pliske refers to as "a type of interior journal" (108, *translation mine*). Moreover, an understanding of the narration as writing is nearly impossible to reconcile with the complications presented by the cryptic third-person (and apparently omniscient) narrative presence that appears for a few pages near the conclusion of the novel. Schönherr dismisses a discussion of this third narrative voice as beyond the scope of his otherwise admirably comprehensive treatment of the text (347n9).

Schönherr's understanding of these accounts as *text* unwittingly renders the voice visual, thus betraying a problematic reliance on visual models comparable to Karnau's. To this extent, Schönherr's reading of the novel is itself an embodiment of Mallarmé's assertion that everything in the world exists only to end up in a book (*qtd. in Schönherr 338*). Schönherr recognizes the difficulties inherent in an understanding of Karnau's words as writing, but nevertheless adheres to that interpretation:

Although visible and audible manifestations are undoubtedly part of any literary representation, their actualization always misses the reality of material. Furthermore, writing implies a temporal belatedness toward the actual event, whereas acoustic and optical media can record their subject in complete simultaneity. Thus, the voices Karnau's phonograph stores are never those that his notes describe. This raises the question of why Beyer let his acoustician and voice-explorer return to the historically outdated storage medium of writing, in which the reality of sound and noise disappears again into the realm of the symbolic. (344)

While Schönherr's description of the problematic nature of the translation of sound into writing is astute, his assumption that Karnau himself delivers these descriptions as text is ultimately unfounded. It is thus only on a metatextual level that Beyer's rendering and Schönherr's description of this mnemonic project qua writing duplicate the faulty translation accomplished by Karnau within the novel's plot. Helmut Schmitz makes a similar observation, remarking that the "obviously extradiegetic ordering of both narratives [Karnau's and Helga's] continuously draws attention to the novel's own constructedness and serves to undermine the authenticity of the voices presented" (122). Accordingly, I intend to supplement and support Schönherr's interpretation of the gap between sound and its symbolic representation by paying careful attention to the procedures Karnau himself uses to document the acoustic within the fictional framework of the novel. His is a disastrous attempt to map the human voice visually and through inscription: Karnau's encyclopedic project is conceived as a translation of the aural into the visual; the voice itself is viewed as an archive and the acoustic project is referred to as a panorama.

The archivist imperative is shown to be dangerous within *The Karnau Tapes* inasmuch as it is an abrupt (and often brutal) transformation of ephemeral experience into eternal memory, and of the immediacy of involuntary memory into an intentional and aggregate order that cannot preserve it. The atlas of sounds at the centre of this novel is itself a type of violent inscription; the selection and semiotic rendering of collected human utterances betray an almost maniacal desire for order in a world rendered increasingly orderless by the attempt. Beyer portrays the ethical ambivalence not only of the narrator's specific encyclopedic project but of the occidental positivist desire for comprehensive knowledge generally. And it is through this polemical portrayal that Beyer's novel escapes the confines of *Bewältigungsliteratur* and attempts to come to terms not only with the uniquely German guilt of the Holocaust—in which his generation had no part—but with the nature of twentieth-century experience generally.³ Essentially, Karnau finds himself at the crossroads of the two distinct experiential modalities outlined by Walter Benjamin in his studies on modernity and represented by the German word *Erlebnis* (momentary transient experience of an event) in contrast to *Erfahrung* (aggregate or collective experience)—the two halves of what Adorno terms a "dialectics of forgetting" in Benjamin's thought (1131). The very real dangers of this metaphysical encounter between ephemeral and immortalized experience are brought to light in *The Karnau Tapes* through the portrayal of the novel's ethically precarious protagonist.

Karnau's desire to achieve a certain type of omniscience is manifestly problematic, in part because it betrays the fact that his goal as collector resides outside the

sphere of mere collection: as sound engineer, he wishes not only to preserve, but to catalogue and categorize as well. Karnau is comparable in many ways to the figure of the *Sammler* outlined by Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*. This parallel can be enlightening not only because Beyer's portrayal of the collector so closely resembles Benjamin's, but also because of the unavoidable preoccupation with fascism that haunts both Beyer's novel and Benjamin's later work.

