The Language of Things: An archaeology of musique concrète

LOÏC BERTRAND

Frankfurter Allee, 19, 10 247, Berlin, Germany
Email: lorizom@yahoo.fr

This article considers the concept of a 'language of things', which Pierre Schaeffer developed in his early work, the *Essai sur la radio et le cinema* (1941–42). On the basis of a careful consideration of this text, it will appear that the 'language of things' engages a specific posture that shows, in the process of concrete music's emergence, two distinct but interrelated aspects: one concerning things themselves and the other concerning language. It is this knot, this interwovenness, that we will try to understand in this article. The article will show that the promotion of noise is directly linked to the deconstruction of language and that these two processes, which can be precisely identified in Schaeffer's early works, refer to a fundamental switch, signalling the birth of musique concrète.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 'language of things' ('*langage des choses*') is probably the expression in Pierre Schaeffer's *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma* (1941–42) that best foreshadows the musique concrète that would be established in 1948. Although the term 'concrete' (*concret*) already appears in this text, it is not yet used to label a type of music but rather the 'words' of radio and cinema, and more generally the character of these two *arts-relais*. Schaeffer's full effort seems to be aimed at the grasp of this concrete nature. 'This essay will not appear useless', he writes, 'once we have understood that cinema and radio as images and noises (and not naturally as they include a dialogue) use only concrete words' (Schaeffer 2010a: 50). Radio and cinema are concrete insofar as they allow the audience to view or hear directly, through images or sounds, without having to go through speech or dialogue. The language of things would thus be established in opposition to human language. Hence the contradiction that Schaeffer will establish later in the text between *arts-relais* and language arts. But is there really any such contradiction? And if so, why refer to images and sounds as 'words'? Why look for a 'language' of things? How can we understand the expression, 'language of things', which is paradoxical to say the least?

    Let us first recall the context in which the notion of the language of things appears. Schaeffer initiates a comprehensive reflection on the arts and media to define the boundaries and possibilities of radio and cinema. After having distinguished these two *arts-relais*, or mechanical arts, from the traditional or mimetic arts (distinguishing radio and cinema from painting and music), he comes to speak of a language of things:

> The silences speak; the slightest noise, a crumpled sheet of paper, the slamming of a door, and our ears seem to hear for the first time. Yes, things now have a language, even up to the similarity of the words that express it: image, which is the language of the eye; and a sound effect, which does the same for the ear. (Ibid.: 49)

As a language freed from the voice, where even silences talk, the language of things seems to contradict the common idea of language (after all, things have no tongue), while maintaining the principle.

    The gap between the language of things and human language is clearly established when Schaeffer approaches the question of writing, not insofar as it reproduces language but insofar as it alters it: 'It is true that writing begins with being a sign and the reproduction of a gesture. First and foremost, it is concrete, like cinema' (ibid.: 48). Writing is concrete because it is at once similar to and distinct from language, at once sign and gesture. It bears a resemblance to language in that it is a recording thereof, but distinguishes itself in that it is a material trace external to language. Writing does not duplicate language. On the contrary, it introduces difference.[1] It is following the model of writing that Schaeffer returns to radio, identifying it as a 'sound writing with its punctuation, its characters, its layout' (Schaeffer 2010a: 48). In this sense, 'concrete' words no longer refer only to noises but also to the words of spoken language as relayed to us via radio, insofar as they are established through difference. In a long note, Schaeffer thus states the first meaning of the word *concrete*: '"Concrete" (*concresco*, 'that which has grown together') is said to be understood as a whole, comprising everything involved in its formation … any phenomenon, material or not, united in its conditions or its cause, is concrete' (ibid.: 50, n74). Thus begins a

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[1] It is remarkable that the first occurrence of the term 'concret' concerns Scripture. We could detect a similar strategic role given to Scripture in the work of Jacques Derrida (see Derrida 1967).

process of deconstruction from which Schaeffer draws the first consequence, affirming that the concrete 'designates that which falls under the *senses* and not under the *meaning*' (ibid.).[2]

