

## Book review

### **Jonathan Sterne, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021**

DOMENICO NAPOLITANO

domenico.napolitano-ssm@unina.it

*Scuola Superiore Meridionale, Naples (Italy)*

Jonathan Sterne is one of the most prominent scholars in media archaeology, cultural studies and sound studies. Indeed, his distinctive ability to merge the three fields of study coherently and sensibly is always present in his outstanding work. However, with his third monograph, *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (Duke University Press, 2021), Sterne takes a further step forward, bringing this experience to bear on the field of disability studies. In this exquisite work, residing at the border between theory and autobiography, the author begins with a narration of his own experience with thyroid cancer-induced vocal impairments. This leads to a reflection on the ways sound technologies for speech and hearing impairments are intertwined with socio-cultural issues concerning representations, operations, institutional policies, juridical dimensions, elements through which disability is defined in the first place. In describing interconnections and co-constitutions which undermine easy classifications and comfortable ontologies, Sterne seems to share an attitude typical of STS and ANT authors, although his own declared preference is for Bourdieu and Mauss (Sterne, 2003a; 2003b). Nevertheless, this work disposes of all those established references to follow a personal and unconventional path. The resulting book may even be poised to found a new literary style in Academia.

In order to capture the originality of this work, both in its references, thesis and literary import, it is necessary to start from the title. What does Sterne mean by “A Political Phenomenology of Impairment”? The author’s aversion to phenomenology was clearly stated already in his first book, *The Audible Past*, with phrases like “[p]henomenology always presupposes culture, power, practice, and epistemology” (Sterne, 2003a: 13). Almost twenty years later, something has changed. The experience of impairment has given him a new vantage point on phenomenological issues, such as the origins and mechanisms through which experience becomes possible and shareable. Indeed, it is precisely the perspective of impairment that, for Sterne, highlights phenomenology’s principal limit while, at the same time, offering the possibility to overcome it. Phenomenology has traditionally assumed the point of view of a subject in command of their own faculties, a subject (which in practice corresponds to the author of each phenomenological treatise) imagined to be completely ‘able’. This position thus reproduces the ‘ableism’, which has been dominant in Western culture for centuries, a concept that has been radically questioned by disability studies in the last few decades. For instance, Tobin Siebers (2008) relates ‘ableism’ to the prevalence of an ‘ideology of ability’, the assumption of an original, untouched condition of ability and perfection, subsequently corrupted by disability. Such an ideology has three crucial implications: the first

is a philosophical conception of the subject as abstract and untouched by embodiment; the second is a moral condition of 'fear of disability'; the third is that of a practical-political preference for a 'medical model' aimed at 'curing' disability as if it were a pathology, in order to restore a presumed original condition of ability.

Sterne engages with such issues by proposing the perspective of an 'impairment phenomenology' in order to escape the ableism inherent to transcendental phenomenology. This phenomenology does not assume an "epistemic authority" of the subject but summons "a subject who is somewhere and someplace, unsure of itself; a subject that oscillates between self-assertion and self-abrogation, between agential audacity and claiming its radical dependency and situatedness" (Sterne, 2021: 19).

This subject is, of course, the author himself. His autobiographical narrations are affected by altered states of consciousness induced by surgery, drugs, pain, fatigue, while his apperception is unstable, insofar as communication technologies and bodily prosthesis are transforming it.

It is no mere coincidence that this book focuses on sound, mainly speaking and hearing. These faculties have indeed been traditionally considered by phenomenology as sites of 'presence' and self-affection: we need not summon Derrida (2010 [1967]) to recall the metaphysical privilege attributed to voice as an expression of the inner self, and as such endowed with a value which is inseparable from hearing, the others and the self (i.e., hearing yourself speaking as original self-affection).

Through the use of impairment phenomenology, this book reveals the shortfalls of those models when confronted with everyday experiences. In the first three chapters, the author describes the loss of his voice following a tracheotomy and the technologies adopted to replace his missing voice with an artificial one. What happens to our perception of the self when our voice no longer emanates from our mouth? What kind of embodiment is produced by speaking through a loudspeaker hanging on one's chest? These experiences challenge any universalist or normative conception of body, voice and identity, opening to a constructionist perspective which is well defined by the words of Ingunn Moser and John Law (2003: 491):

'Voices' do not exist in and of themselves. They do not reflect something that is pre-given. Rather they are constituted or 'articulated' into being in material arrangements which include social, technological and corporeal relations.

The author's preference for the term 'impairment' in place of 'disability', already apparent in the title, is explored in-depth in the fourth and fifth chapters by introducing the concept of 'normal impairment'. In its historical connotation, the term 'impairment' has not been used only in relation to a person (as is the case with disability), but also to singular aspects of an individual, as well as to machines and instruments. Sterne sees this as indicative of the liminal and ambiguous connotation of the term, and this is the basis on which he prefers it. Through the phenomenology of hearing loss and fatigue, the author argues that impairment is a condition which not only touches everyone but may even be desired in certain situations. Hearing loss, for example, can be related to a cultural tendency to be consensually exposed to loud sounds, that is, in workplaces or at concerts – something the author calls "audile scarification" (Sterne, 2021: 121) to recall the connection between body transformations and self-formation, even those that can result in impairment. Without falling into simplistic or

over-optimistic schemes, he acknowledges that impairment is not necessarily a limit but sometimes represents a condition of possibility: audile scarification can be a condition necessary to access places or subcultures “where loudness is part of the price of admission” (Sterne, 2021: 123). In a sense, the term ‘impairment’ recalls the potentiality inherent in a malfunction: when things do not work as they are supposed to, the necessity to find a solution can function as a trigger for creativity, leading to new solutions – something artists and engineers have long treasured.