Benjamin understands the act of collection as a type of noble "struggle against dispersion" (211).⁴ Karnau's goal is along these lines: to assemble sounds that would otherwise be lost. His effort is to preserve the past and the elements of the present so ephemeral that they will soon be past. This is, at its heart, a mnemonic endeavour. After all, as Thomas E. Schmidt points out in his brief article *Erlauschte Vergangenheit*: "To listen actively to voices, be they remembered or recorded [*aufgezeichneten*: drawn out, mapped] voices, necessarily means to recall [*vergegenwärtigen*: to make present] the past" (147, translation mine). Karnau's work does not end with mere recordings, however, as only the translation of the aural medium into a comprehensive register (*Verzeichnen*, a term that could be linked etymologically to the notion of a visual drawing) can defend "against the intrusion of distorted sounds" (Beyer 17). Moreover, the term that Beyer employs in the original for this defence is *wappnen*, to forearm, further indicating the violent quality of his archive and its complicity with the fascist imperative. Karnau's desire to actualize and eternalize the ephemeral past is in fact a desire for *inscription*. And although within the confines of the novel's plot there are no indications that Karnau's recollections are transformed into writing (as Schönherr postulates), this is of course the nature of the novelistic enterprise that constitutes Beyer's work as a written text. Moreover, Karnau clearly shows the urge to place his findings within the order of a comprehensive system—to make each symbol, as it were, an aspect of the overarching allegory.

Thus, although his imagined *Schallarchiv* is, by its very name, an *acoustic compendium*, it is important to take note of the sound engineer's peculiar desire to illustrate his archive graphically. (I choose the word *compendium* here to mean precisely that, an exhaustive inventory, but I also hope to use the term suggestively, to imply a summary or even an abridgment.) Such a translation into the visual realm by a narrator much dedicated to the often-ignored aural aspects of experience is indeed striking. On a narrative level, for instance, the SS doctor Stumpfegger suggests to Karnau during their first encounter that he should be content merely to record the various sounds in his collection, without documenting them further (140). Karnau, however, conceives of his project primarily as a type of atlas, a mnemonic map of captured sounds, a *topophony*, as the title of Schönherr's article would have it. This ironic aspiration to chart topographically what is not visually discernible is perhaps the central

tension of Beyer's novel. Karnau says, "My vocal map will not be compiled in accordance with familiar rules or confined within predictable boundaries [. . .] but [will] display an area extraneous to every human cartographic domain. [. . .] We, being optical creatures convinced that all phenomena should be regarded in the same way forever [. . .] must do no such thing" (20). In his quest to compile an ultimately understandable totality of knowledge, Karnau is, by his own admission, attempting to represent optically something that cannot be subjected to such an illustration. Moreover, by rendering it visual, he is depriving the human voice of the very quality he admires about it: its perceived immediacy and expressive superiority as an ephemeral element of ostensibly unparalleled intuitive *presence*, independent of any potential "synthèse mondaine ou empirique," to speak with Derrida (*La voix* 84).

In this way, it becomes clear that Karnau's aspiration is less to *preserve* a diversity of sounds than to *categorize* them. Yet the unfamiliar ordering of his project again recalls Benjamin's contemplations on the figure of the collector, whose peculiar methodology is another aspect of an expertise ostensibly incomprehensible to the philistine unaware of the value of seemingly banal objects, or in this case, sounds: "For the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection" (207). Perhaps Karnau's attempted arrangement is in the end an endeavour to achieve an alternate form of presence, one that adheres to some *natural* arrangement. Karnau maps out the samples he has procured, not "in accordance with familiar rules" (20), but according to an apparently arbitrary ordering and a graphic illustration that even he, an acoustic savant, could perhaps never fully understand. The samples are "no more than a few cursory sketches of vocality comprising a few jagged lines scrawled on paper [. . .] merely the rudiments, perhaps, of a map [. . .] devoid of an established scale, together with a few equally faint dots that do little to assist one's orientation. [. . .] In what area, since the map lacks a key?" (17). This disoriented, jumbled collection of data demonstrates the difficulty of transliterating the personal and ephemeral acoustic medium into a permanent and collective visual-semiotic construction. Shown here, in part, are the difficulties and dangers of an attempted valorization of aggregate memory, what I will call *Gedächtnis*, over specific and active event memory, which I will henceforth term *Erinnerung*.⁵