2. THE POWER OF MICROPHONE

The first way to approach the language of things is not from the things themselves but through a process of deconstruction, considering the concrete nature of the radio and its effect on text and on the idea of language. In his *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, Schaeffer writes:

> Let us insist on the concrete nature of the radio … On the radio, the power of the voice on a text is unlimited: it is common to hear the best texts annihilated by a mediocre voice or to discover a new meaning to the most banal sentences, so we must think that these are not texts that the radio brings us, but a spoken text, absolutely concrete, that is to say where the least intonation, the slightest accent, can not only unbalance the formal order of the sentence, but change the meaning or distort the intention. (Schaeffer 2010a: 52–3)

If the concrete is a whole, the grasping of this whole passes through the perception of detail. The concrete is perhaps above all a question of detail. A seemingly insignificant or unnoticed fact suddenly assumes a disproportionate importance and overturns an equilibrium. The concreteness of the radio, then, is not due simply to the fact that we are dealing with a spoken text. What is absolutely concrete is that inside a word in action, the slightest intonation or the slightest accent can destabilise organisation, change meaning or distort intention. Detail is no longer an insignificant or negligible element; it is revealing. In the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, Schaeffer is already paying attention to what may be called 'the grain of the voice' (see Barthes 1982: 236–45).[3] It is in the singularities of a voice, in the presence of a sensitive, even invisible body, that the concrete dimension bursts forth. Hence, the question is how a singular voice, a word in action, affects a text and supports (or does not support) its meaning. A first shift takes place here. It is no longer a matter of knowing how a voice will serve a text, but how this voice manages to express itself within in a text. The voice is first and foremost; it precedes and exceeds the text. It is with this main idea in mind that Schaeffer and Jacques Copeau led the Beaune workshop, in autumn 1942, objective of which was the study and practice of vocal techniques for broadcasting. Vocal development was undoubtedly the first field of concrete experiments where interest in a radiophonic art, emancipated from the other, more traditional arts, was asserted. The question was no longer how to adapt theatre or literature to radio but to grasp the specificity of radio.

> Schaeffer noted that radio creates a situation opposite to theatre: Everything ought to pit radio against theatre: the way to choose a subject, to divide it into acts and scenes, to set the scene; the technique of voices; and, of course, mimicry …
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> Finally, since time immemorial, with or without their mask as a megaphone, theatre actors have been trained and brought into the world to *pretend* to speak naturally. On a stage, exposed to a thousand eyes, they represent solitude, intimate conversation, even clandestinity. On the radio, they say, 'So-and-so is talking to you', and he really speaks to you alone, at home, very close to you. Would it be normal for him to yell what he had to say to you in a voice made to carry to the hen house? (Schaeffer 1970: 99)

When there is no longer a question of declaiming or gesticulating, the actors lose all composure; it is practically as if they no longer know how to speak. Thus Schaeffer remarks that 'out of a hundred actors trying out the microphone … it happens that there is not a single one, once freed from his mannequin, who moves us; not one who reveals some inner resource, a deep sensitivity, a true intelligence, through his voice' (ibid.). The Beaune workshop sought to fill this void. It aimed to initiate and train a new generation of actors in radio art. What they learned is that on the radio, we do not play; we do not pretend. Only a natural, confidential tone can be suited to the art of the microphone. Indeed, for Schaeffer, unlike the theatre, the radio represents a school of sincerity (ibid.: 100). The theatre is representation and the microphone is confidence – or, as Copeau put it, 'The microphone is the close-up on the heart.'[4] This theme is particularly present in the *Notes sur l'expression radiophonique*: 'Whether ordered by a lyrical, poetic, narrative, or dramatic work, the attitude in front of the microphone is a purely internal attitude' (ibid.: 101). This inner attitude goes as far as a metaphorical undressing.[5] The microphone not only reveals the imperfections of the voice but also 'the very act of speaking' profoundly scrutinises the human body; it reveals the anatomical nakedness of the organs and all that is hidden by our behaviours. For Schaeffer, the machine finally shows human beings as they are and not as they imagine themselves.

