

Berit Fischer

On the Notion and Politics of Listening

in: [hlysnan] *The Notion and Politics of Listening*, Berit Fischer (ed.). Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg – Forum d’art contemporain, 2014, pp. 9–18

Every contact leaves a trace.

– Edmond Locard¹

When reflecting on the notion and politics of listening, it is crucial to consider spatial and sociopolitical relations, in particular, the relation of the *self* to the shared space and the surroundings. In Helmuth Plessner’s bio-philosophical understanding, “a living being [...] is placed in the border between its body and a corresponding environment. Only first when a living organism takes up a relation to its border, does it become open (in its own characteristic way) to what lies outside and to what lies inside. Only then does it allow its environment to appear in it and it to appear in its environment.”²

Foucault describes the relation of the self to itself in terms of its moral agency as ethics and practice, a self-forming activity that allows the self to subject itself to a set of moral recommendations. Part of this practice, the care of the self, involves, for example, the ancient form of speech called *parrhesia*, in which one expresses one’s subjectivity – the duty of speaking the truth as an act of freedom, even if it means criticising oneself or another, even if it means putting oneself in danger.³

When the border of the self is transgressed or extended into the outside environment through sense-based information – including aural information – a relationship and resonance between the self and its surroundings can be established. As Hans-Peter Krüger notes: “Singularity does not make any sense without its semiotic contrast of plurality. And, instead of merely thinking about plurality with the best of intentions, the consequences of living plurality prevent us from using force against one another. Thus, in order to coordinate contingencies, we need as a common minimum a procedure for publicly finding out the best currently available way towards a common future.”⁴

Despite the dominant visual and linguistic understanding of today’s culture, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that “the sonorous [...] outweighs form”: “It does not dissolve it, but rather enlarges it; it gives it an amplitude, a density, and a vibration or an

¹ This statement, known as Locard’s exchange principle, is one of the basic tenets of forensic science; it was formulated by Edmond Locard (1877–1966), one of the founders of the field.

² The Helmut Plessner Society, “The Thought of Helmut Plessner”, <http://www.helmuth-plessner.de/seiten/seite.php?layout=bildhome&inhalt=engl>. Accessed on 24 March 2014.

³ See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001, pp. 11–20; see also Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 66–67.

⁴ Hans-Peter Krüger, “The Public Nature of Human Beings. Parallels between Classical Pragmatism and Helmut Plessner’s Philosophical Anthropology,” *Iris: European Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate* (Florence), vol. 1 (2009), p. 202.

undulation whose outline never does anything but approach. The visual persists until its disappearance; the sonorous appears and fades away into its permanence.”⁵

Focusing on the sonorous obliges us to reconsider the aesthetic object in relation to the multisensory realm and to question representations of what sonic stimulation might communicate as information. It also creates a relation and a correspondence to the self, to the other, and to the outside world. Seth Kim-Cohen makes the point: “Lyotard’s equation of the sublime with postmodern aesthetics signals a different approach to the question of representation. The sublime object is no longer conceived strictly as the product of nature, as in mountains, oceans, and earthquakes, nor strictly as a product of the boundlessness of time and space. The sublime object, as it is now understood, is just as likely to be the product of human intervention.”⁶

I would assume that social space is more sonic than visual. Communication is more precise acoustically than just visually.

– Haroon Mirza⁷

In the Old English word *hlysnan*, “to listen”, the focus is on the notions of *attention* and *intent*; it refers to an active act not merely of hearing, but of hearing with intent. In Modern English, too, while the verb *to hear* usually refers to automatic or passive sound perception, the verb *to listen* connotes intentional or purposeful use of the sense of hearing. It implies intensified concentration and awareness of what one is listening to. The French word *entendre* carries both meanings: to hear but also to understand what is heard.