Karnau's untempered desire to achieve a totality of acoustic knowledge compels him to force the limited, ephemeral mode of memory (here, *Erinnerung*) to fit into a larger and ostensibly more stable mnemonic schema, what I am calling *Gedächtnis*. Each individual recorded sound must accordingly be mapped out as part of a whole. Yet Karnau himself seems wary of this type of deliberate mnemonic effort, which

might obliterate the immediacy of aural experience through semiotic ordering; hence his absolute passivity. The archivist remains essentially reflexive and allows his collection to take its own shape, as we have seen. He is only active in collecting each sample; their ordering, however, remains entirely organic and involuntary. That the greater structure of an ordered, aggregate, and (in this case) collective experience or memory (*Erfahrung* or *Gedächtnis*) cannot permanently contain the volatile and transitory occurrence (*Erlebnis* or *Erinnerung*) is perhaps the hidden maxim of Beyer's text.

Karnau's ordering is abstruse, but it can hardly be viewed as arbitrary, because he is not in control of it. The recondite, natural sorting performed to create a triage of assembled data requires a great deal of passivity on the part of the collector, who remains overpowered by the objects of his collection "until, quite suddenly, the heavens burst open and the world of sound breaks over us with elemental force" (Beyer 20). The archive, it seems, interprets itself through the cartulary, and he can impose no external semiotic order. Furthermore, the archive interprets itself violently and destructively, "reducing all that is familiar to ruins" (20). The passivity of the collector in *The Karnau Tapes* also affects the narratological and syntactic structures of Beyer's novelistic enterprise. Helmut Schmitz notes the passive verbal constructions ubiquitous in the passages where Karnau acts most violently, and then the eventual disappearance of the first-person pronoun altogether. These grammatical constructions are particularly prevalent when Karnau is recording the cries of dying soldiers or, even more brutally, the terrible screams produced by the victims of medical experiments.

Despite an obvious eagerness on the part of the narrator to complete his collection and accomplish its graphic representation, "such a plan will require infinite patience" (Karnau 20). The white blank of his atlas can only slowly be filled: "der weiße Fleck läßt sich nicht ausfüllen" (*Flughunde* 30).⁶ When, at the conclusion of the first chapter of *The Karnau Tapes*, the narrator relates that his archive is still constituted by an almost entirely empty map, the reader can only assume that it is to be filled by the horrific sounds collected throughout the remaining scenes of the novel. Beyer's description of the yet uncharted territories of this acoustic map as a "weiße[r] Fleck," however, is richly suggestive in that it invites the reader to imagine Karnau's project as a blank parchment to be filled with "faint dots" (Karnau 17).

The finished atlas, if all possible sounds were to be collected and charted, would perhaps then be entirely black. This image is clearly analogous to the narrator's description of the recording of sounds onto a record:

Und immer muß noch Schwarz hinzukommen. [. . .] Im Unterschied zum Schreiben oder der Malerei wo Farbe aufgetragen wird, ohne den weißen Grund zu beschädigen, braucht

es die Verletzung der Oberfläche, um Geräusche einzufangen, es braucht das Auskratzen des Tonspeichers mit dem Schneidstichel [...] als könnte das verletzlichste Phänomen nur mittels einer verletzenden Prozedur fixiert werden. (*Flughunde* 24)

Black is an essential additive. [...] Unlike writing or painting, in which color is applied to a white ground without injuring it, the capturing of sounds requires one to damage the surface, to incise the recording agent with a cutting stylus. It is as if the most transient, fragile phenomena demand the harshest treatment and can only be captured by means of a deleterious process. (*Karnau* 15)

The vocabulary of violence chosen here (*beschädigen*, *Verletzung*, etc.) should not go unnoticed. Furthermore, it is important that the act of preservation is presented as a type of exhaustive obscuration, an “Auskratzen” of the surface. The described mnemonic markings—or scarrings, rather—would seem to render the previously blank surface of the (visual or aural) record entirely black. And this darkness corresponds to the black silence described as existing within the wings of Karnau’s cherished fruit bats, the eponymous creatures for which the German edition, *Flughunde*, is named. This imperforate blackness, this comprehensive destruction of the white void at the centre of Karnau’s blank atlas, would be the ultimate achievement of the archivist’s imperative and the only true completion of the collector’s encyclopedic desire, as Benjamin describes it in his *Arcades Project*: “As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he’s collected remains a patchwork” (211). Thus, Karnau’s atlas could never have been sufficient if the voices of Goebbels’s children remained undocumented therein.