The microphone reverses relationships: a scream carries less than a whisper, the hero gives way to the man (ibid.: 101). Schaeffer's work on the voice thus led him to specify the powers of the microphone. After all, if the radio has the ability to reveal that which is genuine in all its details, it is thanks to the microphone,

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[2] The *senses* ('les sens') and the *meaning* ('le sens').
[3] The grain is what causes the body to be heard directly.

[4] www.franceculture.fr/emissions/creation-air/pierre-schaeffer-au-temps-du-studio-d-essai-1943–1945 (accessed 15 September 2017).
[5] 'any clothing was just pulled up. It was the nudity of the organs' (ibid.: 105).

its power of magnifying and separating. Schaeffer explains (ibid.: 103) this double power by comparing it to the development of the movie camera and the invention of the close-up in film, which totally changed the viewer's relationship to the actor by increasing the size of his face on the screen:

> This face now fills the screen. Let the camera come closer, and the eye, isolated, begins to live a harrowing, savage life for itself. The microphone can confer the same importance and then – if it pushes the magnification further – the same dimension of strangeness, to a whisper, to a heartbeat, to the ticking of a watch. Between several shots, whether sound or visual, it becomes possible to develop arbitrary relations, to reverse proportions, to contradict everyday experience. (Ibid.: 104)

The magnification power of the microphone is a separating power. Honing in to the details, the microphone makes it possible to isolate an element that was previously dissolved in a whole, to detach it from that whole and to show it as an autonomous object. Thus a detail, visual or audible, can be extracted and presented for viewing or hearing as it is. Along with its role of enlarging and separating, the magnification thus provides a dimension of strangeness. An eye alone, in close-up, faceless, takes on an animalistic, inhuman dimension. In the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, this theme of strangeness is omnipresent: 'We are always surprised', writes Schaeffer, 'by what else image and noise communicate' (Schaeffer 2010a: 50–1). Image and noise reveal that which previously had not been noticed – that which we could not see, or did not wish to see. Image and noise are fundamentally 'other' because they do not belong to the category of language and because they are given to us unadorned. In the *Notes sur l'expression radiophonique*, the category of the Other is set up as a true concept. With the machine, 'It is no longer a question of making requests and answers, but of attributing its participation to that of something or someone *Other*' (Schaeffer 1970: 93). Thus, in Schaeffer's conception, we find a category of the Other that machines, microphones, recordings, radio and cinema make it possible to articulate. Let us note straightaway that the 'Other' here could refer equally well to some*one* or some*thing*; that is to say, in its otherness, this category surpasses the difference between the human and the non-human.

3. STRANGENESS AND THE NON-HUMAN

This fundamental strangeness is not only the result of the possibility of close-ups, of new proportions or of the new relationships established between things through the microphone or the camera. The strangeness results first of all from the fact that the camera or the microphone gives us to see or to hear things from the point of view of the things themselves and not from the human point of view. In the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, Schaeffer is explicit on this point. On returning from a radio report, the recorded material turns out to be quite different from what we had expected, from the idea we had of it: 'The film, the microphone have betrayed you, you say, but how naïve to think they are your friends! They are not with you but against you; they are not on the side of mankind, but on the side of the world' (Schaeffer 2010a: 50). A careful examination of the possibilities of radio and cinema, the *arts-relais*, and their technical devices led Schaeffer to reconsider human beings' relationships to 'things' and to make a fundamental shift. This theme is developed in the *Notes sur l'expression radiophonique*:

> One can therefore imagine the Human and the Universe in the same relationship to one another as the front and the back. … Symmetry is applied in relation to a plan that defines for each of us the intersection of the Human and the Inhuman. So that the Human, in this story, does not make his noise alone. There is a propensity on the part of the world to intervene other than by a simple echo. Our noise is created by complicated surfaces whose outline is imposed on us. These external surfaces are no less delicate than the internal devices which we consider, who knows by what right, as belonging to us. In what way are the semicircular canals, the cochlear membrane, the large V of the larynx, or the sinus resonators more human than the shell? (Schaeffer 1970: 91)