Kim-Cohen stresses the “inter-textual nature” of sound, an “aboutness” that “allows for sound’s interactions with linguistic, ontological, epistemological, social, and political signification.”⁸ He also points out that listening is not about the “sound-in-itself” or “the solipsism of the internal voice”, but means multiplying the singularity of perception into the plurality of experience, which extends into “a conversation with the cross talk of the world.”⁹ Most crucially, he introduces the notion of a “non-cochlear sonic art” that moves away from the materiality of sound, away from the solidity of the *objet sonore*, of sound-in-itself – “a movement tended to be inward, a conservative retrenchment focused on materials and concerns considered essential to music and/or sound”¹⁰ – and towards a discursive conceptual sonic practice. Active listening can be an aesthetic/semiotic process that in fact goes beyond the realm of music, which is often understood as the language of the emotions.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, Bronx (New York.: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 2; originally published in French in 2002.

⁶ Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 219.

⁷ Artist statement, in: Barbara London, *Soundings, A Contemporary Score* (New York: Modern Museum of Art, 2013), p.48.

⁸ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, p. xvii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xxii–xxiii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

As Rosalind Krauss emphasises: “It is obvious that the logic of the space of postmodernist practice is no longer organised around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material, or, for that matter, the perception of material. It is organised instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation.”¹¹

Conceptual sonic art can itself be a spatial, cultural, social, political, and ideological practice in which the acoustic space conveys the social relations within a socially and politically produced space. From the auditory perspective, the space might be perceived primarily as a mere physical space with multiple layers of operational sounds from our everyday life, which we most often attempt to tune out. We seek to disconnect ourselves from the world outside and collective experience – this is a global phenomenon. With our personal devices demanding more and more of our attention, we are steadily growing deaf to our immediate environment and losing that sense of being part of a whole.

The sonic art group Ultra-Red stresses that active listening helps us to define our own position in the public space: “How we hear what we hear [in] the spaces we come to occupy, constitutes us within this public space.”¹² While it is true that the public space is a design for control, which includes “a listener’s relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what”,¹³ it is not only a physical space, something engineered, but also a social space, formed by people and their social relations, and this is what produces its meaning. In contrast to shielding ourselves from the ubiquity of surrounding sounds, listening involves assigning meaning to our own social relations and amplifying and transforming the way space is produced and accounted for.

Everything is in conversation; everything is interconnected. As Eyal Weizman stresses: “The surface of the earth – now increasingly called upon to perform as evidence/witness in political negotiations, international tribunals and fact-finding missions – is not an isolated, distinct, stand-alone object, and nor did it ever ‘replace’ the subject; rather, it is a thick fabric of complex relations, associations and chains of actions between people, environments, and artifices. It always overflows any map that tries to frame it, because there are always more connections to be made.”¹⁴

Recording techniques have become tools for documentation – not only in the realm of political and legal negotiations – but also in the writing and (re)creation of history, culture and reality. Who decides what is recorded, how it is recorded, and what should be remembered? Audio recordings can be tools for reconciliation, for resistance to power; they can be used as testimony and evidence in legal and forensic arguments. But like most things, they can also be abused: consider sonic anti-loitering devices and sonic warfare, or the military strategy of targeted assassinations using drones. Generally, the use of drones is an attempt to reduce

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); repr., 2002, p. 289.

¹² Ultra-Red, “Constitutive Utopias: sound, public space and urban ambience” (2000), <http://www.temporaryservices.org/ultratext.html>. Accessed on 17 March 2014.

¹³ Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), p. 12

¹⁴ Eyal Weizman, “Surface of the Earth”, in: “Lexicon”, *Forensic Architecture*, from <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/lexicon/surface-of-the-earth-eyal-weizman>. Accessed on 14 March 2014.

civilian casualties, but their omnipresent sonic by-product, a high-frequency emission that hovers in the air like an indiscriminate lethal weapon, in fact causes severe long-term psychological distress with a variety of consequences for the social dynamics of whole communities. There can be no question that the deployment of such weapons, including, among other things, sonic booms used for the purpose of intimidation, violates human rights laws against harming civilians and exacting collective punishments.