Scarring in *The Karnau Tapes* thus serves simultaneously as a monument of a past event and as its erasure. This is also true in regard to the vocal cords themselves, which Karnau perceives as corporeal reminders of the past, as objectified souvenirs: “We all bear scars on our vocal cords. They take shape in the course of a lifetime, and every utterance, from the infant’s first cry onwards, leaves its mark there” (12). In this sense, the vocal apparatus as mnemonic object recalls explicitly the wax cylinders that form the narrator’s acoustic archive. Karnau even refers to these inscribed mnemonic traces as such: “So the scars of our vocal cords form a record of drastic occurrences [*einschneidender Erlebnisse*]” (*Karnau* 12; *Flughunde* 21). The traditional distinction between the immediacy of voice and the referential quality of writing—the “*étrange autorité*” of the voice over the written medium, as refuted by Derrida (*La voix* 78)—is undermined by this perspective, as the voice itself serves only as a symbolic reference for something that precedes it. Here the human voice consists of a type of *natural inscription*.

Such scarring or cutting is, however, also a means of erasure, as damage to the vocal apparatus is unavoidable if the narrator is to procure from his subjects the sound samples required to fill his atlas. In fact, Karnau valorizes the most injurious, destructive sounds as the dearest and most essential: “It’s sometimes far easier to detect the characteristic features of a voice from its most extreme utterances—shouts, hoarse cries, whimpers—than from the spoken word, even though those sounds leave exceptionally deep scars on the vocal cords. Even though, or for that very reason? [. . .] [Moments] when the organ is coping with rough treatment that threatens to stifle it and extinguish every sound” (49). Karnau’s mnemonic enterprise is shown to be destructive to its very subject. More subtly, in this passage the dichotomy between language and ostensibly non-symbolic verbal utterance is again problematized: initially the narrator seems to favour the presumed immediacy of the voice over the spoken word (which does not so readily allow the researcher to observe the peculiarities of the vocal utterance), but, keeping the previous discussion in mind, even a scream or a whimper would seem to be analogous to writing inasmuch as it causes an irreversible inscription on the vocal cords.

The odious irony herein is that the destruction of the human voice seems to result directly from the desire to preserve it eternally: the attempt to create an aggregate *Erfahrung* out of disjointed *Erlebnisse* or to assemble a comprehensive and collective *Gedächtnis* out of disassembled individual *Erinnerungen* is shown to be ultimately injurious. Conversely, one could argue that Karnau’s nostalgia for the human voice finds its roots precisely in a recognition of the transitory, moribund nature of any vocal expression: perhaps his longing to preserve the instantaneous immediacy of the human voice stems exactly from his recognition of the futility of this endeavour. This dynamic seems also to correspond to the technological function of the (rather primitive) sound recording devices presented within the novel: “The needle leaves its trail across the shiny black shellac, painfully probing [*tastet die Schallplatte ab unter schmerzlicher Berührung*] and imperceptibly eating away the grooves with every revolution, as if its purpose were to delve deeper and draw nearer to the origin of the sounds” (Karnau 15; *Flughunde* 24). Again, the language recalls violence perpetrated against living organisms: the process of playback is described as painful contact, and even the very tactile *abtasten* relates to the narrator’s dealings with his human subjects, as he himself uses this vocabulary later in the novel to describe his scientific aim: “we must probe [*abtasten*] the inner self by submitting their voices to close examination” (111). As Schönherr puts it: “The ‘stylus’ that cuts into the wax disc, thus preserving the materiality of the voice, is replaced by the ‘scalpel’ that forces access to the other by invading its physical integrity” (340).

Schönherr seems to draw another parallel to Benjamin when he refers to the “technological reproducibility” (329) of recorded sounds during the Nazi period, and it is indeed possible to view the deterioration of the sound sample as a deterioration of the Benjaminian *Aura*.⁷ Just as Karnau’s finished atlas would seem to be an entirely unintelligible black surface, the act of inscription necessitated here by the nostalgic pursuit of the “origin of the sounds” would eventually result in an illegible record: “Every playing of the record erodes a little of its substance, an amalgam of resin, soot, and the waxy deposits of the lac insect” (*Karnau* 15). As Benjamin intimates throughout his work on modernity, deliberate mnemonic effort is innately detrimental to remembrance itself.