The image presented by Schaeffer only appears to follow the classic schema of the microcosm, of a connection between humankind and the world. It is rather a question of a 'battle between the Logos and the Cosmos'. What is important to note is that the things of the world are resistant to humanity. The world does not resemble a human being. It is neither his echo nor his mirror; it is radically different. If humanity and the world are grouped close together, it is no longer in order to read the world as a book, where man would recognise his own values, his own language. Rather, if there is a seeming continuity between the surfaces of the external world and the internal canals, membranes and mechanisms that make humans speak and hear, this continuity appears to introduce strangeness into the core of humanity.

Schaeffer accomplishes a fundamental shift that redraws the boundaries separating the human from the inhuman, the human from things. If this redistribution of roles deals above all with a technical question (the microphone, recording, machines, hearing and the ear considered as instruments), its consequences go far beyond technique, touching upon questions of aesthetics and ethics. In a way, it shapes an ontology of the language of things and partly determines the developments which will lead to the creation of concrete music. It is therefore necessary to stop here and try to evaluate the stakes and consequences of this singular relationship that Schaeffer establishes between humans and things.

On this ontological question of the relationship of humanity to things, one could situate Schaeffer in relation to existentialism. In the *Notes sur l'expression radiophonique*, Schaeffer writes that what fascinates him in the broadcast of a stage play is not the play itself, but 'this halo of sound, this heavy silence interspersed with parasitic noises, these throat-clearing sounds, these coughs, all that forms a reality in the nascent state into which the philosophers of existence should take the trouble to look' (Schaeffer 1970: 95–6). Schaeffer is no doubt referring to Jean-Paul Sartre, whose first novel, *La Nausée*,[6] published in 1938, contains a whole philosophy of the relationship of humans to things. Nausea is the experience of what we feel when we deal with things, the suffocation we feel when faced with their contingency, the feeling of existing the way that things exist, of experiencing our selves the way we experience any other object in the world. And it is against the backdrop of that mode of existence of things that the main character contemplates the possibility of overcoming his existential malaise. We can thus understand how Schaeffer distinguishes himself from Sartre. Both consider an area where humans and things are no longer quite distinct from one another. But whereas Sartre's classic philosophical gesture rejects this mixture, this obscure zone where humans and things are intermingled, the founder of concrete music makes it his field of research, believing that humanity can find some self-awareness therein. In this area of indiscernibility between the domain of humans and that of things, this area made available by machines and reproduction technologies, which Schaeffer refers to as a 'no man's land', humanity is no longer alone in the world. The microphone is not content to be inert as a thing; it spies and records, like an attentive observer. It gives life to things. And while things begin to speak, humans, on the other hand, see themselves from the outside, as one thing among all the other things. Schaeffer thus recalls this experience:

> I listen to the recording. What does it show – the good or bad rhythm that I took? From the moment that I let down my guard, when I was no longer wholly involved in what I said, I thought I could make an illusion. If it were only that! This voice, which at first sounds like someone else's, is it mine? Cruel surprise. A superstitious terror. This friend whose voice I now hear, a voice which I thought so familiar, had I ever really known him? This intonation, from him, surprises me, almost worries me. And that laugh. (Schaeffer 1970: 101)

Alterity has many faces. In this example, the imperfection, the detail, first alters a message and muddies its

meaning. But above all, alterity consists in hearing one's own voice from the outside, like the voice of another – the singular experience of not recognising that which is familiar. The disturbing strangeness (*Unheimlich*)[7] that results from these experiences forms the psychoanalytic side of a fundamental alterity, which Schaeffer seeks to grasp, to circumscribe, rather than to repel or deny. This Otherness is polymorphous, monstrous[8] and changeable. What brings it together, which gives form to this quasi-formlessness, are the machines, the microphone and the recording, and the sound material that results from them. We can thus detect another power of the machine, which Schaeffer does not seem to have elucidated but which nevertheless guides his reasoning: that it effects a mixing and an equalisation between humans and things, which the concept of a 'language of things' directly summarises.