In sound recording practices, what is recorded is not only the sonic scope produced in the space (and which defines the space), but also the sound of the space itself. Sound is produced by space, but it also *is* space. Recording sounds may serve multiple purposes, but at the same time it brings up questions about ownership (e.g. commercial sound trademarks), the distribution of media in relation to the social space, consumerism, and spectacle. Field recordings (usually an unmodified recording of the soundscape of a specific environment; but often also understood as *sonic journalism*) play a crucial role in the practice of documentation and in the discourse around its various methods. In many cases, there may be a critical dichotomy between the aesthetic aspects and the factual circumstances of the recordings, involving such issues as social injustice, military and geopolitical affairs, and the interdependent relations between culture, the human species, nature, and the environment, as well as related questions of adaptation and reappropriation. As we have learned, when we lose an indigenous culture or species, we also lose a sound.

The surface of the earth is surrounded by an atmosphere consisting of vibrations of light and electromagnetic radiation – a geographical soundscape and the medium for the sound waves of wireless communications and radio emissions. Although stemming from a concrete physical reality, radio waves extend into other realms of the consciousness and sense experience, connecting and coinciding with faraway places. Radio can be a useful tool for information – and can also be abused (e.g. for propaganda) – and it can provide entertainment for popular culture and serve any variety of subcultures, even dissident cultures (e.g. BBC and Voice of America broadcasts in the Soviet Union during the Cold War). Radio communications, and sound works in general, certainly have the capacity to create a sonic fiction – not only in the sense of a literary fiction, but as an alternative reality “which makes audible the possibilities of the actual world”, as Salomé Voegelin puts it. “It is sound itself, as pathetic trigger, that entices us to inhabit this world in listening, and grants us access to what the world might be and how we might live in it as in an affective geography.”¹⁵

Auditory landscapes can also be interpolations between space and time, space and reality, the psycho-social and the geographic, and temporality and memory. The act of listening involves a transitional state between attention and imagination, between sensual experience and understanding or seeking a possible meaning.

¹⁵ Salomé Voegelin, abstract for her talk “The Pathetic Trigger of Sound Draws Us Into a Sonic Fiction”, at the conference “Resonant Bodies: Landscapes of Acoustic Tension”, 13–15 June 2013, Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin.

[M]eaning and sound share the space of a referral, in which at the same time they refer to each other, and [...], in a very general way, this space can be defined as the space of a self, a subject. A self is nothing other than a form or function of referral: a self is made of a relationship to self, or of presence to self [...].

To be listening will always, then, be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self [...].

When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something [...] that identifies itself by resonating from self to self [...].

– Jean-Luc Nancy¹⁶

Listening is situated between expectation and prediction; it is based in the present moment, but this is a moment that looks towards something yet to occur. It is a desire for and an anticipation of understanding.

The lack of space between sign and signifier in the visual logic frames a location of desire.

– Salomé Voegelin¹⁷

Listening is an interchronic moment, a void caused by the time of information moving between resistor, capacitor, and our biological auditory system as receiver. To listen is to enter a spatiality in which time becomes space, located between past, present, and future and encompassing notions of the *remainder* – the trace that, in Derrida's description, "offers itself for thought before or beyond being":

It is inaccessible to a straightforward intuitive perception (since it refers to something wholly other, it inscribes in itself something of the infinitely other), and it escapes all forms of prehension, all forms of monumentalisation, and all forms of archivation. [...] What we are saying at the moment is not reducible to the notes you are taking, the recording we are making, or the words I am uttering – to what will remain of it in the world. [...] These remainder effects will thereby have presence effects – differently in one place or another, and in an extremely uneven way according to the contexts and the subjects that will get attached to it.¹⁸

As early as the fifth century BCE, the Pythagoreans explored ways to amplify the ungraspable effects of presence and developed the notion of *acousmatics* – a

¹⁶ Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁷ Salomé Voegelin, "Aural Intimacy" (2011), published on her website, http://salomevoegelin.net/public_html/salomevoegelin.net/intimacy.html. Accessed on 20 March 2014.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Remainder", in: "Lexicon", *Forensic Architecture*, <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/lexicon/remainder-jacques-derrida>. Accessed on retrieved 11 March 2014.

method of knowledge production that involves hearing something without seeing the originating cause.

