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## Karaoke: Subjectivity, Play and Interactive Media

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Subjectivity, Play and Interactive Media Johan Fornäs

Karaoke is an interactive media phenomenon which opens new avenues, for music use and for media research. It focuses attention on aspects of the playful use of symbols and imputation of meaning which are latent in other media forms, as well. In the following I shall explore some of these aspects, with an emphasis on differences in subject construction that relate to ethnicity and patterns of socialization.

I personally have encountered karaoke only a few times. On the first occasion, in the spring of 1992, I was together with four friends in a Japanese restaurant in Stockholm. The murk of the cellar bar was brightened by a battery of video screens suspended from the ceiling. Music flooded the room provocatively as we sipped our beer and leafed through a binder full of song titles, classified under headings like "Western", "Japanese", "Korean", "Chinese Opera", "Mandarin" and "Canton". Since none of us knew an Asian language, we kept to the first chapter. Two of the fellows in our group bravely put in an order on a slip of paper with the number of the song and our table number. The bartender promptly put their song on the machine!. They went over to a little stage in front of a video screen. Perched on bar stools, each held a microphone. Instead of Michael Jackson's voice, the lyrics appeared on the screen, shifting from white to green as the accompaniment reached that point in the song. The one sang, and the other filled in the gaps with squeals and moans. With amazing gusto! The two women in the group then took up the challenge with Madonna's "Material Girl". Once again, the voice of the artist was missing, to be replaced by our friends' voices, accompanied by the instrumental, plus video images. Not Madonna's video, but a specially composed, not quite as engaging clip. It was especially fun when the fellows chose "Like a Virgin", another Madonna hit, which acquired a new dimension through the unusual combination of masculine and feminine identities.

We others sat all the while with our beers and talked. Some of the video screens showed the video clip, others showed the singers scrambling to keep pace with the lyrics. Everyone applauded politely after each number, regardless of the quality of the performance and, tactfully enough, seemingly without looking.

My second encounter was in a crowded pub in Århus in Denmark, where a boisterous flock of NATO sailors turned karaoke into a collective sing-along ritual, reminiscent of the bellowing masculine camaraderie that you sometimes hear in British pubs.

The third time was a private party, and we had bought a karaoke video

cassette for the occasion. It didn't really turn out, despite the fact that (or perhaps precisely because) most of us knew each other pretty well. The songs, the musical arrangements and the video images all seemed too modulated, too "lukewarm" for us. The one major exception was the well-known standard, "My Way". It was a huge success, especially among the men (while the women, indulgently amused, sat and listened). By the seventh time around, the syrupy sentimental lyrics had become heavily laden with multiple meanings.

And now the end is here, and so I face the final curtain My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case of which I'm certain I've lived a life that's full, I travelled each and every highway And more, much more than this — I did it my way.Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention I did what I had to do, and saw it through, without exemption I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway And more, much more than this — I did it my way [...]For what is a man, what has he got, if not himself, then he has not to say the things he truly feels, and not the words of one who kneels

The record shows I took the blows — and did it my way
Our version of this song, written by Paul Anka (with François, Reyaux & Thibault), wavered between Frank Sinatra's and Sid Vicious' famous versions, with individual excursions into Elvis Presley, Gipsy Kings and other variants. We wandered in and out through the well-known notes and lyrics, lost ourselves in the images of a lone man who drives his car in the sundown through the monumental deserts of Arizona, and alternated between our quite diverse role models. As a result, meanings appeared and intersected each other in new ways, meanings related to the song and its genre(s), to the social situation and to the subjectivities encoded in the personal memories that the song brought to mind in each of us.

On a recent visit to different parts of the USA I encountered karaoke in several different contexts. A Japanese bartender on Manhattan's Lower Ease

several different contexts. A Japanese bartender on Manhattan's Lower East Side tried to get his downhearted patrons to sing after the N.Y. Knicks had lost to the Chicago Bulls in a televised basketball game. But in vain. Perhaps he might have had more success if the guests had been Asians, accustomed to singing melancholy songs about lost love.

On Elm Street in the club district of Dallas — "Deep Ellum" — there is a highly organized karaoke bar with nearly 2,000 titles on laser discs, which are presented in a hand-out brochure. The titles are arranged first by decade — from "50s hits" to "90s hits" — then thematically, in sections for "Standard/Broadway hits", "Country songs", "Christmas songs", "Duets/Group sing-alongs", "Nursery songs" and "Gospel/Inspirational songs". The club

also has a hostess who organizes the performances, "referees" and, by means of less than discreet gestures, passes judgement on their quality. I encountered a couple of other varieties of karaoke on my journey, but all in the form of public bars with W! estern material and a light-hearted atmosphere. Finally, this past July I participated in a conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) held in Stockton, California. A workshop there was devoted to "Karaoke throughout means) 16.874588 0 1488 6 39 A1'

-3567 522 (t the world". According to the Japanese expertise in attendance, this was the first international scientific forum to discuss the phenomenon. Organized by Toru Mitsui, the workshop provided interesting examples from many parts of the world and diverse cultures: Japan, Australia, England, USA, Spain and Brazil1.

