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Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



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Understanding the Listener

Shantam Goyal
Teaching Fellow
Ashoka University,
Sonapat, Haryana, India

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Abstract: With the invention of the telegraph, the telephone, and the phonograph near the end of the 19th century, voice was wrenched away from the body and new practices of listening emerged. The disembodiment led to argument for the equal stake of music, noise, babble, the hubbub of cafes, the clarity of signifying speech, and the performance of poetic language in the soundscape of modernism. Here, we take a closer look at the modern listener. Making our way through the ontology of sound, we go towards a brief history of the development of sound technology and the “noisy” city of wild industrial progress. We then arrive at the listening body subject to the clamor of urban rhythm, and we arrive at the resonating chamber of the listening body suspended between meaning and meaninglessness in the babble of the city.

Keywords: Aurality, Resonance, Ensoniment, Rhythm, Noise.

The body stands and walks through the space of messages, orients itself within noise and meaning, amidst rhythms and rumblings. As it hears through the soles of its feet, through the sites where muscles, tendons and bones are attached and articulated, and finally in the space where the inner ear connects with the canals which control our balance.... Our most intimate gestures move to sounds, we dance. Or rather, this is where dancing begins.

(Serres 142)

Listening in philosophy and in literature is most often employed as a metaphor, equated with reading or understanding. The metaphor places the literal act of listening under the shadow of



the interlocutor's position in a dialogue, and the listener is captured behind the bars of voice and the signifying capabilities of language. Even theories of reception focus on the reader-listener of speech and the written word, or at most on the musical listener capable of decoding patterns. The reception of sound is kept within the realm of the sensible and response to sound is kept within the realm of interpretation. Yet, sound has maintained a steady relationship with cultural production through poetry, as well as through the avant-garde responding to the changing technological and sonic environment in the past century. Since the 1990s, with a body of critical work which has especially grown wildly since 2000, Sound Studies has emerged to rescue a critical engagement with aurality, understanding noise, music, recording and communication technology, and the location of sound at an intersection of science, history, ontology, and literary theory.

As such, consider a city where voices, alarms, announcements, and noises come together to form a soundscape within which our listener is stood, being assailed with waves of indistinguishable sound from all ends. She listens and responds, as the sounds around her change and become new, going from typewriters to airplanes to cellphones and muzak. She changes with the sounds and her ways of being within the soundscape transform too. By examining an ontological account of sound, a history of technological change, and listening practices, we can find out who our listener is, where she stands, and how she listens.

What is listening supposed to reveal? Hearing the sound of thunder makes for an instinct to look up at the sky to confirm visually the presence of rainclouds. Is hearing meant to reveal the source which becomes perceivable because of the sound it creates? Or is it meant to tell us something essential about the sound which is heard regardless of its source? If it is the latter, then is the sound which is heard as *present* to us as an object which is seen? Can the sound of thunder by itself – even if heard as a recording or on the television – do something other than alert us to the presence of clouds which might or might not be there?

Sound-by-itself is what the ontological account in sound studies concerns itself with. In considering what sound is, the answers come through considering what it is not. Sounds persist once they have been produced by an object or caused by an event, which means that they have to be



separated from their point of origin (Scruton 271; Nudds & O'Callaghan 3). Further, much like light carries the visual perception of an object to our eyes, sound waves create patterns within which sound rests and is carried to us, not as an object but as a wave in flux acting upon its medium (O'Callaghan 255). Finally, sound cannot be clearly conceived as what is heard either. If our listener hears a ten-second beep on the phone, she has not managed to clearly demarcate and isolate a ten-second sound event purely through listening. The ten seconds are the time spent between the moment the beginning of the wave makes contact with my ears and the end of that contact as the wave passes. These waves continue onwards and are constantly changing, and the totality of sound is not captured in listening (O'Callaghan 260).

Sound is not the object which produces it, not the wave in a medium, and not the ear which senses it. What is sound? This question might not be all that important. The importance of philosophy in sound theory, Roger Scruton says, is because it facilitates a "shared understanding of the world" (278). Such an understanding of the world does not have to be founded on isolating sound as an event, object, or property. More than anything else, sounds are "public objects" (275) which our listener can tune in and out of based on how she chooses to direct her intentionality towards specific audibilia in the hubbub of the sound-scene around her, and everything in this ruckus is subject to flux. As O'Callaghan observes, sounds "unfold" over time (263). The unrest of sound compounded by the unrest of our own auditory mechanisms which move as we move changes the experience of sound, and it is in this instability that the essence of sound is located.