Again, the parallel between human experience and communication media is not only metaphorical: the ‘transmission impairment’ (Mills, 2011) is also a very material condition through which we experience the world and the other. There is a co-constitution between media and human faculties that is rooted in ‘normal impairment’: hearing loss can be caused by the use of media, such as when listening to music that is too loud by using speakers or earphones, or when we are exposed to noise pollution; but media themselves can actively discard information through their non-human agencies, information the device considers as undesirable ‘noise’, a disturbance of the message. In this sense, the normal operation of the media itself represents something equivalent to hearing loss, insofar as the operation’s output has been stripped of essential details. In his previous work, Sterne (2012) has attributed this condition to the techno-cultural affirmation of ‘compression’.

Drawing a sharp line between the impaired and non-impaired is then a complex, even impossible, task since it would obscure how one impairment or another influences almost every human action, reaction, and relation. ‘Normal impairment’ is then a way to draw attention to the necessity for every subject to deal with the changes occurring in their own bodies, engaging actively with how these changes re-define their own subjectivity, which makes, again, the phenomenological position necessarily situated and partial, and the ‘able’ subject just a fantasy.

But, of course, Sterne is well aware that lines have been (and are being) drawn, and he engages actively with these topics throughout the book (Sterne, 2021: 33):

Institutions define impairment and disability all the time – who requires accommodation and who does not; who is judged ‘able to work’ and who is not; what even qualifies as work; who needs extra time on a test; whose impairments even matter and under what conditions; what difference must be accounted for in the design of a building, website, or broadcast system.

These considerations shed light on the socio-technical intertwining of subjects, media and institutions, suggesting the need for further investigation with input from disciplines such as organisation studies. After all, “a phenomenology of impairment is also a phenomenology of policy” (Sterne, 2021: 32).

The book ends with a user’s guide to impairment theory, which sketches some methodological, epistemological and ethical principles so as to conduct and inspire further research.

In conclusion, Sterne’s (2021) work contains three principal points of interest:

- it exemplifies the importance of sound studies as a discipline that can enlighten cultural and social aspects *through* the lens of sound but well *beyond* the mere dimension of sound;

- it is a step forward in a new approach to media studies, paying close attention to what Parikka (2012) would define as the materiality of cultural practices. Such an approach recognises the importance of mediation (as a condition of possibility of experience) as a concept co-constituted by both discourses, bodily experiences and materialities such as the design of artefacts, the technical operations of media, institutions, standards and procedures. These various levels result in material practices of embodiment and are 'inscribed' in organisations (Joerges and Czarniawska, 1998);
- as a result of the first two points, this book represents a step towards a phenomenology informed by sociology, media studies, disability studies and organisation studies; in other words, a phenomenology conscious of the socio-technical challenges which impede any assumption of a pure, abstract, able subjectivity which can be positioned at the centre of the frame. Impairment phenomenology is a political phenomenology, since it aims to "critically reveal the naturalization and contingency of subjectivity" (Sterne, 2021: 10). As the author outlines, "[a] critique of naturalization is especially important for the phenomenologies of impairment, illness, and disability, which are defined by their contingency and situatedness but often treated as naturalized" (Sterne, 2021: 10). Sound technologies, media technologies, organisations and institutions are political, insofar as they affect the way experience becomes possible: how people come to act and intend mostly happens in conditions they did not themselves create.

In its consideration of both representations and material practices, both experiences and organisations, this book is a journey into the complexity of processes of self-definition and naturalisation. By highlighting how technologies can be at the same time enabling and disabling, Sterne (2021) instructs us about the constructedness of ability and disability. An intimate and rigorous journey, indispensable for anybody who wants to engage with the issue of disability in media and reflect on its importance for organisations, accessibility and inclusion.

## References

- Derrida, J. (2010 [1967]), *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. by L. Lawlor, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Joerges, B., and Czarniawska, B. (1998), "The Question of Technology, or How Organizations Inscribe the World", *Organization Studies*, 19 (3): 363–385.
- Mills, M. (2011), "Deafening: Noise and the Engineering of Communication in the Telephone System", *Grey Room*, 43: 118–143.
- Moser, I., and Law, J. (2003), "'Making Voices': New Media Technologies, Disabilities, and Articulation", in G. Liestøl, A. Morrison, and T. Rasmussen (eds), *Digital Media Revisited*, pp. 491–520, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Parikka, J. (2012), "New Materialism as Media Theory: Medianatures and Dirty Matter", *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 9 (1): 95–100.
- Siebers, T. (2008), *Disability Theory*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Sterne, J. (2003a), *The Audible Past: Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- Sterne, J. (2003b), "Bourdieu, Technique, and Technology", *Cultural Studies*, 17 (3-4): 367–389.

Sterne, J. (2012), *Mp3: The Meaning of a Format*, Durham/London: Duke University Press.

Sterne, J. (2021), *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.