

Listening: A Relational Body

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The question of sound seems to require another type of thinking, inspiring another way of understanding and relating to what is around us. What I'd like to do here is to speculate on what this other type of thinking might be; to fundamentally (re)imagine a relationship to what is around us, and to each other, according to experiences of sound and listening. This will lead to exploring what sound is, how it behaves, and what it might suggest to us in terms of what I'd like to refer to as "community life".

To start, I want to consider what happens to the body when we listen, and how sound locates us as bodies. The question might be: what type of body does sound create? And what might such a body suggest in terms of an ethical framework, or how we live together?

First, I want to start with a fundamental understanding of sound, what we can think of as a defining characteristic, that of *propagation*. A movement, an agitation, is always constituting sound. To deepen this idea, I start with a sound: this sound here: [knocking on the table].

What I want to emphasize is that sound is a friction between two bodies: two things coming into contact, a type of intersection. For instance, we do not only hear the table, but also my hand as it hits the table; the hand and the table are brought together in this sound – in fact, this sound is constituted by the material agitation of these two things as they meet, as they confront one another. I would not necessarily call this a conversation, rather a primary contact: literally, *bumping into each other; a force of relation*.

Might we think of this sound then as no longer the table or the hand, but both, together? An expression of singularities meeting, blending, commingling? In this regard, sounds are the result of an event between two or more – I might already say: it is an *assembly*.

We can follow this understanding of sound a bit further. The event of sound is also one that works to leave the original object behind – to *depart from origin*. I knock on the table and we turn our attention here. Even though this sound is already moving away from the object, it still refers us to the table; the sound we hear works by distributing the object: animating it, moving it from here to there, from this place to another, *passing it around*.

I would suggest, that through a focus on sound the table is no longer here, but over there. It is here, and then already somewhere else. Sound, in other words, is defined *as* sound because it gives animation or expression to this ambiguous event of things meeting: the folds of skin that vibrate with voice; the body contacting the material world around; the force of so many elements meeting, displacing and replacing particular assemblies, to circulate, to travel away, and quite possibly, to function as a

meta-materiality: sound, in short, becomes its own object: a kind of ghost, or transmutation: object becoming energy, and one that aligns here and there.

Where does this sound go then? Where does this sound end up, as it departs from one place to arrive at another? I would say, it goes into our listening; it brings this event, this table / this hand, from here and then, into my body; it enters, it vibrates, to travel into my perception, my understanding and imagination. In this way, the table and the hand *inhabit* my body.

Sound can have such a forceful presence – it breaks into us, it ruptures the surface; it is immediately a transgression of borders, a trespass: it doesn't stay put, rather, it springs upon us; I'm *pressed* by sound, washed over by its movements – there is nowhere to hide.

Intensities, ambiguities

Following these ideas, I would suggest that sound is the making of a “relational body”. First, this begins already with the act of two (or more) things meeting: a hand and a table, for example, coming into contact, forced together. What we hear then is a relational event: sound as the constitution of more than one. In this regard, sound is a type of composite – might I even say: *mutant*? – expressed as the intensity of a togetherness: interruptive, resonant, vibratory. Sound is the flexing of this togetherness, the *animation* of contact and assembly.

This assembly must include not only the propagation of the event, but its reverberation as well; these sounds that leave the table come to interact with its given acoustical surroundings: sound is a collection of so many frictions and contacts.

Mladen Dolar gives a suggestive account of listening in his article “The Phonetic Burrow”.¹ Following a reading of Kafka's “The Burrow”, Dolar highlights a deep ambiguity to sound: it is “enigmatic”, and aligned with the dark, with the absence of a concrete, knowable reference; and yet, we assume its origins – we hear something outside, and we understand it as being connected to a particular object or event: we locate it, we fix it to an origin, in order to contend with what we do not know. Yet sound is essentially freeing itself from reference; it is shuttling between acoustical matter and acousmatic impression – I move in and out of knowing for certain this sound that I hear.