Let us take the listener's indelible presence further. Brian O'Shaughnessy, discussing the location of perceived sounds, says, "The ultimate purpose of perception is to lead the mind beyond itself" (125). Interpreting from sensory audible data performs this work by conjuring up our surroundings and other causal activities taking place around us like a mechanical city emerging from the ground itself. If we look at sounds as existing in what O'Shaughnessy calls "spatio-temporal containers" (111), where is the spatio-temporal container of heard sound? Nudds offers an answer by saying that sounds affect the listener in a specific manner because it depends on how they are at the moment of aurality, and therefore sounds are created at the site of the listener. They



are located egocentrically. (83) All ideas of directionality, origin, distance, loudness, and even clarity of sound come from its positions relative to our listener. The most important sounds are those which are heard, and so we can begin thinking about sound through listening.

A Brief History of the Audible

To understand listening practices as they are woven into the bodily net, we can begin by locating the listener. To be clear, we are not looking at a static listener who can be visualized standing still as the world around her changes with waves of sounds brushing around her body – from tram-trains and motor vehicles, megaphone announcements and recorded concert music, ringing telephones and burbling factory workers heading home after the last bell. We are not looking at a listener who mulls over the loss of silence in spaces, not necessarily urban, with a sense of defeated quaintness and solitude. Instead, the listener changes with the changing soundscape. Jonathan Sterne in “Hello!” the opening chapter to his book *The Audible Past* calls this “Ensoniment,” (2) a concept parallel with the Enlightenment considering the changes in the default of sensory perception and interpretation which accompanied the new soundscape. The story of this Ensoninment stretches roughly from the late eighteenth century of industrial change to the early years of the twentieth, with a new set of technological permutations constantly changing the ways in which our listener listens to music, noise, and even speech till today. We must therefore keep in mind that examining a history of technological change to understand sound can in no way lay claim to understanding the actual experience of listening at the time.

Consider *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis*, a 1927 silent film by German director Walter Ruttmann. It is almost entirely a montage of archival historical footage of a city in the throes of industrial modernity, more fascinating because it is silent but for the orchestral musical composition running all the way through in the background of the montage. The actual sound of the city is inscribed into the visuals which are all aghast with activity as the camera struggles to find a rhythm in the mess of movement. Moving from the outskirts into the center, the camera is quickly hypnotized by the unstoppable motion of Berlin waking up to its clatter. People milling around the streets, fighting or just getting started on machinery, answering phones and switching on the day are



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all sounds dissolved into the operatic film score. It is as if there is no more meaning to be made if our listener were to actually be able to listen to the sounds surrounding the camera. The film, along with the actuality of modern urban experience, forms part of several representations of the city as chaotic, the chaos focalized by the fact that it occurs in a space meant to be run with order and purpose. The thrill of anticipation is a recurring motif, like the train moving into the milieu with the promise of a new, productive day. What also recurs is a motif of loss and the city's opposition to silence and meaning. The moments of technological change which are usually recognized as the beginning of this loss can only be understood by associating them with their industrial dimension as seen in Ruttman's film and in countless others.

Three of these technological breakthroughs, that of the phonograph, the telegraph, and the telephone, were all in the 19th century. They conflated an advance in communication with a leap in bringing new kinds of sounds in new ways to the public sphere. Jonathan Sterne is particularly invested in the history of the Morse telegraph, largely because it signifies a clear move from the visual to the acoustic. Samuel Morse thought of his telegraph as a visual medium because the transmission of a message over large distances depended on the indentations made on paper by the machine. The amount of time for which the transmitter key was pressed would determine the length of the mark it would make on the paper on the other end of the line. The accompanying sounds were thought of as no more than noise, as incidental to the actual working of the telegraph as the sound a car engine makes to get the vehicle moving. The sound was merely residual. Within a few years, however, telegraph operators developed an ear for the sound of transmission and could transcribe messages by listening alone. Sterne tells the story of one James Francis Leonard from Kentucky who by 1855 could transcribe at a speed of 50 words per minute. Surprisingly, Morse himself was initially averse to the idea of sound telegraphy on account of patent rights, but a more pressing concern against the general move towards listening rather than reading seems to be a loss of authenticity (144-150). To do away with the papers with indented signs meant a loss of seemingly permanent records of a transmission, and an increased dependence on playing it by the ear, so to speak. However, listening was faster, and the increased frequency of transmissions made



sure that within a decade, sound telegraphy was dominant – yet another sign of industrial modernity precipitating a move towards the new sound of communication.