4. 'CHOSAGE' AND LANGUAGE

The strangeness effect is surely most prevalent when it touches on what supposed to be strictly human: voice and language. One must take the full measure of the example cited above, in which the subject perceives his voice as that of another, for this perception affects the very foundation of self-identity. The voice is what sustains one's identity (Derrida 2009). To perceive one's own voice as that of another is therefore to suppose an alterity at the very heart of the subject. It also affects the idea of language as an instrument used to take and dominate the world. Schaeffer thus effects an essential shift by drawing a contrast between 'chosage' and language: 'Mankind, with his tongue, does what he wants; he attacks reality. But the human in the cinema and the radio is no longer, with respect to the image and the sound, in the same conditions. He is on the defensive; it is Nature that speaks. We should dare to say that in response to our language we receive a "chosage"' (Schaeffer 2010a: 51).

This neologism, 'chosage', can be taken as the very signature of the language of things, the inscription in language of some nameless thing. Based on the word *language*, it substitutes the word *chose* ('thing') for *logos* and maintains the ending, indicating that there would be a 'language' specific to things. Schaeffer thus proposes what must be called a deconstruction, and this deconstruction takes place in two stages. To think the language of things, to name it, we must first deconstruct human language and then recognise the autonomy of things. These two moments form the two sides of the language of things. The two poles, the

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[6]Note also that the French word *nausée* is related to the root of the English word *noise*. The malaise in front of or among things (*nausea*) and its recognition is therefore not foreign to the question of *noise* and the possibility of an art or music specifically dedicated to it.

[7]Schaeffer never refers to Sigmund Freud but talks explicitly about psychoanalysis. The concept of *Unheimlich* developed by Freud seems to convey the feeling of strangeness before the familiar particularly well (see Freud 1988).
[8]The theme of the monstrous is recurrent in Schaeffer's works and texts.

human endowed with language and the mute things, seem then to exchange their role. The voice will then be heard only as a noise, a rumour,[9] while things will have adequate words, noises and images through which they will express themselves directly. In the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, it is these two shifts that occupy Schaeffer and which he seeks to establish from a theoretical point of view. And we can see how these two shifts are found in Schaeffer's work as two moments in the same general reversal leading to the creation of concrete music. But before showing its historical link, we must approach the language of things from its other side, no longer as a deconstruction of language but as the promotion and the autonomy of things.

From that perspective, the language of things can be understood as a singular theory of description seeking to define the methods specific to the *arts-relais*. There is a description in the sense that it is a matter of reporting on things. But the means available to radio and cinema, thanks to images and noises, make it possible to go beyond description as it was developed, for example, in literature. As far as literature may push its exploration of the realm of things, it cannot stray from its instrument, language, unlike the *arts-relais*, which can indeed go without language. Thus Schaeffer writes:

> To describe or evoke the slightest thing, language gets bogged down in interminable efforts, and the result is always disappointing. Clever at defining the nature of things, it is very difficult for language to define its forms. Cinema and radio have precisely the opposite powers. … If language has power over the abstract, cinema and radio have real power over the concrete. If language expresses the nature of things, cinema and nature express themselves through their forms and in the sense that they can where humans no longer could. (Schaeffer 1970: 53)

Rather than a contradiction, Schaeffer sees a complementarity between the *arts-relais* and the language arts. It is, however, in opposition to language that Schaeffer defines the powers of radio and cinema. While language is lost in interminable efforts to grasp things, yet never quite succeeds because it uses a tool essentially different to things, the *arts-relais* can grasp the forms of things directly, when they use their own language, through noise or image. Rather than passing through language and signs, image and noise form a realistic or concrete language that directly communicates things. This makes it possible to be freed of signifying language, and to get rid of a certain subordination between language and *chosage*, between narration and description, between words and noises. A language of things, literally impossible in literature, becomes possible on the radio insofar as radio works can proceed with a redistribution of these functions. They can go without any narrative or any language

and at the same time modify the status of the description, to reassess the place of things and the status of noises. This is precisely what happened in the development of Schaeffer's work. If we consider what separates *La coquille à planètes* (1943–44) from the first *Études de bruits* (1948), the fundamental change lies precisely in the fact that objects are given to be heard for themselves, without reference to any text, without a narrative plot, whereas *La coquille à planètes* was still largely characterised by narrative. This disposal of text, language and narration is the condition of a specific investigation of the status of noise, which Schaeffer addresses in the introduction to the *Études de bruits*:

> Noise, considered as a poor relation in the field of sound, is generally used only as a set decoration. It is used on an episodic basis to recreate an atmosphere, to indicate an adventure. In this subordinate role, however, it is particularly evocative. The question posed is this: Would it be possible, in the rich matter of natural and artificial sounds, to take portions which would serve as materials for an organized construction? (Schaeffer 2010b)

Noise is a decoration only for a type of classical narrative, where it has only a subordinate and episodic role, which means that quantitatively, it is rare, and qualitatively, always second, relayed in the background, behind the signifying, spoken word. By disposing of all narrative, all language, this status can in fact be re-evaluated. This is precisely what the *Études de bruits* bring to fruition, offering only noises to be heard, in close-up, for themselves.

The *Études de bruits* thus highlight the direct relationship between the new status conferred to noise and the deconstruction of language. The *Études de bruits* utterly dispose of language. No text supports them. When speech appears, as in *Étude Pathétique*, words are deconstructed into a multitude of fragments, while things talk for themselves. It would be easy to believe that these two aspects are not related. Yet Schaeffer's insistence on language issues, in the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, is revealing. After drawing a contrast between the language arts and the *arts-relais*, Schaeffer writes: 'Language is properly symbolist and idealistic, it makes signs; radio and cinema are realistic and naturalistic; they are not signs of man, but signals from objects' (Schaeffer 2010a: 55). A little further on, Schaeffer comes to consider a certain poetry in which the words are no longer comparable to those of the dictionary, and he compares these words to objects (ibid.: 56). We can therefore assume that the 'concrete words' of radio or cinema can mean both images and noises, or certain words of deconstructed language. After having evoked the 'intrinsically' suggestive words of Leon-Paul Fargue and James Joyce, and after quoting Henri Michaux, Schaeffer writes: 'So there are words that mean nothing and that say more than the

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[9]This is how Schaeffer conclude his series of three articles dedicated to sound in cinema (see Schaeffer 1946).

most precise words. Is there then something else to the word aside from its meaning, and in the object aside from its nature?' (ibid.: 58). This line of questioning plays a decisive role in Schaeffer's reflection. It accomplishes in some way the deconstruction of language in which he has engaged throughout the *Essai*. It confirms the idea that this deconstruction is a fundamental element in conceiving of the concrete, noise or sound as such. 'Words that do not mean anything' can thus be read as the term accomplishing this deconstruction. If we subtract the meaning of words, nothing remains except sound, which Schaeffer also calls 'the perceptible form'. This is precisely what Schaeffer is seeking. By cancelling or reducing the meaning of a word, one is left with only pure vocal matter, refocused on the sound. In this sense, 'words that do not mean anything' are similar to 'concrete words'. Deprived of their meaning, they take on another dimension, which exceeds the very idea of language. Language itself becomes noise or image; it is aligned with the language of things. Schaeffer's reasoning, leading him to consider words insignificant, confirms the interwovenness, the knot, between a deconstruction of language and a renewed conception of noise. This knot finds its foundation in a critique of the notion of signs and is based on a singular conception of language.

5. CONCRETE MUSIC AND SOUND POETRY

The question that holds Schaeffer's attention in the last part of the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*, about 'words that do not mean anything' and a certain poetry using 'intrinsically' meaningful words, plays a decisive role in the development of Schaeffer's thought. He returns to it in his *Essais radiophoniques* (Schaeffer 1989). In the broadcast *Le temps stoppé*, Schaeffer, through the artifice of editing, establishes a dialogue between lettrist poetry and Jivaroan songs before commenting:

> If the Lettrist phonemes of Altagor have thus acquired their rightful place, and also have their place in our museum of speech and of anti-speech, wouldn't that mean that speech has been devalued in the meantime? … That there would be little left of substance or form …? For the cursed white poet who has no more words or intonation, what is left except to crawl into madness and utter a heartbreaking, head-splitting, deadly scream? (Ibid.)