Secondly, the event of sound relates to us as listeners; this sound brings me into its event – it *enfolds me* within its propagations and reverberations; I can't stand outside, it already immerses us, relating all that it gathers in its movements to a listener: I hear not only a single sound, but a sound as a composite of relationships to which I am integrated, *collected*. In this sense, the assembly of sound, its relationality, is also prone to a type of impersonality: a form of crowd; a *crowdedness*.

Finally, the relational body of sound is also never only *for me*; rather, it relates us to something beyond myself: the stranger next to me, the murmurings in my own body, the music that travel through the walls: This sound, in other words, creates a body that

¹ See Mladen Dolar, “The Phonetic Burrow”, in *Parole #2: Phonetic Skin* (Cologne: Salon Verlag, 2013): 31-36.

is not only this table, this hand, my body and your body, but all of this together, and therefore, is composed a body that is always more than myself: sound is a stranger that bypasses me; it moves into me and out of me.

In considering these ideas and formulations, we might ask: What consequences does this relational body have for us? What does this relational body of sound produce? What might happen within this space of crowdedness? In the moment of listening?

Multiplicity

I want to continue by turning to the work of Marshall McLuhan, and in particular his publication *Understanding Media* (1962). McLuhan develops an analysis of contemporary electronic media, and how it specifically brings us toward an acoustical or oral condition. For McLuhan, electronic media functions to distribute the body, and our senses, into networked relations; we are suddenly connected according to an immaterial production of flows, of information and data, but also of sensory experiences. Interestingly, McLuhan defines this shift according to sound, and what he calls an “acoustical paradigm” – that the electronic age organizes the world according to the transmission of messages, a flow of presence, a continual movement of information; characteristics that are suggestive of the acoustical, of sound as a form of propagation, of decentered subjectivity. In a way, McLuhan suggests that we rely more on oral / aural structures: a system that encourages individual expressions (spoken over written words), and which circulates those expressions (giving narrative) to a greater number of people.

McLuhan further describes networked society as an “extended nervous system”: electronic media, and the network structure, are not only about what we perceive or receive, but also about the affective ways in which media moves through our bodies. Tiziana Terranova elaborates a similar view through a notion of what she calls “affective vibration”, thereby extending McLuhan’s auditory analogy.²

I read McLuhan's work as pointing toward the relational body of sound I'm outlining here by recognizing in our contemporary media landscape an expression of acoustical relationality. Accordingly, the relational body of sound comes to function as a model for how to describe and understand network culture, and possibly how to navigate a society of global intensity – how listening is required to contend with the possibilities and problematics of global relations.

This is further developed in the work of Walter J. Ong. Throughout the 1960s, Ong developed a body of works in which sound and audition feature; in particular, Ong shifts McLuhan’s ideas toward that of the metaphysical, describing the intensities of global relations through the image of “the sound world”, which is “the I-thou world where, through the mysterious interior resonance which sound best of all provides, persons commune with persons, reaching one another’s interiors...”³

Ong emphasizes this question of interiority, to extend our notion of sound as a relational body. Returning to the event of sound, we can appreciate how a sound is not

² See Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture* (2004).

³ See Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (1967).

only the contact between two things meeting, a friction, but more: that the quality of a sound is shaped by the inherent physical attributes of those things; what we hear is both the event of things coming into contact, as well as the intrinsic material properties constituting those things. My hand hitting the table sounds the way it does because of the qualities of my hand, and of the table, as material forms or things; that the “interior” of these objects or things is *exposed* in the event of sound – I hear the inner properties of these things as they resound and propagate.

For Ong sound is also a type of network, yet one that leads us to an intensity of interiority: an affective maze of involvement; a dramatic *presencing* that seems to foster the capacity for empathy, mutuality. We might also characterize this, as Pauline Oliveros does, through a notion of deep listening. Following Oliveros, there is a type of “commingling” we experience when listening; the event of sound, in moving from these objects to these bodies, from the interior of one to the interior of another, produces an experience of mutuality, of what she might call “global intra-action”, and what we might also describe as “radical sharing”. Is not sound a sort of shared event, a common property, a collective body – a body at odds with identity? A mutant. An assembly in whose gathering interiorities and exteriorities interweave. In occupying the space between things, might sound be considered free of ownership? Shared property?