Within *The Karnau Tapes*, memory and the encyclopedic urge that drives the narrator are shown to be self-destructive. It is in this context that I would like to discuss the anonymity of Karnau—who enacts remembrance as an archivist but himself serves as a reminder of nothing. The type of mnemonic *recollection* pursued by the narrator of *The Karnau Tapes* contains nothing of the personal; in the first pages of the novel Karnau speaks of a void within himself, and this void is also related in aural terms: “I’m a person about whom there’s nothing to tell. However hard I listen inwardly, I hear nothing, just the dull reverberation of nothingness” (8). A bit later, still in language that recalls the acoustic function of his thinking, Karnau postulates this emptiness as a lack of self-comprehension: “I look upon myself as I might regard a deaf-mute: not a sound to be heard, and even my gestures are unintelligible” (9).

The narrator, in the name of scientific inquiry, is convinced of the necessity to disregard the potential meanings of the sounds he collects: “Anyone intending to compile a map of all the vocal nuances [. . .] mustn’t shrink from the most extreme human utterances. [. . .] The listener must regard his subjects as sources of sound [*Stimmquelle*], nothing more; just sound sources, and not, for example, painracked men in urgent need of assistance” (19). Here the sources of sound are rendered perfectly anonymous, without even the slightest semblance of human individuality. If Karnau’s fascination with the human voice includes a conception of vocal expression as pertaining to a superior, pre-linguistic order, this cleavage of voice and speech is ultimately disastrous in that it allows the narrator to deny all meaning in the cries of victims. Karnau, as a collector of sounds, views himself as an anonymous deaf-mute opposite the anonymous deaf-mute other. Or, as Schmitz puts it, “The modern scientist reduces the human to an animal in his image” (131). This detached scientific gaze is shown to have catastrophic consequences.

Karnau’s own personality figures nowhere into his encyclopedic aim; his goal is to assemble a comprehensive atlas of all potential human sounds, to achieve what Benjamin

would call the imagined *Vollständigkeit*, completeness, of his collection. Karnau's brutal dehumanization of his fellow man is perhaps the inevitable result of his attempt to "overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 204–05). The danger of Karnau's morally detached pathology is that it leads to the metamorphosis of memory into history—of the immediate pre-linguistic potency of a human cry of pain into an impersonal piece of the greater, systematic collection.

But as a collector, Karnau is in some way immune to the fatality of his own mnemonic project. Is not Karnau's childlike, unchanged voice—which is revealed never to have properly dropped during puberty—itsself an example of the rare, scarless type, "simply coated with a soft, delicate network of veins" (21)? By refusing to record his own voice, and thus to become the object of memory rather than its custodian, Karnau ensures that he will not be scratched out, that his voice will not fall victim to the same scarring erasure eventually inflicted upon the voices of Goebbels's children. To this degree, we can comprehend Karnau as a Medusa figure: those regarded by him are transformed into stone monuments but simultaneously rendered as lifeless as they are immortal. Each object of Karnau's collection becomes what Benjamin refers to as a "*tote Habe*" (*Zentralpark* 681)—a dead ware.

Yet, Medusa-like, Karnau refuses introspection for fear of the consequences of his own gaze. He remains himself an unmentioned white blank in the blackening atlas of sounds before him.⁸ Unwilling to record himself, Karnau holds his breath so as not to be captured by the wax cylinders or magnetic tape. His apparent cowardice, to which he repeatedly refers, is really nothing less than the recognition that "every recording process, every modulated groove, may whittle away a child's voice. [. . .] Hence, too, my instinctive fear as a child of having my voice recorded" (93). Aware of his privileged position of control, Karnau remarks, "I have become a voice thief" (97)—"*Bin zu einem Stimmstehler geworden*" (123). It is interesting to note that, in the original German, the personal pronoun is again missing, lending the perpetrator a degree of anonymity.