Karaokeology: The Fundaments

Karaoke was "invented" in 1972 in Japan. Actually, it was more of a social than a technological invention2. The technical components were nothing new — the "invention" consisted of combining video, microphone, amplifiers and speakers to perform a special function, and to assemble a library of video recordings and song catalogues3. The three decisive factors are, first, the echo-effect, which "enhances" the performer's voice (otherwise the contrast between the professional accompaniment and the amateur's song voice might be so unbearable that no one would dare climb up on the stage); second, a song selection system that is immediate and easyto-use (which eliminates waiting while the tape-recorder fast-forwards to the requested title);! and third, reproduction of the lyrics on a video screen (which eliminates leafing through ponderous song-books and helps the unrehearsed performer keep his or her place)4. The technology was first used by middle-aged businessmen who visited bars after work and sang Japanese pop hits and traditional enka, slow ballads with sorrowful lyrics on themes like "harbours, tears and rain". Doleful tales of lost hope and lost loves, of desperation and heart-ache. According to Hosokawa et al. (1993:12), enka is frequently referred to as the "heart and soul of the Japanese"; essentially conservative in tone, it resembles Country & Western. Thus, the new technology fit nicely into an existing social context, a musical praxis that now acquired a suitable technical apparatus. There are roughly 500,000 bars equipped with karaoke in Japan today. In 1991, 51.2% of the population aged 15 or older reported having experienced karaoke, and those who visited karaoke venues d! id so once a month on average5. There are also karaoke clubs and associations, private tutors and schools, television programmes and a growing body of research. In addition to the bars and

home use, the Japanese can rent a fully equipped "karaoke box", used only for this purpose. In Japan today you run into karaoke everywhere — in taxis, buses and via the telephone. A similar development seems to have taken place in England, where in the mid-1970s similar apparatus was installed to enhance traditional "sing-alongs" in pubs6. Here, too, the technology fit into a musical-social context in which group song was well established. In the late 1970s Japanese manufacturers put more easily accessible karaoke machines on the market, and the phenomenon spread — first to other agegroups and social circles and to women and girls in Japan, then gradually, to all parts of the world. Meanwhile, the repertoire, too, expanded to include more and more popular music! genres, and improvements in certain aspects of the technology also evolved (laser discs, portable karaoke machines, etc.). Modern machines can shift keys to suit the individual vocalist without impairing either sound or tempo, although most karaoke tunes are recorded one or two keys lower than the original to make it easier for the amateur. Whereas the Japanese technology and terminology have become international standards, different cultures have developed their own ways of using the technology. Karaoke really took root in Sweden in 1990/91, when several nationally circulated newspapers ran articles on the phenomenon. England, the USA and Australia experienced similar epidemics. One major impetus was the new karaoke machine that Pioneer had introduced on the international market. It is to be found in Chinese and Japanese restaurants here and there, and sometimes at outdoor events on city squares and in parks. In addition to the open bar where we sat, the above-mentioned Stockholm restaurant had an additio! nal, smaller room for private parties. Karaoke can also be performed in the home using rented cassettes and rented or purchased karaoke machines. It has even been televised. Kara-oke literally means "empty orchestra". Anyone familiar with the etymology of kara-te (empty hand) knows that kara means "empty". Oke is an abbreviated form of the word, "orchestra". And there is truly something empty or hollow about the music. There is a gaping hole in the orchestration; the usual vocalist's voice is missing from both sound and picture in the video clip. It is this "void" that the karaoke performer fills with his or her voice, body and soul. A space is offered, waiting to be filled by anyone who wishes and dares. Obviously, karaoke has many parallels and antecedents, both in the realm of music and in other art forms and forms of expression. In some popular resorts, for example, tourists may be photographed in folkloristic attire by sticking th! eir heads and hands through holes in a painted stage set. There are innumerable contexts in which we combine prefabricated structures and personal "performances": playing music or singing according

to notes; singing along with recorded music at parties; young girls "playback" miming to pop music; "minus one"-records, where one instrumental part is missing, to be filled in by training musicians; and sophisticated musical collages by means of digital sampling are but a few examples from the realm of music. Even in the silent movie era there were animated films in which the lyrics of popular songs rolled up across the screen and the audience could sing along with the help of a little ball that bounced from syllable to syllable through the lyrics, perhaps to the accompaniment of the cinema orchestra, piano or organ8. Similar animations with sound-tracks were later produced by Disney, and during the 1950s and 1960s television audiences, too, were encouraged to sing along to similar bouncing ballmusic fi! lms. Thus, the 0 1488 6 42 A1`

425 -2078 (rarely any major advertising tre have long been prototypes of karaoke, but the new technology highlights and vivifies the element of audience participation in a manner that suggests an interesting further expansion and refinement of the interaction between the subject and media (hardware and software). A Multicultural GenreOne interesting aspect of karaoke is the repertoire, which can be examined from the point of view of intertextuality, reception, ethnicity and cultural identities. How do karaoke videos relate to other music video clips (such as those shown on MTV) and other television genres? Which producers and audiences choose which songs and in which contexts? How do performers and audiences use the different levels of the videos: the musical sounds, t! he lyrics, the visual flows? And what explains the differences between Oriental and Western karaoke videos? Karaoke is no musical genre unto itself. It rather consists of special versions of pop hits — recordings without the lead vocalist's melodic line, but the lyrics are instead successively displayed on the video screen. Karaoke hardware represents a medium or technological apparatus. As software, karaoke videos represent a separate music video genre, a sub-class of all music videos, but at the same time a super- or metagenre that itself contains a diversity of musical genres and sub-genres, which are related to different styles of pop music and television genres. It would be interesting to study karaoke producers' choice of songs, as well as the selections purchased by different groups of consumers (private persons, clubs, bars, restaurants, etc.) and the selections made by different groups of users/performers (by gender, age, socio-economic classes, ethnic grou! ps, etc.) on different occasions (business contacts, visits to bars, private parties, etc.). It would also be interesting to examine how the "original" versions have been altered: the choice of new visual accompaniment for songs that already have video versions; the special arrangements, often with more liberal use of