The telephone too evoked similar responses. Steven Connor, working on the sensory changes brought about by technology, thinks of it as an enhancement of the senses wherein the listener's body could resonate the sound, being "pervaded by the vocal body of another" (206) while staying within a private acoustic space. Headphones and earphones too are meant to be understood like this, as a portable private acoustic space in the public realm. The loss of intimacy felt by the two speakers and listeners is perceptibly compounded by the fact that the voice was to be heard without visual confirmation of the sound-producing body. Even telephony is then understood as a reproduction of sound through electronic means, suffering from a loss of fidelity, authenticity, and originality. The phonograph, capable of recording and reproducing sound, only aggravates the sense of something genuine running away with time.

Mark Katz's history of the phonograph begins with a vignette about a small child in 1905 running towards a phonograph as his family listens and sees, peering into the horn to find the tiny musicians who were playing inside of the incorrigible machine marvel (8). If anything, it is a reminder that a critical history cannot distract you from the wonder that technology could be. In fact, a large portion of both Sterne's and Katz's work deals in quaint vignettes, early advertisements, and anecdotes from public exhibitions of sound technology. The thematic of their histories is rooted in the undeniable fact of a sea change and its public reception, but the tone is that of loss rather than one of anticipation. With the phonograph specifically, the loss of an audience, of *liveness* in music is a central concern, as musicians learned to not revel in the thunderous applause of concert audiences, but rather to encounter the deathly silence of a "huge anonymous mass" sitting alone in a small, enclosed studio space (Sterne 239). Even spontaneity was lost in the milieu of a manufactured spontaneity. Recordings were not necessarily natural in their imperfection, but were manipulated into feeling natural for the listener with the loss of improvisation. Katz observes a similar phenomenon in Hindustani music where the artists could no longer respond to their audience, and the shape of their performances no longer included an element of the interaction



between audience and artist (23). The scope of variability in different performances of the same piece was curtailed as the one performance came to be codified in the form of a reproducible record which was repeatable. With repeatability came a loss of non-repeatability for the artist, whose two performances could never have sounded the same yet whose recordings would transmit the exact same permutation of rhythmic improvisation into the listeners' ears for years to come.

Was something really lost with the onslaught of infinite reproducibility, repeatability, and artificiality? Sterne offers a way out of this gauntlet of loss by historicising the senses themselves, commenting that senses are historically shaped and brought into being before the subject's capability to contemplate upon them is even a possibility. This is what he terms "Ensoniment" wherein new ways to listen were learned and the functionality of the ear moulded itself to the changing technical soundscape. He dismisses the fact of loss and disembodiment by dismissing the a priori assumption that the body and its senses were at any point in history "whole, undamaged, and phenomenologically coherent." If we did not historicise the body, the overriding analysis would be that "all modern life is disorienting" (21) because suddenly the senses cannot see the source of perceived sound. The caveat to understanding the history of sound technology is rejecting the condition that an *authentic* way of perceiving sound ever existed, that it was only in face-to-face communication and live music that intimacy was present.

The unfamiliar new soundscape was not limited to the telegraph, the telephone, and the phonograph. The industrial dimensions of these technologies along with others like the radio gave a shape to the sonic environment of the city as well as to the political environment of the new world. The noises of the Great War were channelled from its modern industrial practice into forms of art which were trying to keep up with an ear gradually getting used to the dissonance of the world. Douglas Kahn in his essay, "Noises of the Avant-Garde," writes of the Italian futurists Luigi Russolo and F.T. Marinetti as those who seized the great orchestral dissonance of combat noises, conceiving of them as parole freed from structures which would press utterance into meaning. Thus was the destruction of syntactical chains learned by Marinetti on listening to the whirling propellers of aircraft being used in warfare for the very first time. For Russolo, the ear in the midst of combat



occupied a position far above the one it occupied in daily life, setting up a “model for modern listening” (439-440).