The brutal experiments that Karnau perpetrates at the end of the text are related in such dehumanizing language that, as Helmut Schmitz points out, they resemble closely the seemingly innocuous dissection of animals that the narrator enacts even at his most tender moment, when Goebbels's children are still residing in his apartment. His brutal desire for control is not only portrayed in the final pages of the work; it is already present in the very first chapter, where, upon hearing an unpleasant sound from his neighbour on the tram, Karnau remarks, "Unprovoked assaults like these should be reported and repulsed" (9). Again, the original German is even more suggestive: "*Man müsste die Laute solcher Kreaturen löschen können* [One must be able to

erase the sounds produced by such creatures]” (18). Not much later, this desire is revealed as generally nihilistic: “Just erase it. Erase it all” (24).⁹

This attitude should hardly be surprising, considering that Karnau’s mapping of sounds is rendered immediately uncanny by the association with phrenology that Karnau makes when he introduces his atlas. He conceives of his work as a parallel to that of Joseph Gall, a pioneer in the field whose observations of human skulls “filled whole [. . .] *atlases*” (17, *emph. mine*).¹⁰ Gall is described by Karnau as having been a “lonely child” (19), recalling the narrator’s frequent references to himself as a weakling. It seems as if the pathology of the collector is in some way linked to cowardice, and perhaps specifically to a fear of the other. The other is rendered harmless by both Gall and Karnau inasmuch as he or she is always objectified and controlled by the collector and turned into a specimen. This is why Karnau warns that the scientist “must not be deterred by the fact that many vocalizations sound far from pleasant *both to the hearer and to those who utter them*” (19, *emph. mine*).

In this regard, Karnau presents his violent apathy as an assertion of his bravery, in that he must bear witness to his own cruelty. If, as previously shown, the grammatical constructions of the most brutal passages of this book seem to denote an absence of subject, an unnerving lacuna where Karnau as perpetrator should be, it is because he has, in a sense, disappeared into the role of the victim. This metamorphosis is made manifest by the final chapters of Beyer’s novel: posing as a concentration camp survivor, as a victim of his own atrocities, Karnau escapes justice. This is precisely what allows Karnau guiltlessly to commit such heinous crimes: as a perpetrator, he does not, and cannot truly, exist. It is only by mapping the voices he has *stolen* into a symbolic, pseudo-linguistic order that Karnau himself creates an identity as a reflection of those around him. In this case, the reflected identity is that of victim. Karnau’s desire to fit his findings into a comprehensive order, an authoritative—and, I would argue, *linguistic*—construct is nothing less than his desire to find his place within that order.

The nostalgia of origin, the painful encounter with an origin of sounds, is simultaneously a type of mnemonic homesickness and a longing for an original law. Behind any archive is this profoundly bidirectional motivation. The archivist seeks, on the one hand, to move towards an origin of memory, towards the lost ephemeral *Erlebnis*, and, on the other hand, to establish an authoritative construction of a collective *Gedächtnis*. As Derrida reminds us at the beginning of *Mal d’Archive*, *Arkhé* means both commencement and commandment (11). The Derridian equation of archive and law is also a driving force in Beyer’s text. Karnau’s expressed desire to

erase and correct the dead souvenirs that stand in for experience hides a tacit desire for control that infiltrates the assemblage of any (inherently) selective archive.

This is the most hazardous aspect of the archive as law, for included within a project such as Karnau's is not only an actualization of the past, but a preservation of collected samples for posterity. Thus he who controls the documentation of the past and present also controls the future. Derrida, for instance, views the archive both as an "enregistrement du passé," and "un mouvement de promesse et d'avenir. [. . .] Plus qu'une chose du passé avant elle, l'archive devrait *mettre en cause* la venue de l'avenir" (52). A description of the archive as portending future events is hardly unique to Derrida, however. Benjamin makes similar claims at multiple points in his *Arcades Project*: "The 'objective' data [. . .] come together, for the true collector, in every one of his possessions, to form a whole magic encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object. Here, therefore, within this circumscribed field, we can understand how great physiognomists (and collectors are physiognomists of the world of things) become interpreters of fate" (207). Benjamin's allusion to physiognomy parallels Beyer's to phrenology. Karnau's mystic recognition of the natural order that his collection takes is nothing less than ostensible clairvoyance. The historical context in which *The Karnau Tapes* is placed renders the augural aspect of the archive particularly haunting.