synthesizers and a more standard, "mainstream" character; and how texts, too, may have been altered (in some cases it has been necessary to choose between alternative versions or to decide whether, when and how the chorus answers the lead vocalist). Answering such questions calls for a comparative analysis of the "MTV versions" (artist-authorized "original" versions) and karaoke versions (as a sort of re-functioning "covers") of pop videos9. Karaoke is a multicultural phenomenon, with respect to both repertoire and praxis — both as a genre and as a medium. Where and under what circumstances are karaoke videos p! roduced? What is characteristic of Scandinavianproduced karaoke videos? The first time I encountered karaoke I was eager to see which songs were included in all the different categories, and I wondered which of these 2,000 titles were "most wanted" and by whom. A single ABBA hit represented Sweden. Anglo-American songs were illustrated with romantic couples strolling through parks: as for provocation, there was not a trace. An entirely different aesthetic applies to Japanese enka ballads; they are more narrative, dramatic and melodramatic. For example: Mother and son and a motorcycle race. The father is in an accident. Screams, tears. Blood running inside his helmet. He clambers up on the bike and manages to finish the race. A subjective camera gazes out through his bloodstained visor. A tear-filled reunion, but only momentarily. The husband and father wins the race, but falls down dead at the finish-line. It is a terrible tragedy, as anyone can see — whether or not you know a word of Japanese. Th! is is hardly the kind of narrative you will find on MTV or in a Swedish cinema10. The multicultural karaoke repertoire suggests certain otherwise seldom discussed undercurrents in the world of TV/video/pop. In Japan, karaoke has a longer history, and the video accompaniment for enka ballads is much more elaborate and well-attuned to the melodrama of the lyrics. Western karaoke videos are a younger phenomenon and generally less elaborate; karaoke production here, what is more, is totally secondary to conventional pop and video production. Consequently, videos in the West tend to be "flatter" — although the video for "My Way" contained obvious efforts to synchronize the picture with the sound and lyrics (sunset and solitude fit in with the song's reflections on Life, and certain pans were clearly synchronized with the major transitions in the song). For the most part, Western karaoke videos are low-budget productions having generally lower priority! than in Japan, and they are produced assuming that the visuals play a far less salient role than the text-line for the use and exchange value of the number. Inter-ethnic differences in the visual aesthetic may also have to do with differences in the character of the songs. Japanese enka ballads are narrative and sentimental, and their video presentations can draw

on Oriental conventions in the fields of the visual arts, theatre, opera, film and music. Many of the Western songs that are most popular in the context of karaoke are of a more light-hearted and non-narrative character. Yet another explanatory dimension may be ethnic differences in psychological and physical subjectivity as a result of different socialization processes. Karaoke interacts intertextually with other genres and sectors of the media world and music. Drew (1993:4f) points out a number of traits common to karaoke vocalists and amateur musicians in other genres 11. They often lack formal training and have learned their technique from elder friends or s! iblings, often with the help of recordings. The equipment and acoustic balance is often mediocre. They have to compete with other activities (video games, sports telecasts and conversations) for their audiences' attention. They are subject to conflicting role demands when friends and family are in the audience, and their performer's role is not firmly established. (Their return to the audience upon completion of their performance exerts a special social pressure on the performers.). Ogawa (1993a:20 and 1993b) discusses the impact of karaoke on pop music. Duets are specially composed for karaoke, and there is even a subgenre of pop music that is created with a view to performance by amateurs. The popularity of karaoke has also made "covers" more legitimate within the world of pop music by weakening the bond between vocalist and song and elevating the pleasure of imitation. In England and Japan karaoke was preceded by different forms of social song that t! ook place in bars, etc. In these countries, karaoke technology can plug into existing traditions and produce new, locally specific forms. Other countries may lack corresponding pre-karaoke traditions. This may mean that karaoke does not gain a foothold there (in France, for example, karaoke is far less widespread outside the Japanese immigrant community). But media-distributed popular music is everywhere, conveyed via music video clips and MTV, and new musical practices can, with the help of the karaoke machine, grow up around that music, albeit the trend may progress more slowly where sing-along antecedents are not prevalent. There will presumably always occur some degree of fusion with local traditions which gives rise to local karaoke variants in one respect or another (the premises, the technology, social patterns, vocal style and/or repertoire). Thus, as a medium and metagenre, embracing a diversity of musical genres, karaoke has grown up in an already complex and multi-layered field of other media forms and! metagenres, with which it continues to interact. Inevitably, it is the use and functional context of the genre that defines its possible forms and content. For example, it is presumably more than coincidence that karaoke videos show relatively few musicians playing instruments, compared to "regular" music videos. Artists are presumably reluctant or unwilling to lend themselves to such "cover" versions, and it would be strange to see a vocalist but not hear his or her voice on the track, or to see accompanying musicians, but not the lead singer. Furthermore, the amateur singer is probably not too eager to see and "be seen by" the idol he or she attempts to imitate. Such mechanisms cast some light on the interplay between forms and functions. Subjectivity East and WestNow, what is the point of this invention? Is it the sadistic pleasure some people get out of watching others make fools of themselves in public? Or is it a new form of contest, whereb! y the performers' can show off their virtuosity? For me, and many other Swedes, karaoke brings to mind people who laugh themselves silly at their friends who dare to make total asses of themselves. It is embarrassing to display your mediocre talents singing songs you don't exactly identify with. You feel a bit of a fake, inauthentic, as though you were betraying your true identity or risked losing it by performing a threeminute song over which you do not have full control. This is not the case in Japan. Amateurs from all over the country sing their hearts out every Sunday morning in a television programme entitled "Proud of One's Voice". Some contestants are truly talented and are crowned winners at the end of the year; others are just as hoarse as any of us, but they are not ashamed to show it in public. At parties, too, the Japanese are less inhibited about performing individually before others, who, instead of laughing themselves silly, give the performer their support by clapping rhythmically. These ! song contests, called nodo-jiman ("boast with the throat"), experienced a tremendous boom in the early days of television, in the 'fifties and 'sixties12. Today, many song contests have assumed the form of karaoke. A highly deferential and sober social ethic is reflected in the three prime rules which, according to Ogawa (1993b), apply in Japanese karaoke: 1) a tabu against singing the same song twice in a row (which would bore the audience); 2) a tabu against singing a song someone else has sung on the same occasion (which might embarrass the earlier performer); and 3) an obligation to applaud every performance (the audience should not embarrass the performer by staring all too intensely during the performance, nor should the audience fail to show each performer due recognition and respect). Whereas Westerners snigger at each other and are afraid of making fools of themselves (but enjoy watching others do so), Oriental people seem to have a diffe! rent psychological concept of the individual. Going into a bar and mimicking a rock idol is not threatening to one's personal identity. The song one sings is nothing you have to identify with, in terms of either taste or the values expressed. The only one who loses face is the individual who refuses to perform and thereby