Even as the Futurists were hunting out the freed language of war by actively pursuing combat, there was a war raging in the modern city, albeit a war against noise. Karin Bijsterveld in her book *Mechanical Sound* enumerates a history of noise legislation starting off from the early 1900s when Western Europe and North America began seeing a surge in the number of anti-noise leagues being formed to combat the surging sounds of technology (2). Even though anti-noise advocacy persists till today, a kind of Ensoniment is apparent in how our listener’s perception of silence has changed. Bijsterveld offers a fear of silence as one of the explanations for why noise persists in our public environs. Silence almost refers to an “absence of life” (13), as is apparent from the example of the BBC which had to buy a noise machine after the employees reported feelings of paranoia and loneliness in their completely noiseless office (11). The presence of life, as it is understood in the industrial city, necessitated our listener’s change of perception to reflect the acoustics of the changing world around her.

The Listening Body

Like the Enlightened mind, the Ensonified listener lets sound act on her body not only individually, but also as it becomes part of a larger listening society. Both these acts of sound offer an interpretive opening to the listener, an ability to make meaning from that which is recognizable and familiar in the aural content of the world. We, however, are concerned with the ineffable in the soundscape. This ineffable is simultaneously more or less than noise as it is not entirely meaningless and residual in its semantic content, but is at the same time simultaneous in its combination of several expressive sounds. Douglas Kahn explains simultaneity with reference to sound art, where different sounds and voices come together in a kind of cacophony which rejects the need to be able to make sense of the separate parts; simply knowing that the separate parts are there means their distinctive semantic capabilities can be ignored and a form of distracted listening can be cultivated – a proposition quite close to the listening experience in the city (434). The listener therefore is not a subject of meaning in this formulation, but is subject to an individual



bodily response to sound as well as subject to being part of the social makeup which is creating the soundscape. Such an analysis would not differentiate between music, language, and noise, seeing them as important not in their distinctness but in their coming together to form a sonic environment.

We can begin by following the listener going from the social to the individual, and by finding space for the listener inside rhythm. Henri Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* defines rhythm as repetition, albeit repetition inscribed into inevitable difference. The everydayness of rituals, movement, ceremonies, directives, and rules compose these rhythms which are never in a state of absolute repetition (6). "Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm," he says (15). The closest it seems one can come to defining rhythm is as a process constantly being reconfigured by the demands of modernity. Rhythms can therefore be studied over time and within space, but they come down to the moment, the instant within the process, like each step on a crowded sidewalk whose direction, length, and force is simultaneously determined by one's own desire to walk in a particular manner and by the steps crowding around and giving spontaneous direction to the crowd. Even Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Listening*, calls rhythm the "time of time, the vibration of time itself in the stroke of a present that presents it by separating it from itself" (17). It has its place in the instant rather than over a length of time.

By Lefebvre's logic, the ability to grasp the meaning of a rhythm and its composite parts is the exclusive domain of the rhythm analyst. Like the gifted craft of Shelley's poet, the rhythm analyst is meant to be more sensitive to finding order in chaos, or sensing repetition in patterns. She should be able to allow the body to be immersed into disorder, and then step outside of it to break it down into parts which come together in some or the other rhythmic sense. "A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function," says Lefebvre (27).

But our listener does not stand on a balcony looking upon the soundscape; she is part of the distracted mass upon whom the rhythm acts without her being able to, or even wanting to, grasp the law of the process. She and the mass of listeners around her *understand* the soundscape, but they are not beholden to analyse the soundscape (Lefebvre 42). The analogy which Lefebvre offers



aligns a body within the rhythm of urban noise with the unconscious, terming it akin to a cell which has no need to know the body to be able to be a part of it (55).