As both Beyer and Benjamin demonstrate, this perilous conception of fate can readily be situated specifically within the horrific milieu of German fascism. Benjamin, for instance, speaks of the vanishing of nineteenth-century "adventure" in favour of twentieth-century fascist "fate": "In fate is concealed the concept of the 'total experience' that is fatal from the outset. War is its unsurpassed prefiguration. [. . .] 'I am born German; it is for this I die'" (*Arcades* 801). And it is precisely this "intentional correlation of experiences [*intentionale Korrelat des Erlebnisses*]" (*Passagenwerk* 966, translation mine) to which Karnau seems to subscribe, except that the death he understands as potentially unavoidable is not his own, but rather that of his *Stimmquelle*.

The discriminatory instinct and desire to erase that delineate and restrict Karnau's ostensibly all-encompassing archive are perhaps the most violent elements of his action, and also the most intriguing. Like Karnau's scratched recording apparatuses or his marked atlas, the National Socialist attempt to purge Alsace of French lexical influence is described in terms of damaging inscription: "The entire region is being blue-penciled. [. . .] The blue pencil is inflicting deep wounds, gnawing away at the foreign vocabulary" (80). Following Derrida, any archival inscription would betray both a figurative corporeal violence and an enactment of (in this case Jewish) law as a type of circumcision. Karnau's description of this process may initially appear critical of the fascist political program, but he is ultimately anything but: his only

explicit critique of the linguistic purge is that it does not reach deep enough, that it does not make contact with the very origin of the sounds. As Schönherr notes, “According to him, the successful ‘Aryanization’ of the voice cannot be achieved through language training, but solely through surgical interventions on the body” (340). Karnau’s proposal would thus include a compulsory surgical alteration of the human vocal apparatus.

Although Karnau’s desire to record voices from other regions is part of what draws him to the project, his only involvement that is witnessed by the reader is the purportedly accidental erasure of a recorded voice. The inadvertency of this deletion is called into doubt, however, if we consider closely the narrator’s reaction to the voice on the tape: “There’s an unusual timbre to the voice on the tape. *It reminds me of my own siren voice.* [. . .] I find the sound so distasteful I want to clap my hands over my ears” (65–66, *emph. mine*). I would argue that Beyer thus implies a conscious element—a pseudo-deliberate refusal of self-reflection—to Karnau’s action. The type of repression that allows the narrator to report this event as an accident would certainly correspond to his failure to remember his own guilt at the conclusion of the novel.

As Schönherr phrases it, “Karnau’s work of remembering cuts short before it develops into an active work of mourning” (346). Influenced, perhaps, by psychoanalysis and its emphasis on the talking cure, Schönherr—who dedicates large portions of his article to a psychological reading of the protagonist—attests that “what cannot be narrated cannot be remembered, either” (346). But in my view, while Schönherr (among others) rightly interprets the conclusion to *The Karnau Tapes* as an incomplete anamnesis (345), it is precisely the desire to integrate individual lived experiences into an aggregate, *narrative* whole that is revealed to be so dangerous. This desire for narrative would subject ephemeral experience to the same standards of permanency, subjugating the acoustic to the visual, and unsteady utterances to stable text. Despite his enlightening critique of Derrida, Schönherr’s insistence on the purportedly textual mediality of Karnau’s words seems also to expect the presence of sound to be supplemented by the “dead letter” (332) of the written word. Ulrich Baer insightfully suggests this dynamic when he presents Karnau as “a symbol of postwar Germans who can safely rely on ‘the archives’ to preserve historical memory and are thus relieved of the burden of embodied memory as living beings. [. . .] *Flughunde* investigates precisely how the reliance on archival recordings can acquit someone of truly remembering one’s past” (250–51).

Karnau’s initial refusal to record Goebbels’s children is postulated as a fear of the fate to which it would condemn them. As such, his ultimate decision to capture their voices is already his acceptance of their inherent fate. His willingness to record them

is indirectly nothing less than his reluctant resolution to be their murderer. The crime was inevitable, for even after Karnau initially resolves to leave the voices of the children as a blank spot in his atlas, he is shown, in the scene following their departure, to have captured these sounds perfectly within his memory. Already, he fondly remembers their absent voices with the same unjustified sense of innocence that characterizes his nostalgic reminiscence in the novel's final scenes. As a written work, *The Karnau Tapes* strips Karnau's apparently noble decision of all value by including Helga's voice as the other narrative voice within the text. If, as Derrida puts forth in *Mal d'Archive*, the antonym of justice is *forgetting*, then Karnau's incapacity to comprehend his own culpability at the conclusion of the novel is already an evasion of justice. But how could it have been otherwise, considering that it was he who inscribed memory? This is the ultimate failure of the archive as a natural semiotic system observed, but not controlled, by the archivist: Karnau's endeavour to construct a coherent totality of memory from individual recollections is ultimately destructive in that it strips each recollection of all meaning. This is the consequence of a seemingly radical preoccupation with sound that wishes to document the aural in a presumably sturdier visual format. The mnemonic drive is inevitably murderous to memory itself.

