Speaking in Tongues: *Stop Making Sense* as a Postmodern Artifact

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"The world to me was a secret which I desired to discover; to her it was a vacancy, which she sought to people with imaginations of her own."
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

I.

The Brides of Funkenstein effectively broke up in 1979 when Lynn Mabry got pregnant and George Clinton got tired of having her around. The songs they would have made hits were driven into the Parliament Funkadelic catalog, which is still being wheeled from festival to festival today as Clinton stands onstage with his brood of children in shimmering, over-sized outfits, and delivers his trademark catechism, *is funk still relevant after all this time?* But thirteen days before Halloween, thirty years ago, people went to San Francisco's Castro Theatre, a chandeliered relic of the baroque age of movies in the most prevalently gay quarter of the funkiest city in America, to watch a film that very nearly answered Clinton's question. Lynn Mabry was there, onscreen, in a Jedi romper and a fabulous new hair weave (Bliss and Banks 75-77).

The movie was *Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme's concert film of Talking Heads' four-night run at Hollywood's Pantages Theatre. Images had been on celluloid in the cutting room since December of the previous year, while sound had been, for the first time, cloistered in hard drives somewhere between L.A. and Frisco, probably around San Jose, that fourchette of Silicon Valley. California was a large state even then, but there's no doubt that some people went to both the concerts and the theatrical premiere (Doherty 13); and since Demme spent the whole wasted first night of filming ogling the audience with his seven high-tech cameras, there's also no doubt that the audience knew they were being filmed and expected to see themselves onscreen. But through clever editing, Demme kept the crowd out of the shot until the bridge of

1

the final song, all but eliminating what had been a crucial element of the concert film genre, which by 1984 was brackish to say the least. March of that year had seen the release of *This is Spinal Tap*, a non-violent Disco Demolition of the genre, replete with a fictional controversy over a fictional band's fictional oeuvre's fictional cover art. Rob Reiner, as director and "director" Marty di Bergi – Scorsese sans the drug-culture acumen – hammered his nails deep and hard, and it's imaginable that some rock fans went to the Castro premier of *SMS* to have something new to laugh at. Instead, something magical happened against the Pacific Ocean on that first chilly Thursday of October, as 1,400 assorted rockers, hipster, punks, funksters, New Wavists, intellectuals, children, and ushers were very nearly *burning down the house*, so much so that management threatened to cut the projector if the truly massive violations of fire code were not toned down (Reynolds 30). The rest of the hip world, the part that writes about things they might have seen for the digestion of people who weren't sure if they wanted to see them, subsequently defecated a collective paving stone over how good this piece of cinema was. Thirty years, several releases, and much change in the music world later, *SMS* still insinuates itself into under-lit late-night halls from Amherst to Pasadena to Coral Gables. Its influence is broader than mavens of bong smoke, though. Its re-release came less than a year after *Gone With the Wind's*, after all. But instead of letting a good thing simply *be* good, the time has come for someone (me) to endeavor to help someone else (you) understand why *SMS* is part of the postmodern universe.

II.

I want to persuade you that *SMS* is not simply a piece of the postmodern by chronological default, but is in fact integral to understanding the postmodern condition, its rise and fall. I'm going to argue that *SMS* evinced postmodern qualities in order to strip signification from language, and distilled the quintessentially human trait of self-awareness as a means to challenge

that self-awareness and confront it with emotion. My main premises are the following: *SMS* is

lyrically and visually a product of the postmodern condition; characteristics of the postmodern

serve ultimately to release languages from coded meanings and allow them efficacy apart from

human manipulations; and *SMS* is rife with postmodern characteristics, particularly lyrical and

visual ones, that do exactly that.

<div align="center">III.</div>

Postmodern cultural responses tend to strip language of meaning. What follows is a

chronology of the rise and failure of the modern condition preceded by samplings of lyrics from

SMS, in italics, which I hope emphasize the reactive nature of the words while maintaining their

narrative capacity. Though the weakness of an argument based on acontextual lyrics is apparent,

the simplicity and repetitiousness of the songs chosen for the film allow for weightier

interpretations of their meanings. A constructed narrative of the human condition is, in fact, the

subtext, the collective story behind the diegeses of the songs.