disappoints the group. It is less of a scandal to sing miserably than not to sing at all, i.e. to place oneself outside the social circle. Several researchers suggest similar ethnic differences. Drew (1993:4f) describes karaoke behaviour in Philadelphia. In a Japanese karaoke bar, all who enter are expected to sing at least once. It is part of the social contract. In American bars, singing is more or less optional, which raises the threshold and splits the collective into two groups: performers and listeners. Even if most singers are amateurs, there arises a gap between performer and audience — more so than in the Japanese model. Macaw (1993) systematically compares karaoke in Japan and Austr! alia. Australians mainly sing British and American songs, plus a few domestic hits (roughly the same pattern one finds in Sweden). The "rules of the game" are far more fluid than in Japan. There is much more group singing — groups of singers gathered around the microphone or the audience joining in the refrain. Australians find group singing less embarrassing or threatening and more conducive to camaraderie in the group. Individual innovations, i.e. deviations from the norm, in the form of new lyrics and improvisations are rewarded, whereas producing a faithful copy of the original is the ideal in Japan. Hosokawa (1993:4,10f) sketches an 2620 F jbd^

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2 2 53 1 33 90 -832 620 interesting overall pattern, which he has arrived at on the basis of a comparative study of three parallel forms of karaoke in Brazil: Japanese (for Japanese tourists and businessmen), Japanese-Brazilian (for Nikkei, Japanese immigrants), and Brazilian. Hosokawa observes that Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and presumably most other East Asians generally sing solo or are individually responsible for an entire song (except in songs that are duets). Brazilians, British, Americans, Germans, Spaniards, Scandinavians and presumably most other Westerners tend to sing in groups and freely enter and leave the stage, even in the middle of a number. In Japan, the audience is expected to speak quietly and at least make a show of listening and then appla! ud politely at the end of each song. All do their part to simulate the ritual of a television performance, and both singer and listeners take the situation quite seriously. In Brazil, however, karaoke often assumes the character of a madcap party, with spontaneous dancing, joking and loud laughter. Singers choose happier songs (rather than the melancholy enka). Brazilians are out to create alegria, the exhilaration that unites friends and unknown persons in collective ecstasy. The Japanese, on the other hand, are out to dissolve the rigid formal demands of everyday life through socially legitimate individual performances. The differences, Hosokawa argues, are most likely outgrowths of different patterns of socialization —

among other factors. Similar patterns may be observed in British pub culture. Both Kelly (1993) and Ogawa (1993b) stress that karaoke in England is far less bound by formal rules and verges toward group song. Another characteristic di! fference is that in Japan one generally pays to sing, which is rarely the case in the West. If you rent a karaoke video, of course, you pay. But if you go into a bar in, say, Sweden or the USA, the cost of the apparatus is generally shared by all, i.e. it is included in a cover charge or in the price of food and drink. Charging for the privilege of singing would only raise the threshold and make it even less likely that anyone would dare to perform. Among the Japanese, paying for one's song is a matter of honour; that, after all, is the reason for going to the bar in the first place. In the West, perhaps a majority of the guests have come to hear others sing, and a certain amount of social pressure from one's friends is needed to nudge one onto the stage. Even the slightest fee might defeat the whole idea. Thus, there seems to be a basic difference between Eastern and Western karaoke, although one must, of course, treat such generalizations with caution. Naturally, there are enormous differences within both Eastern and Western karaoke; indeed, it may turn out that these differences are far great! er than the polarity suggested here, which can only serve as a tentative, provocatively simplistic approximation of what in reality undoubtedly is a much more complex pattern 13. There was another Swede in that Stockholm karaoke bar: a blonde fellow, sitting over his beer, his back turned to the stage. Alone, close-shaven, double-breasted, he seemed somehow out of place. To our surprise he suddenly took the stage and sang a song — in Japanese. He sang with sincerity. Sadly, softly, and on key, his eyes following the Japanese characters on the video screen. We realized he must have lived some years in Japan, but also, that the ability to adopt a certain cultural position is a social skill and not chromosomal. For lack of more detailed empirical comparisons, I shall have to content myself with the following, admittedly gross dichotomy (figure 3). When it comes to karaoke song contests, the Japanese prefer a qualified jury to audience approval. Judges should be! recognized authorities (music teachers, professional singers) whose decision confers legitimacy on the winner. The contests are not just for fun; they are serious matters. Without the legitimacy of the judges, the contest would lack all meaning 14. Swedish rock band contests contain this element, whereas the annual Eurovision Song Contest has varied between specialist juries and representative (democratic, populistic or perhaps listener-oriented) electoral systems 15. According to Hosokawa, the situation was different in pre-war Japan; then, singing was a leisure pastime indulged in after the day's work. Nowadays, song contests (and thus an