NOTES

1/ References in English to *The Karnau Tapes* are to the translation by John Brownjohn. Some translations have been modified, and in those cases I have relied on Beyer's German edition, *Flughunde*, for the original German. Readers will find that edition cited in these instances.

2/ For instance, Leslie Morris, in "The Sound of Memory" (*German Quarterly* 74 [2001]: 368–78), hopes "to add a new layer to the exploration of the sites of Jewish and German memory" by "shifting the focus from the visual to the aural" (368). Ulrich Schönherr similarly describes Beyer's own aim: "Although both the individual and the collective archives of the visible world, from the picture album to the museum, enjoy public and private recognition, the audible lacks any such social signifying function. In this regard, Beyer's novel also represents the attempt to recover through writing what no historiography of the Holocaust has ever recorded: the forgotten history of the voices of both perpetrator and victim" (329).

3/ For more on the question of the novel as an innovative work of *Bewältigungsliteratur*, see Beyer's interview with Klaus Bednarz, "Flughunde" (in *Von Autoren und Büchern: Gespräche mit Schriftstellern*. Ed. Klaus Bednarz and Gisela Marx. Hoffman und Campe: Hamburg, 1997: 65–72), pages 65–66, as well as Schmitz; Schönherr; Stuart Taberner's "Hans-Ulrich Treichel's 'Der Verlorene' and the Problem of German Wartime Suffering" (*Modern Language Review* 97 [2002]: 123–34); and especially Ulrich Baer. Sandra Schöll's "Marcel Beyer und der Nouveau Roman" (*Fußnoten zur Literatur* 46: *Auskünfte von und über Marcel Beyer*. Ed. Marc-Boris Rode. Bamberg: Otto-Friedrich Universität, 2000. 144–57) also addresses the issue of third-generation representations of the Holocaust (144–45).

4/ Quotations from the *Arcades Project* are from the translation by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; some quotations have been modified, and in those instances I have relied upon the German edition of *Arcades Project*, *Passagenwerk*. Readers will find that edition cited in these cases.

- 5/ These are terms I borrow from Walter Benjamin's studies on modernity. Particularly in his "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" (*Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977. Vol. I.2. 607–53), Benjamin makes a tacit distinction between these two variant mnemonic modes. Yet, as Benjamin's distinction between *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung* is neither always entirely clear nor, perhaps, perfectly consistent, I have adapted the terminology for my own purposes.
- 6/ This second phrase—describing the atlas as a white spot recalcitrant to darkening—is, curiously, entirely absent from the English translation. *Fleck*, in German, can mean mark, spot, or stain.
- 7/ Baer—through Avital Ronell—also brings Benjamin's thoughts on technology and aura into conjunction with the fascist paradigm.
- 8/ Lesley Morris's "The Sound of Memory" (*German Quarterly* 74 [2001]: 368–78) makes a similar observation (375). The play between light and darkness in *The Karnau Tapes* suggested here is discussed, in part, in Bernd Künzig's essay on the novel, "Schreie und Flüstern: Marcel Beyers Roman *Flughunde*" (*Baustelle Gegenwartsliteratur: die neunziger Jahre*. Ed. Andreas Erb. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998. 122–53).
- 9/ Pliske also cites these two passages (110).
- 10/ For a summary of the association between phrenology and National Socialism in the context of *The Karnau Tapes*, see Ulrich Simon's "Assoziation und Authentizität. Warum Marcel Beyer's *Flughunde* auch ein Holocaust-Roman ist" (*Fußnoten zur Literatur 46: Auskünfte von und über Marcel Beyer*. Ed. Marc-Boris Rode. Bamberg: Otto-Friedrich U, 2000. 124–44), pages 132–35.

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