> *Down, down in the basement, I hear the sound of machines*
> *And I'm driving in circles, come to my senses sometimes.*

The modern period, to which the postmodern experience is directly correlated, ended, in

part, because of cataclysmic death-fear. Postmodern literature tends to problematize this element

in domestic ways. In *White Noise*, Don Delillo talks about death-fear on a basic and conjugal

level. His protagonists watch the collected meanings and structures of their existences become

uncertain and inadequate. World War II wrought increased technological capacity, mega-death,

an abstracting amount of informational stimulation, and a level of bureaucracy bordering on

computer-like complexity, all of which were fresh to human experience in 1939. Thomas

Pynchon also relates the capacities and complexities of the post-war world to death-fear,

particularly through the outlet of paranoia. The typical Pynchonian protagonist is a sort of

investigator who begins in a state of certainty, which gradually devolves into paranoia as the various plot permutations shatter any set knowledge. This paranoia leads characters in Pynchon and Delillo's novels to go out of their senses and act in ways contrary to their stated morals, a condition that manifests itself within inversions of traditional narrative structures. Rather than a denoument, these postmodern novels tend to lack satisfactory resolutions.

> *All those beauties in solid motion*
> *All those beauties*
> *They're gonna swallow you up.*

Because media technology developed along with military technology, more humans were positioned to discern the heft of the other two and a half billion people on the planet at the time. They could understand better than at any previous time the sheer amount of decisions made on a daily basis in the world and the sheer amount of individual and collective self-awareness. As a result, time became longer and fuller, and it seemed to move faster, even while each moment was seemingly crowded with more detail. In reaction to this, postmodern authors purposefully distorted time. This is in stark contrast to the technique of modernist authors, such as Joyce, who sought to depict the progress of time in a supremely faithful manner. Temporal distortion was central to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which the protagonist becomes "unstuck in time." Delillo muses lengthily on the distorting, yet homogenizing influence of television on human self-awareness. He argues that informational saturation is dehumanizing. While later writers, such as David Foster Wallace, would develop characters who relished informational saturation and byzantine linguistics, postmodern literary characters tend to approach complexity with trepidation and dread.

> *There was a time before we were born, if someone asks this is where I'll be*
>
> *When they split those atoms*
> *It's hotter than the Sun …*

So wake up, young lovers
The whole thing is over
Watch out, touch monkey
All that blood
They're gonna swallow you whole

Humans discovered that decisions made on massive national and international levels were not necessarily conducive to the evolutionary imperatives of the species. In contrast to a Hobbesian model of government or society as "an artificial man" capable of rationally making decisions for the ultimate good of individuals, modern, and later, postmodern scholars began to characterize them as essentially cabalistic and pervertible devices. Furthermore, along with broad acceptance of Darwinian theories and the incumbent failure of religious faith concurrent with the modern age, humans had, for the bulk of the modern era, been inundated with new data from the geologic record that pointed to the presence of mass extinctions of entire species. With the rise of nuclear weaponry, and especially in the immediate wake of the Cuban missile crisis, when the possibility of massive death on American soil became a real possibility, this recognition of the potentiality of species failure led to the filmic depiction of apocalyptic fear evinced by movies such as Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe*, and Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach*.

I quoted *Frankenstein* with a purpose. I believe species-death has always lurked in the collective human subconscious because humans are aware of mortality and empathetic to the uniformity of certain elements of life. One of art's functions has always been to provide an outlet for the anxiety death evinces, often in highly specific ways. Decisions made en mass, such as the strategic decisions made by nation-states during World War II, are not always concentric with decisions made on smaller, more disparate scales. After the war a significant number of people realized that the decisions of nation-states were far-reaching enough to exterminate humanity.

I'm dreaming of a city
It was my own invention
I put the wheels in motion
A time for big decisions

Survival is humanity's primary imperative, but when survival seems unlikely, our secondary goal is to bequeath some singular element of our humanity to another entity, preferably something of our creation. The dire, broodingly electric cityscapes of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, in which corporations claim that their android products are "more human than human," neatly display this ethic of the future, as seen through the postmodern lens. In music, too, synthesized instrumentation allowed artists to transcend the limitations of the human/tool relationship with a "heavenly dream-space of defied physical constrictions" (Adamson and Pavitt 55). Bands such as Kraftwerk celebrated the automation of human experience in their album *The Man Machine*, which featured lyrics such as "We're functioning automatik/ And we are dancing mechanik/ We are the robots."

You start a conversation you can't even finish it.
You're talking a lot, but you're not sayin' anything.

Facts are simple and facts are straight
Facts are lazy and facts are late
Facts all come with points of view
Facts don't do what I want them to

Massive amounts of technology made the modern world viable. This included machinery, what we think of usually as technology. But it also included technological states of mind, such as acquiescence to bureaucracy and a belief that all knowledge was attainable via analysis of information. Modernism had great faith in the power of language or code as a tool.