important branch of karaoke) have become much more earnest affairs: a striving for renown and official recognition. As a result, training and discipline have become principal elements. Many take voice lessons to refine their talents. Hosokawa sees karaoke as a parallel to "cover bands", whose aim is to imitate the original as perfectly as possible rather than to create a new! or personal sound. Fidelity is more highly valued than originality. This competitive-imitative mentality bears some relation to the rapid pace of modernization Japan has undergone in the 1900s, Hosokawa suggests. All this differs radically from the more spontaneous and improvisational Brazilian song culture, but there may be some parallels in Scandinavia, which has undergone a similar transformation from pre- to late modernity in the space of a few decades. Here, certain institutions within rock culture have strongly competitive and formalistic features. Exactly how karaoke may fit into existing cultural patterns here has yet to be determined. Perhaps it will follow two separate courses of development: one leading toward increasingly semi-professional contests, and the other toward purely informal singid6991b1d96574b9856071a

9ea95542554248e1080ng at bars and parties. Gaps A culturally conservative critic might see karaoke as yet another example of how we are voided by the profit-greed of popular culture industries, how personal authenticity is removed and replaced by insipid copies of idols. Here we learn to imitate Madonna and Michael Jackson to artificial melodies that approximate equally artificial pop ideals hatched in some distant multinational metropole. The music and the videos are empty simulations, lacking in soul, false fetiches for idolatry and submission to the dictates of fashion. The songs are mainstream hits and, what is more, the karaoke versions are only watereddown substitutes for them. It is a haven of superficiality and insincerity which both entices and forces consum! ers to even more masquerading on others' terms under the added pressures of social control and competitive rivalry. Behold, our ultimate colonization by the inauthenticity of mass culture! But are we really devoured and voided? The videos and the music do impose definite rules and limits, but as in all forms of social life, there are also openings and a certain leeway. The song offers a couple of minutes in which we can try out new means of expression, borrow a little of a mediated identity and see how it works together with the subjectivity of our own voices. As in all other forms of cultural expression, we are dealing with a disappearing act16, but only as momentary play with our identity, where we have nothing to lose but our naivité and inertia. On the contrary, it is an opportunity for growth: in stylistic connoisseurship, in the ability to express ourselves, and in self-knowledge. In singing, like in all musical experience,

we only lose ourselves t! emporarily, not permanently. Through singing we can find and develop ourselves since, in addition to the liking and enjoyment of the group, we can also learn something new about a genre of music and about unknown layers (strengths and weaknesses, competences and abysses) in our own identity. Nor is the music itself "empty" or devoid of meaning. It contains shades of meaning that listeners relate to personally. "Mainstream music" is a figment. All music can mean different things to different individuals at different times, in different places. My cursory inventories of the titles in the karaoke bars I have visited show a remarkable diversity and hardly a "watered down" middle-of-the-road selection. Nor can one foresee what the performers will do with the music at hand. We may fill the void in karaoke music with the voids in ourselves. Our voices may smoothly reflect the impersonal surface of the world around us, and perhaps the opportunity to do this is exactly what we need: to try out different masks, to test the fascination of artificiality. But we may also choose to sing with passion, off key and hoarsely, but full of our unique experience which no machine can take from us. The diffe! rences between the Oriental and European use of karaoke technology indicate a wide spectrum of possibilities. You may take the microphone in hand and "bare your soul", following an authenticity ideal often associated with Bruce Springsteen. This requires careful selection of your song and a generous portion of self-confidence and/or insensitivity to overcome most Western amateurs' sense of embarrassment. A less demanding alternative might be to let the ego playfully assume a new position for three minutes in interaction with one's friends and the other, unknown faces in the bar. By trying on Madonna's or Michael Jackson's provocative style of expression, Sinatra's maturity or Sid Vicious' cynical brutality, one might discover new potentials in oneself, in the modes of expression and in friends' response. A peculiar, ethnically specific conception of subjective identity underlies Swedes' anxiety about performing. It is as though it were a p! ossession, a commodity that can be lost to alien powers. Now what in the way of authenticity and personal experience could one possibly lose by play-acting a few minutes? Nothing, unless you convince yourself it will happen. Only people who actually believe that evil spirits exist can fear that death-metal music might awaken them, and only those who consider their identity a thing to possess can feel threatened by singing to video accompaniment. Thus, popular culture creates voids, gaps that may be filled with heretofore unknown subjective expressions, provided you are brave enough to take the stage and not just shy away from the challenge. Karaoke opens public spaces that allow a special form of social interaction, with video serving more as a tool or point