Anti-speech or the idea of devalued speech are the terms approaching what we have called the deconstruction of language, which is at the heart of the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma*. Lettrist poetry represents a particular path for this deconstruction, in relation to which Schaeffer maintains an ambiguous relationship. If he does not recognise himself in the experiments of the Lettrist poets, Schaeffer cannot hide the proximity of his approach with sound poetry, meaning a poetry that gives primacy to sound over meaning.

It is as though – in order to approach sound as such, independently of its cause or meaning, as Schaeffer will later define the sound object – it were necessary to put language through an intervention which is in many respects similar to the practices of sound poetry. It is in any case to this deconstruction of language that the first masterpiece of concrete music leads. The *Symphonie pour un homme seul* (1950) can indeed be considered a sound poem, as Sophie Brunet remarked (Brunet 1969: 73). It is not the noises that form the essential part of the work, as in the *Études de bruits* of 1948; it is on the one hand musical fragments, realised from looping or Pierre Henry's prepared piano, but above all, it is a material resulting from a systematic deconstruction of language, and about which we would now like to offer the most salient details.

Only two words are clearly audible and recognisable in the *Symphonie pour un homme seul*: *l'homme* (*the man* or *the human*), from the beginning of the work, in the first section, *Prosopopée I*, and *absolument* (*absolutely*), in the part called *Apostrophe*. All the rest – that is to say, the essential material of the *Symphonie pour un homme seul* – consists of a vocal matter that has been cut and sculpted so that it becomes unrecognisable and loses its meaning. We recognise that they are male or female voices, words referring to different situations or enunciative contexts, but these voices, these words, we do not know what they say, nor what they are talking about. This deconstruction does not only concern syntax, nor does this work on the voice lead to 'words that mean nothing'. The fragmentation carried out is such that the vocal matter does not even allow us to recognise units such as words. The audible fragments follow neither the divisions of spoken language nor the categories of linguistics. Thus we cannot discern words, syllables or phonemes. The cuts made by Schaeffer and Henry do not follow the articulations of language. The exploration of the sonic potential produced by the voice exceeds language (noises of the mouth, breaths, sighs, whistles, humming). This processing of the voice results in particular in pulverising the minimal unit of meaning as conceived by modern linguistics. The third vocal fragment in the opening of the *Symphonie* is exemplary in this regard. One can hear a very brief vocal fragment, an articulation which has been subtracted from any vocalisation, so that this articulation is reduced to a glottal stroke and resembles a percussive element. As a pure articulation, this element therefore represents an attempt to impart a naked consonant without a vowel. Now, a consonant, as the position of the phonatory apparatus, is theoretically inaudible. Linguistics assumes, in fact, that every consonant requires the addition of a vowel to be pronounced and audible. This sound element thus contradicts a central postulate of linguistics. By making a naked consonant audible, the composer not only ruins the idea of a minimal signifying unit, but also

the speaker's body is heard, as in a movement of the phonatory apparatus, which no longer refers to the voice but to the body itself. It should be noted that the importance of consonants had already attracted the attention of Luigi Russolo, who dedicates a chapter of *L'Art des bruits* ('the art of noises') to the noise of language, writing: 'Vowels represent, in language, sound, while consonants undoubtedly represent noise' (Russolo 2001: 72). This example shows the importance of Schaeffer's examination of deconstruction of language in his thought and his works, as well as its strategic importance in the conception and realisation of concrete music, music that makes ample room for noise.

The notion of 'the language of things' finally shows how the process of deconstructing language and a new conception of noise are two directly related aspects. But to what does this deconstruction lead and in what way might it be necessary in order to establish a music of noise or a concrete music? If Schaeffer attacks the logic of signification, we must ask ourselves what he substitutes for it and examine the very nature of the language of things. We will put forth some hypotheses on these questions, which would require a much more detailed study.