The group of people who realized that the shape of world order after World War II was unconducive to species survival was large enough, especially in the intellectual community, to dissipate modernism. They realized humans had the choice to continue to invest their humanity

in and cede their efficacy to technological structures, or they could find another outlet. Language can have a sort of self-awareness. This was the great discovery of the postmodern. Language is a primary means of communication, and communication consists of three parts: thought, encoding, and decoding (Sperber 119). However words can exist by themselves, "signifying nothing". The element characterized as essentially and uniquely human throughout the centuries and between the religions is self-awareness. Compelled genetically to jettison some node of identity, humanity was given two outlets in which to invest their sacred yet existentially threatened characteristic of self-awareness: technology and language. The postmodern reflected an intellectual tradition that germinated from the latter choice.

Rothko had his Macy's show in 1942; Pollock came out of Jungian psychotherapy in 1942 (a worse time to be hyperaware of the collective unconscious I cannot imagine), and painted *Male & Female*; de Kooning managed to squeeze out *Light in August* before heading literally for the hills of North Carolina. In the first half of the fifth decade of the twentieth century these men painted in ways that defied not only classic representation of form (as Picasso had done), but also the very importance of form. It was as if they were painting for a humanity that had stopped obsessing over itself in the mirror, had stopped flexing and picking pimples long enough to realize that the persistence of form was exactly the problem, the limitation, both in art and in general (Wallace 97). Daniel Gunn writes that the development of postmodernism was:

> "The ability of words to not just be windows into ideas or descriptions but to cloud up and assert their own reality, their heaviness and texture, drawing attention to themselves for their own sake" (165).

This is not to say that the constituent elements of a word or a brush stroke, the pigments, the graphite, get up at night and clean the atelier. However the Bible, that great engine of

metaphor, has much to say about the anthropomorphizing of words: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth" (*King James Bible*, John 1.14). But words cannot have a life of their own if they are dependent on us for meaning. They must be unmoored from meanings we force upon them in order to "signify nothing" (transitively, a human, by postmodern definitions, must signify nothing in order to achieve gestalt). Gunn calls attention to "not meaning, but the material which produces meaning" (169). The sound of the word as separated from the years of circulation and paragraphs of derivation is immensely important to a literary hyper-consciousness in his view. Instead of reading second-level meaning into the surface meaning of words (the basis of irony), we must accept that "making sense seems no longer the principal business of language," and deal with it (Gunn 169). Language must be created with regard to our senses and not our cogitative processes. We must "cease to be talking heads, and stop making sense" (Doherty 14). Only then can language become aware of its own substance.

> *As we get older and stop making sense*
> *You won't find her waiting long*
> *Stop making sense, stop making sense...stop making sense, making sense*

Gunn seems to believe this should be accomplished by remaining aware of the material reality of language when constructing or deconstructing a sentence. This is seductive in theory, but his concepts are a little flimsy, not least because he's trying to make a case for the emancipation of words while using the words themselves to signify his thoughts. Still he makes a case for an idea of "words in their pure state…antecedent to convention and interpretation." Although it allows emotion to be portable, or perhaps because of that portability, language does seem to complicate and dilute emotion. He seems to be all for the dissolution of the writerly

voice and for writers to instead hurl words at the page as fast as we can feel them up in order to allow the words to "constitute their *own* meta-language" (his emphasis).

> *Facts are living turned inside out*
> *Facts are getting the best of them*
> *Facts are nothing on the face of things*

IV.

The interplay of verbal language in *SMS* strips symbolism from emotional impact while maintaining a discernible narrative arc; the visual elements of *SMS* bolster this accomplishment and maintain its contradictions. All nine members of Talking Heads are baby boomers, a generation defined strictly by its relationship to World War II. The post-war baby boom is the only postmodern generation, in that it encompassed the movement's entire existence. *SMS* is sandwiched historically between three layers of popular music, within a triplet of mirror-like conceptual twins. It stood chronologically after heavy metal but before hair metal, after punk but before grunge, and after disco but before house. It is also between the death of Bob Marley in 1981 and the formation of Sublime from his ashes in 1988. *SMS* is particularly rife with intertextuality and pastiche of musical and filmic references, which serve to subvert mainstream aesthetics. Because *SMS* is so centrally located within recent musical history, these techniques are especially effective.