of reference than as a dictator. These public spaces and for a vary in type and degree, ranging from the minimal openings and meetings that can take place at home in the intimate sphere, which we often refer to as private (as opposed to public), through the similarly pri! vate boxes and closed-off spaces that different establishments offer individuals and groups and the semi-public fora of large parties, club meetings and karaoke lessons, to open meeting places like bars, town squares and other public spaces 17. The future will offer more, and more sophisticated interactive media technology. The "empty orchestras" of today are no more than a preview of coming attractions. In the past music listeners and TV viewers could adjust the volume, the colour balance, the contrast and the focus, and they could switch channels; today technology allows more and more manipulation of what is received. Computer games and virtual reality point toward even more farreaching forms of interaction in the future. Karaoke represents an important step in this trend. It may seem a marginal phenomenon for a handful of devotees, but the technique is a testing grounds for new ways of interacting with pop music which may be expected to have a more far! -reaching impact on our everyday lives in the century to come. MTV, too, attracted less than one per cent of television audiences about a decade ago, when the video clip was regarded as emblematic of a new epoch in the history of human aesthetics6f29137eda05c. Karaoke, walkman and other important media technologies show that not everything new comes from the USA and that development often takes unexpected turns. Interpretation, Authenticity and ReflexivityThis interactive medium can serve as a paradigmatic model for how media texts always offer their users voids. Listeners, viewers and readers enter into these gaps and fill them with their own (re)constructed meanings. In music listening, the interpretation of the sounds heard is never merely a copying of the intended structure of meaning, but always involves the creation of new layers of meaning. The karaoke experience puts a general aspect of all cultural consumption and reception in focus. The music listener enters into complex fabrics of symbols and produces uniqu! e patterns of impressions, experience and meaning. Theoreticians like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur or Stuart Hall have long maintained that all cultural texts leave such openings for the individual and collective creation of meaning. According to the established formula, meanings are born in the moment of reception, in the meeting between reader and text18. In listening to pop music the work/"text" consists of a foreground of vocally delivered lyrics and melody against a background of instrumental accompaniment. Here the gaps (of meaning) are filled with perceived (and perhaps hummed or whined)

melodic figures and textual interpretations. In the case of genres like house and techno, different rhythmic configurations form the foreground, and the interaction between these rhythmic configurations and a complex, polyrhythmic backcloth creates openings that invite listeners to fill them with the motion of! their dancing bodies. In the case of karaoke, this interpretive creativity has been enchanced to include the production of real sound, not just meaning. Users of karaoke have the opportunity not only to be listening meaning-makers, but also to be singing sound-makers and to hear and see their own voices and gestures in the hybrid audiovisual fabric that results. The auditive and visual "voices" of the video fuse with one's own, which one can then listen to, and learn something about oneself. When we enter into the voids in the music, we bring along our own voices, laden with subjectivity. We sing in styles and to recordings over which we have no autonomous control, but our voices can nonetheless express something unique and make each performance special. The users never have full control of the process, but neither do the artists, the producers or the bar owners. And so: it wasn't our song, but although we may have followed in the tradition of Frank Sinatra, Sid Vicious and the Gipsy Kings, the writers of! the song and the producers of the video, we did it our way! There are countless different ways to sing "My Way" — which is not to say that "My Way" can be sung just any which way. The "text" (the lyrics and melody) prescribes an open set of interpretations (in both senses of the word: realizations as well as significations; reconstructions of both the song and its meaning) which allow any number of variations, the breadth of which cannot be predicted (each limitation can be defied by a new, more radical interpretation). Still, the openness is not total: if we sing (or imagine) "(Let me be your) Teddy Bear", it is not an interpretation of "My Way" (which does not rule out that "Teddy Bear" may cast intertextual light on "My Way" — but that is another, longer story). Both the imagery and the musical arrangement encourage an imitation of Frankie rather than Sid, but interesting tensions sometimes arise when performers! choose less selfevident interpretations. Just as all media texts construct certain preferred readings but do not prevent (and may in fact elicit) other interpretations, the karaoke singer may choose a way that deviates from an exact imitation of the "hit". The song describes a conical sector of meaning, within which unique constellations of subjective identities and intersubjective interaction between individuals and genre codes construct specific sound and meaning gestalts. When my friends and I chose "My Way", we had no idea that it was the most popular Western karaoke song among the Japanese 19. Perhaps it appeals to the non-American's projected stereotype of America, but it is also

singularly appropriate to karaoke in that it has a melody and lyrics that are easy to remember and perform, while the lyrics themselves may be interpreted as a comment on the amateur's idiosyncratic way of singing a given song. "My Way" may in this sense be seen to be the reflexive anthem of karaoke. Karaoke is an! interactive form of media technology that demonstrates how use of media opens up public arenas for intersubjective communication and social interaction, while it also affords opportunities for forms of meaning-creation that allow the viewing, listening or reading subject to enter into gaps in the "text". Karaoke shows that new media hardware does not necessarily make people passive, but, on the contrary, may inspire creativity. Depending on social and psychological preconditions, the technology may be used for individual self-assertion or for collective play, for the testing of role models or original improvisational play with conventional norms and boundaries. The exact nature of the reception processes involved in karaoke cannot be specified without closer empirical examination. For example, it would be interesting to determine what role the video illustrations play. Different elements in the "text" have different functions for different (i! nter-)actors in different contexts. The music in the video, the lyrics of the song, and the flow of images, the performer's voice and body-language (perhaps also displayed on separate VDUs) each, in combination, and together with other activities in the premises, can be put to a variety of uses. For the performer, the video images are most probably extraneous: his/her eyes are focused on the lyrics, and the video images should interfere as little as possible. But, for those who ar28c3b854a67cb31d00e9364868184f69a3