What is called into question, in the *Essai sur la radio et le cinéma* and indeed in the effort to establish concrete music, is the separation of the signifier and the signified and, more generally, the logic of signification. This process is initiated from the consideration of 'words that do not mean anything'. With this expression, Schaeffer calls into question one of the foundations of modern linguistics, according to which there is no signifier without signified,[10] but at most empty structures, which always make sense through their placement, their relationships and the functions they fulfil. It is in this sense that one must understand Schaeffer's references to the dictionary of a new language in which there would be 'blanks' in either column (Schaeffer 2010a: 51). At the end of the *Essai*, returning to the notion of writing, Schaeffer thus explicitly challenges the logic of signification in order to define concrete objects: 'The signs we have drawn … not only have a meaning, but a kind of autonomous existence, they are no longer just linguistic signs, but have an intrinsic value and a concrete existence, and like things, they have a visual and sonorous form' (Schaeffer 2010a: 55). Schaeffer thus situates himself in opposition not only to linguistics but also to the very foundations of structuralism, according to which the constituent elements of a set have no intrinsic meaning. To think of sound in and of itself – that is to say, the concrete existence of sound – the founder of concrete

music must pass through a critique of the logic of signification and its structuralist expression. This break with the logic of signification is the culmination of a deconstruction of language which played a decisive role in the establishment of concrete music. But to what end does this criticism lead? What is it based on?

We find some answers to these two questions in the *Notes sur l'expression radiophonique*, in which Schaeffer writes: 'Radio provides me with the material of a poem which is personal to me. It is far from any convention of language, from any literature. It is without tradition. However primitive it may be in its antitheses, ellipses, and metaphors, it employs an irresistible rhetoric, perceptible even to the inhabitants of Babel' (Schaeffer 1970: 107). The distance that Schaeffer takes with the idea of convention is the immediate correlate of his critique of the sign. Convention represents the central element of the logic of the sign, inherited from the philosophy of the Middle Ages. Convention assumes that the signifiers, taken in themselves, signify nothing (Jackobson 1976: 75). To grasp sound as such, Schaeffer must therefore challenge this postulate of structural linguistics. Against social convention, against literature, he presents the idea of a personal poem. Schaeffer thus dispenses with the social and historical dimension of language. This poem of which Schaeffer dreams is without tradition, without history; it refers to an original language, that of Babel. But this call is not simply confusion on the young Mr Schaeffer's part. On the contrary, it reveals an essential aspect in the development of Schaeffer's thought and establishes support, even fictitious, for a criticism of the logic of signification, which is itself necessary in order to grasp sound as such. The language of things ultimately reveals a utopian aspect inherent in concrete music. If it throws the logic of signification and convention into a state of crisis, the language of things according to Schaeffer is founded on the idea of a natural language, in which meaning and sound would no longer be separated, where meaning would not be established, but would be based in nature. Radio, as a sound composition, makes it possible to reveal a kind of universal language; it contains the possibility of a concealed code of greater authenticity,[11] in which meaning would be immediate, transparent and natural. The language of things thus shows more than two fundamental and correlated operations in the process of the emergence of concrete music, a new status given to things, and a deconstruction of language, where the possibility of attaining the thing itself is only the last term of a process of deconstructing language. The language of things also shows that these two processes are based on a utopian

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[10]Roman Jakobson writes: 'But even when we hear, in a discourse composed of words which we know, one word with which we are completely unfamiliar, we do not initially consider this word to be lacking in meaning. A word is always for us a particular semantic element and, in the present case, the signified of this particular semantic element is zero' (Jakobson 1976: 71).

[11]This quest for new composition has a long tradition that the techniques of reproduction have reactivated. On the idea of natural composition, we can read the work of Jonathan Sterne (2015: 75).

conception of language, a conception essential to the research of Pierre Schaeffer, to his desire to grasp sound as such.

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