In fact, each song is essentially a "mini-movie" (Reynolds 33) in which David Byrne and/or his fellow musicians become certain characters for the duration of the song. Themes run between characters. Evangelism, for instance, is a theme of several songs. However, no theme or character lasts long enough to become obtrusive, or to qualify as an overarching theme. Byrne often took inspiration from tabloids, an example of simulacrum; he said, "What's important is that I believe they were true." Gunn continues:

"American popular culture is always on the verge of unintentional parody, at best just this side of a collapse into the purely conventional and banal. In *SMS* Demme and Talking Heads take this condition and make it a positive virtue, a built-in feature of the discourse of concert and film, so that everything is parodic or half-parodic, and consciously so, and nothing can be taken seriously." (169)

The film opens with "Psycho Killer", the first song Byrne or the band ever wrote. Byrne describes his creative process thus: "I thought 'what if somebody was writing an Alice Cooper song but from a more introspective point of view.'" The eponymous killer clearly considers himself to be sophisticated, throwing vainglorious phrases around in French: "What I did that evening / What she said that evening / fulfilling my hope / Headlong I go for glory, OK," the final "OK" serving to mitigate the elevated tone of the French. The song, though it predates the horror films *American Psycho* and *Serial Mom* by ten years, reminds me of the prim protagonists of those works. They kill people who offend them, just as the Psycho Killer hates "people who aren't polite." The second verse suggests the impotence of words and a new literary ethic of refusal: "when I have nothing to say, my lips are sealed." Perhaps the killer is slaughtering, and thereby negating, excess language instead of actual humans.

More important is the visual language of the mise en scéne. During the first four songs there is no theatrical lighting on stage, nor are there backdrops or other theatrical elements. Gunn suggests this is a way of "pointedly exposing the technical process of concert production and filmmaking – laying bare the technique of both production and reproduction" (Gunn 170). I believe this mirrors the invitational nature of punk and post-punk music, what drummer Chris Franz calls in his commentary to the film, "the 'I could do that' effect." The scenery is carted onstage, a little more for each song, until the climax of the first act, "Burning Down the House." This trajectory, by the way, is parallel to the early trajectory of the band; "Burning Down the

House" was their first Top-30 hit. Furthermore, a new band member is added during each song, roughly in the order they joined the band. These choices lend the entire first act a flashback quality, one that constantly reminds us we are voyeurs.

The most overtly artistic statement of the first act is found in the plotline of "Found a Job", about a couple who saves their relationship by creating television shows. Television is a theme in which Byrne revels. With his first big record advance, he bought a small television in order to "be a participant in the dominant culture" (Hermes 200), and he's written great songs about his ambivalence toward television (see "Television Man"). Byrne seemed aware early on that he is part of, in the words of David Foster Wallace, "a culture that said its most important stuff about itself via mass media" (Wallace 101). The mise en scene of the film is consistently visually ascetic – there is only one costume change: Byrne exchanges one gray suit for another, slightly larger grey suit – which helps strip away the background-noise quality of film and television. Animosity towards the homogenizing influence of mass media also crops up in several songs, such as "Life During Wartime." The song is the first clear break in tone of the piece and begins a series of songs that have more urgent, driving melodies. "Life During Wartime" is a hyperbole of the street violence and cultural animosity especially prevalent in New York at the time. The song rails against the inefficacy of literature: "Burn all my notebooks, what good are notebooks, they won't help me survive" or "Can't write a letter, I can't write no postcard / I can't write nothing at all". The song also seems to reference Anne Frank: "You oughta know not to stand by the window / Somebody might see you up there." Most disturbing is its assertion that in a post-apocalyptic world there is not art, which nods to the conceptions of Orwell and Huxley, and to George Miller's film *Mad Max*.

But in general, the band adopts a gentle tone toward popular culture. Byrne says much about conformity, as if it is only through celebration of ineluctable homogenization that art can still survive. In a 1976 interview with Mary Harron, who would go on to direct the film version of *American Psycho*, Byrne said: "For a long time I felt 'well fuck everybody.' Well now I want to be accepted. I want people to like me…" (Harron). The third act of *SMS* is primarily about humanist conformity. "Naïve Melody, which begins this section, is the only love song in the film. It's an ode to domestic happiness and simplicity, what Harron called, "a particularly 70's state of mind: rebels' pendulum swings against excess." Byrne sings "Naïve Melody" to a floor lamp, charging that object with a host of emotional vibrancy. The awareness of the artificiality of song-writing, a form of what Richard Allen calls "vertical irony" (Allen 40), is contrasted with the unironic authenticity of emotional connection, even restricted to inanimate objects. Byrne says, "uniformity and restriction don't have to be debilitating and degrading," yet by singing to a lamp, he seems to warn us that we are married more to our tools than we are to each other (Wolff 176). Language, a huge catalyst of emotion, is, after all, manifested as a series of inanimate and constricted forms that are used as tools.

