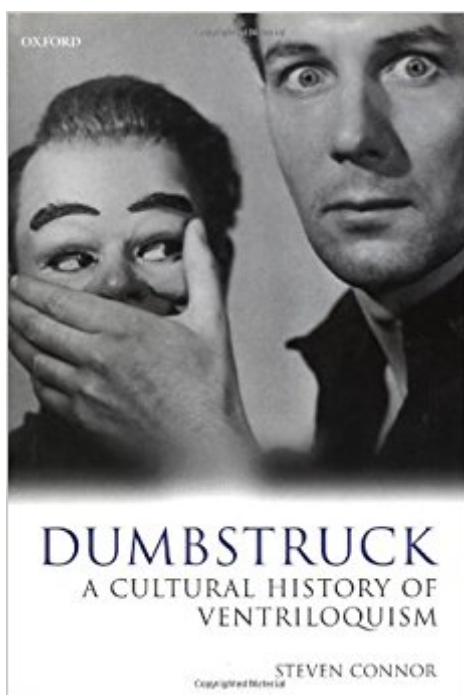


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# Dumbstruck: A Cultural History Of Ventriloquism



## Synopsis

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

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## Customer Reviews

'How the world of mediumistic displays, of possession and exorcism, of glossolalia and witchcraft, led us to Victorian parlour entertainments and then to Toy Story is the absorbing substance of this book.' *Economist*, December 2000 'a genuinely unusual and rich source for the curious ... There is much in this book, much more than the subject matter suggests ... Connor has pulled together an enormous amount of material in the service of a compelling story.' *The Linguist List* 'There is much in this book, much more than the subject matter suggests. Connor has pulled together an enormous amount of material in the service of a compelling story.' *The Linguist List* 'This book is erudite and broad in scope. Its strength is the way it links cultural phenomena in new ways. ... Connor gives us an intelligent study of a domain of skilful cultural creativity, against a background of several millennia of appalling irrational behaviour.' *Raphael Salkie, Times Higher Education Supplement*, Friday 16th March 2001 'fascinating ... highly recommended, not least for its sheer breadth of scholarship.' *Brian Boyd, Irish Times (Dublin) 13.01.01.* 'ventriloquism is defined in the largest and most colourful sense.' *Peter Ackroyd, The Times 8/11/00.* 'this incredibly erudite work ... is easily the best account of the dark business at the roots of the art ... a scholarly but wry style that is a pleasure to read.' *Andrew Martin, New Statesman 11/12/00.* 'comprehensive history...peppered with shrewd observations' *The New York Times Book Review* 'Connor manages to retain a remarkably even-handed tone as he moves from the Delphic Oracle to the Witch of Endor, Dickens to Beckett, the gramophone to the World Wide Web' *TLS* 'Dumbstruck triumphantly reclaims ventriloquism from the condescension of posterity' *TLS*

Stephen Connor was educated at Christ's Hospital Horsham and Wadham College, Oxford, and has taught at Birkbeck College, University of London since 1979. He currently is Professor of Modern Literature and Theory. He is the author of numerous books on English literature and cultural studies, including *Charles Dickens*, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*, and *Theory and Cultural Value*.

Fearful attitudes toward ventriloquism may be fascinating as well as frightening. Ventriloquism as metaphor for certain cultural absurdities, demonstrates both comedic and frightening aspects that have been attributed to the unhoused voice. *Dumbstruck* is a masterful distillation of such organised

phenomenon. In modern entertainment, a speech act, while over the course of history, ventriloquism, speaks from a complex logic of its own. It expresses its own form of logic to the world around it. Dumbstruck, has a treasured place on my library shelf. I found it well written. It tells the tale of voices that might have otherwise remained silent.

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

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

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