The listener then is situated between freedom and conformity, between autonomy and the law. This is to say that every human body which becomes part of a larger rhythmic movement senses itself as an ineluctable and all-important part of the spontaneous order into which an entropic mass of people have organized themselves. It feels as if the body is not merely becoming part of a rhythm and is not merely conforming to a law which has been formed prior to its entrance into a rhythm. Rather, the sensation is that the individual body is the one which gives being to the rhythm and forms its meaningfulness and comprehensibility by lending to it the movement of the individual body. For instance, a room full of soft murmurs won't suddenly erupt with the booming voice of one conversation. This is because the individual noisemaker would conform to the general law of loudness that the room has spontaneously agreed upon. However, the individual noisemaker has also formed the law of the low murmuring by not raising a voice louder than any other. Even Lefebvre says towards the end that "objective rhythms translate themselves into our own rhythms" (69).

Our listener, living inside the noise of capital and off the noise of capital in moulded yet spontaneous rhythmic environments, cannot analyse because of the lack of spatial and temporal distance which life does not afford to each of its constituents. This proposition however is in no way meant to discount the individual listener's response to the soundscape. Even if we do not respond with our minds as analysts, we respond with our bodies, tapping to the beating and stable measure of the sound of a hammer, keeping time with our feet, our membranes vibrating and stomachs resonating. Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the listener may be no more than a "place of resonance" in a sound environment (22). The bodily response to aurality thus has an element of insideness and outsideness. Sounds resonate within us and expand our perceptive field, making us simultaneously of sound and of the world. That is resonance, where we are of sound but we make sound our own. Sound, once perceived, is imprinted into our sensory mechanisms and represented to our minds. It refers to itself, which is to say that the vibrations which makes sound perceivable in



the form of a penetration into our bodies do not make us aware of anything other than the sound we just heard. The desire to resound the soundscape composed of voice, noise, and other composite parts overtakes the desire to make sense of sound as language or as a familiar semantic category. Therefore, our listener does really *listen* to the soundscape of modernity so as to make meaning, in the way Nancy writes of “musical listening” (63). Instead, she allows herself to be touched and allows herself to respond as a resonating chamber.

This, however, does not kill the listener’s desire for meaning. This is Michel Serres’ contention in *The Five Senses*. For him, all speech is noise and the desire for knowledge is addiction, and it is only in relinquishing the speech-knowledge complex that the listener can begin “healing” (87). This healing is not for the ear but for the body which listens as a whole, through what he terms coenaesthesia (85). The listener who is touched as a resonating chamber is touched through the “proprioceptive ear” (110), which both pulls and produces sound, and the body transmits and receives as a whole. Serres further distinguishes between two kinds of audible: the hard and the soft. The hard audible is the astonishing sound of the body, the world, and its people, which goes beyond the intelligible with “things that have no name in any language” (111). We can conceive of the hard audible as a clamor which acts upon the body in the social milieu. The hard is softened through knowledge and through the desire to make sense, and therefore Serres expresses a disdain for the realm of language where the impulse is to capture everything within reason. Much like Nancy, he too thinks of the listener as someone who need not curtail herself to the meaning of the audible. However, his listener is different in that she is not Nancy’s resonating body, not a passive chamber of response, but rather someone who can open up the body to the world.

The listener of urban modernity is then one who is asleep by Serres’ logic, a sleepwalker of the sidewalk who does not reach out for meaning and analysis of the soundscape, but who also does not really listen but simply tunes out the machine rhythm she is a subject of. The ideal form of listening for him is between such somnambulance and rhythmanalysis. “I seek the well of noise,” he says (119), and the listener is one who can enter without drowning or swimming. Thus, Ensoniment can also entail an obliviousness to sound, while analysis can decimate a soundscape by



bringing it into the domain of intelligible language. Our listener, walking underneath buzzing electrical wires amidst the hubbub of a thousand voices at once, answering the ringing phone uncaring for the noise of traffic, will always eventually forget the soundscape, much like we suddenly find ourselves jolted into consciousness when the constant hum of the air-conditioned suddenly stops to give way to silence. Or, our listener can be too perceptive and willing to go to the source of every sound, recognizing the familiar noises and familiarizing the unfamiliar ones, making out each separate language or utterance which makes up a babble. The kind of listening which she can cultivate, however, is the healing impulse of realizing that the location of perceived sound is the listening and responding body, and realizing that the inscriptions that surround us in the city are tattooed on our skin.

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