When a sound wave is transmitted through space, either acoustically or electronically, there is a reaction in both the biological and auditory systems of the body. The body becomes resonant and vibrates in resonance with other bodies and surfaces. A clear example is the *human microphone*, which functions by listening to another person's voice and then embodying that voice in one's own, like a collective vocal transfer. In this method – also called *the people's microphone* and used, for example, in the Occupy movement and in circumstances where electronic amplification is impossible – voice means not only sound produced and uttered through the mouth; it becomes, literally, the *vox populi* (Latin: “the voice of the people”) and serves as an agency by which a particular point of view is expressed or represented.

Involved in a constant reciprocity with its sonic environment, the human body perpetuates the fundamental principle of acoustic resonance: holding a multitude of similar frequencies neither as precisely same nor as perfectly different. Acoustic resonance draws a particular proximity between one's physical location and phenomenal extension to another.

Imagine this resonance as a landscape of acoustic tension, a horizontal spectrum of multiple modalities of sounds, which do coincide with one another but which do not necessarily become one. The very act of hearing holds the acoustic tension. When we hear a sound, we are simultaneously moved to and positioned in a place.¹⁹

Sound is not linear; it is immersive, omnidimensionally complex, penetrating, and omnipresent, and it offers constantly changing possibilities and perspectives. The notion of listening is connected with tension, intention and attention. As Nancy explains, it “forms the perceptible singularity that bears in the most ostensive way the perceptible or sensitive (*aesthetic*) condition as such: the sharing of an inside/outside, division and participation, de-connection and contagion.”²⁰

Situated within the tension of the acoustic scope are the material and performative aspects of the human voice, of language and speech. Vocal gestures can only be interpreted within a social fabric, where they can have far-ranging and life-changing effects: for example, in contractual issues (in the German tradition, a contract only becomes legally valid when a solicitor reads it out loud), in judicial decisions and witness testimony, and in geopolitics and the technologies and sciences that are developing around it. In this connection, we might consider speech-

¹⁹ Zeynep Bulut, Claudia Peppel, and Brandon LaBelle, programme brochure for the conference *Resonant Bodies: Landscapes of Acoustic Tension*, 13–15 June 2013, Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin.

²⁰ Nancy, *Listening*, p. 14.

analysis technologies that measure and analyse bodily responses to stress rather than the subject's speech itself; such devices are used worldwide in immigration and deportation proceedings to determine the veracity of asylum seekers' statements about their origins. Their use raises fundamental questions about how we speak, how we listen, how truth is produced, and how such *technologies of truth* turn subjects into objects. In this context, the notion of silence comes into play – not only in a Cagean or a Situationist sense, where silence amplifies the situation and the omnipresence and spatiality of sound, but also as a form of agency, as refusal and resistance. Gilles Deleuze makes this point when discussing the archaeology of the present: "It is as if, speech having withdrawn from image to become founding act, the image, for its part, raised the foundations of space, the 'strata', those silent powers of before or after speech, before or after man."²¹

Hlysnan, listening with intent, helps us to reconsider deeply held notions about the auditory ontologies and epistemologies through which we understand the world. The act of listening is not about representation or the phenomenological; it is about resonance. What is it that resonates when we listen? And ultimately, how does the self resonate and with whom?

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, "Archaeology of the Present", in: "Lexicon", *Forensic Architecture*, <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/lexicon/archaeology-of-the-present-gilles-deleuze>. Accessed on 16 March 2014.