The relational body of sound therefore upsets a notion of subjectivity as pre-existing others, as sovereign; rather, subjectivity is elaborated as a relational intensity: that which is always incomplete, interdependent.

The philosopher David Michael Levin suggests this point in his book, *The Listening Self*.⁴ For Levin, listening is always “a listening to the other”; it is the making of a space for inclusion, and importantly, a space that includes that which is different from myself. On a fundamental level, listening is a form of generosity by which we bend ourselves to meet each other; it is an act of welcome, encouragement – listening literally invites someone else to speak. We might say that listening is what we do to set the conditions for sharing. The relational body of sound, the commingling of interiors, and the networked society are expressions of sharing on different levels, which fundamentally position sound and the acoustical as extremely relevant contemporary terms.

Sound might come to provide a model, or a vehicle, for creating relational bodies, a body that is suggestive for certain social possibilities – an ethical framework formed by the matters of listening. To listen changes what our body is: what constitutes it and its struggles, by inviting intrusion, interruption and the joy of suffering what we do not know.

Noise

I want to move this perspective of the relational body, to further consider the topic of noise. In short, to highlight this relational body of sound as a fundamental experience of mutuality as well as that of fragmentation. As Steven Connor describes: “The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imaged not as a point, but as a

⁴ See David Michael Levin, *The Listening Self* (1989).

membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises, and musics travel”.⁵

This description underscores the conditions of a heightened sensitivity I’ve been exploring; the listening self is a self open to its surroundings, to others, to the movements of bodies and objects, and to the force of contacts; it is always already integrated into an assembly which is more than itself, and in this regard, is prone to co-mingling as well as fragmentation, rupture, deep unease. The exposure McLuhan speaks of, and the sharing of interiors Ong describes, must also contain a dramatic intensity, what we might call a “deep vulnerability”. If sound exposes us, if it passes through us, to bring us into relation with others, it must be understood to create not only the conditions for empathy and intimacy, of deep attention, but also that of interruption and interference, threat and danger. In other words, listening is a type of risk where sound may also intrude and annoy; the sound that comes into me, that invades my body may also hurt me – *it may break me apart*. It may agitate and frustrate; it may unsettle this body in that moment of hearing: this other that may be too much. In entering into acoustical relations, the assembly of contacts and frictions, and the propagations that pass between and through things and bodies, events and objects, one is put into a position of tensed encounter: an acoustics of power, trespass and the drama of relations.

The relational body of sound then can also be a *monstrous* body; a body that collects together pieces of sound, to move through the environment, and to finally overwhelm us. In other words, sound may work to integrate us within a space of things that are absolutely foreign to us; it may, in fact, challenge the familiarity of oneself.

Final

In following these thoughts, I hope we have arrived at a deeper understanding of the behavior of sound, and the events that introduce us into the intensities of listening as a relational experience. Here, what we understand as “the body” is more than its visual or physical outline; it is more than the shape of my corporeal objectness, or even the identities we sometimes work so hard to foster. Rather, the body is flexed and pressed by an array of intensities – vibrations, resonances, voices – which opens up possibilities for relating to or confronting others, especially that which is farthest from myself. The mutant.

I would suggest, that the relational body of sound is fundamentally the beginning of a possible community; a way of thinking or orienting an approach to community, as being constituted by the incomplete, interruption, and the fragment. If speaking and hearing each other are fundamental to shaping community, to working through the concerns we hold in common, then engaging an acoustical paradigm might assist in fostering conditions of trust, responsibility, care, without corralling the life of togetherness into a shape of the familiar and the agreeable.

Here, we might arrive at an emergent ethics of community, as the working through of the noise of sociality: which must also include that which I have nothing in common with. In other words, recognition beyond recognition.

⁵ Steven Connor, “The Modern Auditory I” (1997).