8f2d91ab1cafc991421e sitting and listening over a beer an attractive flow of images may provide something to look at, a welcome alternative to the performer and the other bar patrons. The opportunities for transgressive interpretations are particularly interesting. Performers can opt to sing a song in a new and different way, but it is also possible to create a provocative contrast to the original only by one's choice of song, i.e., by virtue of one's social and subjective identity. For example, one might choose a song that "fits" an age-group, sex, class, ethnicity, geography or taste that is far from one's own position. When men sing a song that is normally sung by women, the "first-person voice" of which is conventionally perceived! as female, exciting tensions may arise. Performers may "try on" other, foreign identities — which is perhaps more common in the West than in Oriental karaoke, where exact imitation is traditionally striven for. Young rebel Sid Vicious' manner of singing an old man's retrospection over his life contained such a tension, and it is sometimes fascinating to see and hear white Europeans sing explicitly "black" soul and rap titles 20. Here we need more detailed ehtnographic user studies, which should also analyze the socio-demographic composition of various user and consumer groups in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, locality and class. But there are also obvious tie-ins with theoretical notions concerning subjectivity, identity, authenticity and reflexivity21. It is especially obvious when, like in the above-mentioned bar in Stockholm, you are offered the chance to buy a video of your own performance so that you can see and listen to yourself during the song and afterwards, as well. (In some countries young "hopefuls" sometimes use such karaoke recordings as part of their promotion in contacts with the music industry.) But even without this technological finesse, karaoke gives us cause to reflect upon our subjective identity as it is expressed in our voices, in interaction with others' voices (on the tape, in the bar and in memories of previous performances). To listen to one's own voice is an invitation to both authenticity and reflexivity. We search for ourselves and others in wh! at we see and hear. If the voices we hear are perceived to be our own (whether they are inner voices during listening or materialized voices in song), we perceive their expression as genuine, and we can explore them to mirror ourselves and to learn more about ourselves. Karaoke offers each participating subject enhanced opportunities to express subjective and social ideas for others. This mirror makes it possible to externalize and process our ideals, which may open new possibilities for expressing a multilayered will to be authentic. Authenticity is frequently perceived to be inversely proportional to mirroring oneself; we consider the spontaneous and selfless as essential to subjective truthfulness. Mirroring oneself is assumed

to corrupt natural spontaneity and to lead to artificiality. Those who subscribe to this notion would reject karaoke unless the vocalist bandages his/her eyes and ears. On the other hand, one may also argue that it is the unconscious voice! that risks becoming inauthentic, being ruled by uncontrollable external forces and chance occurrences. One can gain some degree of active subject status by listening and looking at oneself. Karaoke may be seized as a means toward increased self-knowledge and therefore autonomy. The role-play does not necessarily destroy one's true self, but can in fact develop it, once we rid ourselves of the essentialistic belief in a naturally pure origin and realize that the subject is both constructed and active. Authenticity is not a theme at all except within a reflexive framework, where we begin to ask ourselves who we are and how our cultural expressions fit our social or subjective identities 22. Karaoke brings the problem of authenticity to a head by playing with the performers' voices. The human voice in our culture is often very strongly identified with the subject and is perceived as a key to our innermost personalities. In horror films (like The Exorcist) it is much more frightening when a normalappearing body has! an uncanny, alien voice than the other way around. A wicked voice in an attractive body brings us to suspect an evil soul in a handsome package, whereas a friendly voice can make even the most hideous monster more human. Discourses on pop and rock often stress the central role of the sound with respect to the construction of authenticity and empathy. Instrumental voices and especially the human voice seem to be the prime bearers of subjectivity in conventional pop and rock aesthetics 23. If we dance to music, mime to play-back, play phantom-guitar, fill out questionnaires, stand in back of plyboard figures and have our pictures taken, or colour in colour books, these activities, too, afford some leeway for our creativity and capacity for subjective expression. We can show our uniqueness and idiosyncrasies by any number of means: visual and auditive expressions can say something about our subjectivity, as can communication perceived through our senses of touch, ! taste and smell. Still, it may well be that the voice, our most direct, versatile and subtile means of making ourselves heard, has assumed a special salience in modern Western culture. Even though it is a question more of degree than of kind vis-à-vis other means of expression and media, this salience makes karaoke particular exciting. In karaoke, the subject's entry into the texts is particularly apparent, even though echo effects and prior rehearsal may make it possible to veil oneself even here. Including our voices in a media montage may have a stronger affective impact than if a visual art form or medium turns a mirror toward the audience. It is generally held that we see ourselves "from

without", whereas we hear ourselves "from within".PerspectivesThus, karaoke may be a point of entry to the exploration of a typically late-modern cultural phenomenon: the problematization of the individual subject and collective com-

mue70c2dbf981582e25b0b15d78935c9040f6b79444790b2d1927nities, a growing propensity t! o mirror oneself, and growing attention to symbolic expression (meaning creation, texts, images, music, the media, language, communication, etc.). Here we find an interesting vacillation between a longing for spontaneous and total surrender and abandon on the one hand and self-objectifying reflexivity on the other. Here is an opportunity to study how subjectivity is constructed and expressed in the kind of play with positions and roles that certain media products make possible. Entering into the gaps that media open for collective meaning construction, individual subjects emerge as voices in a polyphonous web of sound. One question concerns how historical processes take place in complex interaction with technology, economics, politics, forms of social interaction, modes of subjectivity formed by socialization processes, and cultural genre codes, where no one of these factors should be ignored or considered all-important. In another line of inquiry, on! e may ask how aesthetic sub-genres and contexts of use are distributed along social dimensions like ethnicity, class, gender, age and locality. Finally, karaoke calls attention to an interaction that is central to all cultural praxis, a playful and deadly serious interaction, in which identities and subjectivities meet and are formed through use of media and genres that creates public spaces and meanings — a process which constantly activates discourses concerning authenticity and reflexivity. Here is an excellent starting point, in the momentous — but in media research often neglected — importance of music for thematizing the many forms of interaction and communication which the media make possible.Notes1.Cf. Drew (1993), Hosokawa (1993), Kelly (1993), Macaw (1993), Mitsu (1993) and Ogawa (1993b). Japan cognoscente Hans-Göran Ankarcrona and Norwegian film historian Gunnar Strøm have contributed valuable information. I would also like to thank Hillevi Ganetz for inspiring conversations on thi! s subject.2. Karaoke is like the Walkman in this respect; see Hosokawa (1984; 1988).3. This description is based on Hosokawa et al. (1993:25), Hosokawa (1993:10) and (Ogawa (1993a).4. accompaniment, such as a guitar, drums or accordion/concertina, there are numerous reasons on multiple levels, both for the development of karaoke to begin with, and for the spread of karaoke to other countries and the various forms it has taken in different parts of the world.5. Ogawa Kelly (1993) describes the development of karaoke in (1993a:18).6.