The climax of the third act, "Once in a Lifetime" is a parody of evangelical radio preachers (Hermes 165). Radio, the original form of mass media, and what Talking Heads' producer Brian Eno considered "America's seething id," (Reynolds 165) was an ironic medium for the dissemination of "the spirit." Byrne borrowed dance moves for this song from Japanese theatre and from revival meeting antics. Gunn calls his movements "the visual equivalent of the play of language" (Gunn 171). The song is about realizing the tension inherent in prosaic life between our inability to make sense of the past and our desire (but frequent inability) to accept what we have in the present. The repeated line "Same as it ever was" begs the question: *Does*

absolute truth really exist? Have the same ideas and problems always existed, except we've invented new ways of expressing them?

The most famous image in *SMS* is the "big suit" Byrne wears during "Girlfriend is Better". It serves as a visual trick, reducing the size of Byrne's head and thus deemphasizing cogitation while emphasizing the movements of his body. "Girlfriend is Better" takes the tension built up during the series of domestically tranquil songs and channels it along a repetitive electric guitar riff. Byrne said that one of the unique things about the band was their willingness to play repetitive patterns at the expense of virtuosity (Hermes 144). As bassist Tina Weymouth said: Working with a group is like we're consciously trying to annihilate the idea of being an individual who's a hero" (Harron). Repetition and circularity are important to the band, musically and lyrically. Almost every song references wheels or circles or holes. I believe this is a textual way to create a tone of self-reference, which weaves a lot of tension between songs. However, "Take Me to the River", an Al Green cover, releases that tension. The lyrics are obscure and repetitive, like many of Byrne's lyrics. He said, "I felt the challenge was to take something that was lyrically purely structural, had no emotional content whatsoever, but then invest the performance with leaps of emotion" (Reynolds 162). Seemingly meaningless lyrics allow greater subjectivity. Participatory subjectivity was one of Demme's priorities, and the reason he refused to show the audience (Wolff 178). Byrne once wrote of the characters he created in an album: "All of these people are right. None of them is wrong" (Adamson and Pavitt 264). The point is emphasized in the final song, "Cross-Eyed and Painless", a manic romp (which partially references rap music, a genre that deemphasizes the structured emotional interplay of lyrics and music) denouncing the efficacy of facts and observed knowledge. What could be more postmodern than that?

<center>V.</center>

I want to return to the crowd at the Pantages concert I mentioned, the one that very probably expected to see itself on screen. How similar is that to the expectation of the conventional art critic (or lay-viewer) who expects to see recognizable symbolism and forms, who expects signification? How important is signification anyway? If painting is a form of language expressed through the media of color and shape and density and contrast, etc., how puerile it is to force that language into one dimension, that of human perception? The art then has no merit beyond what we see, immediately or aggregately, and thus has no inner life, no self-reflection.

Talking Heads imbue their words and visual aesthetics with life apart from their creative process. They accomplish this via a plentitude of subjective content, i.e. they let the characters in songs speak for themselves. Also they disassociate meaning from language. There are no messages inherent in individual songs. Even the greater narrative arc, the three-act-plus-dénouement structure I have suggested, is purely a conjecture of mine. Furthermore they complicate our understanding via conflicting referential content and sub-textual visual clues. Talking Heads "…imagined creating a ritual music for the postmodern West – a physically grounded transcendence connecting holy-roller madness with African trance rhythms and Funkadelic liberation theology" (Reynolds 166). They also, in the words of Weymouth, "Spent so many years trying to be original that (they) don't know what original is anymore" (Reynolds 170). Art and culture are contrived things; they do not happen without humans making them happen.

Perhaps this is why the postmodern is no longer relevant: because we cannot just allow words to stand alone and still call it art. Words never were a permanent vessel for self-awareness.

SMS, however, will remain relevant because of its dedication to small, localized narratives and characters that are translatable. The songs' believability, their life, is largely due to their refusal to admit their fictionality. As Byrne sings in "Uh-Oh Love Comes to Town": "I'm not the people that you read about in books." Trends in music may shift, and the capacity of various genres and movements to speak to the zeitgeist of human existence may wane, but the ability of a piece of art to strip signification from its constituent elements, in this case lyrical and visual ones, and thereby gain an efficacy, a life of their own, will always be a feat worthy of appraisal. For this reason, if not for the value of sheer entertainment, *Stop Making Sense* will carry the best elements of the postmodern movement into the future.

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