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Great Britain.7. According to Hosokawa et al. (1993:25), the term originated among recording technician in the music industry.8. (1980:87) attributes the invention of the bouncing ball to Max Fleischer in 1924, but emphasizes! lainthat sing-along films of other types had existed earlier, as well. Cf. Crafton (1982).9. Recent analyses of music videos and MTV are offered in Goodwin (1993) and Frith et al. (1993).10. colleague, Göran Bolin pointed out to me that the narrative is similar to that in the American 'sixties hit, "Tell Laura I Love Her" (written by Barry & Raleigh and recorded, i.a., by John Leyton in 1964). The music was, of course, different, and the melodramatic combination of realistic narrative and a total immersion in the violent emotions of the characters, together with the absence of the musicians, is quite different from MTV clips.11. Rob Drew is working on a doctoral dissertation on karaoke, with special emphasis on performance roles. Among other things, he points out how the role of "performer" sometimes collides with other prime roles: that of friend, relative or partner. For example, when singing erotic lyrics, many women may feel compelled to stress — by means of gestures, gaze, etc. — their al! liance with their boyfriends so as to avoid embarrassing complications in relation to other men in the audience.12. Hosokawa et al (1993:23) and Hosokawa (1993:5 ff). Amateur song contests were held in both Brazil and the USA in the 1920's and 1930's. The control and moral ambitions of the authoritarian regime ruled this out in Japan, where the phenomenon instead blossomed on television after the second world war.13. Cf. Hall (1992) on the orientalizing discourse he so aptly characterizes as "the West and the See Björnberg All according to Hosokawa (1993:6 ff).15. (1987).16. Cf. Modleski (1982/1984:35 ff) on the disappearing act in romance reading.17. Hosokawa (1993:1) differentiates between public (bars and restaurants), private (the home), and semi-public (song lessons stages).18. Cf., for example, Wolfgang Iser's (1976/1984) conception of literary reception as a filling of gaps or interpretive communities fill th! em. These and similar reception theories (including Barthes' (1970/1975) notions of writerly versus readerly texts) must be revised in order to avoid elitist interpretations. Nor is simply inverting the hierarchies, as Fiske (1989) does, a fruitful solution. Popular cultural works have neither more nor fewer such gaps than other texts, even if their nature and function do vary between genres. See also Hall (1973/1980), Kristeva (1974/1984) and Ricoeur (1985/1988:157-179).19. Thompson (1992:37) makes an interesting reflection regarding this song: "Familiar though it may be, ... this is a song which most Americans may recognize, but which few are prepared to sing in public. Japanese take it for granted, however, that every American

must, by virtue of his nationality, know all the words of 'My Way' by heart; after all, most of them do. In a supreme irony, an American song which is a virtual anthem to individuality is far better known in Japan, probably the most conformists nation on earth, than it is in the Uni! ted States."20. Such clashes between one's own and borrowed identities may be related to current discussions of role-play, computer networks and "virtual reality". Cf. Turkle (1993).21. Cf. Fornäs et al. (1990) and Fornäs (1990, 1993a, 1993b) on authenticity/reflexivity. Elliott (1992) discusses theories of the subject.22. authenticity of rock has always been measured by its sound and, most commonly, by its voice," Grossberg (1993:204) writes and goes on to argue that the main point of live concerts is not to offer a visual dimension, but an opportunity to participate in the concrete production of musical sound. He maintains that the authenticity ideology of rock is dying out, but offers a number of explanations as to why hearing and the ! music have a stronger authenticizing capacity then visual forms of expression. Bjurström & Lilliestam (1993:49) stress the unique ability of music to "speak directly to the body", and we find similar references throughout the literature that attempts to specify the specific nature of music. Derrida (1967/1973; 1967/1976) has problematized this conventional differentiation between voice and written text, but he is all too preoccupied with literary writing to offer a sustainable alternative model of musical communication. Cf. Fornäs (1992).52ebb2bdd55699e80ad9cf5cf604685bb31c50f46b15ReferencesBarth es, Roland. 1970/1975. S/Z, London: Cape.Bjurström, Erling & Lilliestam, Lars. 1993. Sälj det i toner ...Om musik i TV-reklam [Sell it with music ... On music in television commercials]. Stockholm: Konsumentverket.Björnberg, Alf. 1987. En liten sång som alla andra. Melodifestivalen 1959-1983 [A little song like all the others. The Eurovision Song Contest 1959-1983]. Göteborg: Musikvetenskapliga insti! tutionen. Crafton, Donald. 1982. Before Mickey. The Animated Film 1898-1928. London: MIT Press. Derrida, Jacques. 1967/1973. Speech and Phenomena. Evanston: Northwestern. Derrida, Jacques. 1967/1976. Of Grammatology. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.Drew, Robert. 1993. American Karaoke Performers as Amateurs and Professionals. Paper for the 7th conference of IASPM, Stockton, CA, July 11, 1993. Elliott, Anthony. 1992. Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition. Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva. Oxford (U.K.) and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. Fish, Stanley. 1980. Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Fiske, John. 1989. Understanding Popular Culture. Boston: Unwin Hyman.Fornäs, Johan. 1990. Speglingar: Om ungas

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