

TITLE

The Mediumship of Listening: Notes on Sound in the Silent Arts

AUTHOR

David Toop

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ABSTRACT

This essay is a series of excerpts from my newest book *Sinister Resonance*. It begins with the premise that sound is a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory. The intangibility of sound is uncanny a phenomenal presence both in the head, at its point of source and all around, and never entirely distinct from auditory hallucinations. The close listener is like a medium who draws out substance from that which is not entirely there. The history of listening must be constructed from narratives of myth and fiction, silent arts such as painting, the resonance of architecture, auditory artefacts and nature. In such contexts, sound often functions as a metaphor for mystical revelation, instability, forbidden desires, disorder, formlessness, the unknown, unconscious and extra-human, a representation of immaterial worlds. Threaded through is Marcel Duchamp's curious observation 'One can look at seeing but one can't hear hearing' and his concept of the *infra-thin*, those human experiences so fugitive that they exist only in the imaginative absences of perception.

KEYWORDS

listening, silence, painting, footsteps, sensory spectrum, whisper

ESSAY

Stare intently . . . into the recesses of a darkened room. Now close your eyes for a moment, until the features of that room dissolve into sound, then open them again to enter another room, a series of rooms, in which listening opens out histories and hauntings. A beauty gathers in the stirring that we call silence, but then, as Rilke wrote, ‘For beauty is nothing/ but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able to endure’ (qtd. in Tanner, 2003: xxviii).

Sound is an absence, a haunting; this is its nature. Sound is absence, beguiling; out of sight, out of reach. What made the sound? Who is there? Sound is void, fear and wonder. Listening, as if to the dead, like a medium who deals only in history and what is lost, the ear attunes itself to distant signals, eavesdropping on ghosts and their chatter. Unable to write a solid history, the listener accedes to the slippage of time. Objects, images and writings can be preserved for centuries, giving us a visible and tactile connection to the physical continuity of history. Sounds, on the other hand, fade into old air – ghosts that haunt the tangible reality of castles and clocks, ploughshares and armour, shoes and bones, ancient books, rock formations, fossils and all other remnants of material existence.

Sound is energy unleashed, yet also the perpetual emerging and vanishing, growth and decay of life and death, the perfect metaphor for a ghost. This is why, in a 15th century Japanese Noh play, the ghost can be

heard but not seen, ‘neither substance nor shadow.’ Words fly away; the written letter remains.

All silences are uncanny, because we have become estranged from absences of sound. An uncanny silence falls when it envelops or drifts down into a sounding world, like snowfall muting an otherwise noisy city, as if the presence of nothing can soak up noise, a white blotter that retains its whiteness no matter how much ink is absorbed. Then silence is heard more clearly, like fog, through whatever faint shapes can be discerned within. No silence out there; no silence in here either; though there are many species of silence.

For Henri Lefebvre, our emphasis on seeing has resulted in complex phenomena being reduced to the simplified state of images. The social existence of space is repressively visualized. ‘In the course of the process whereby the visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose clarity, then fade away altogether,’ he wrote in *The Production of Space*, ‘leaving the field to line, colour and light. In this way a part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 286).

School

A loss of memory is a silence, often accompanied in old people by a loss of hearing, so as events of the past speak only intermittently, scattered by the cold winds of age, sonic events of the present grow fainter. Loss of cultural memory is a silence, also – the so-called failed states and collapsed ideologies that are treated as mute spectres gathered at the global feast. Ilya Kabakov’s work, *School No. 6*, created in 1993 on the site of Donald Judd’s Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, is a silent reminder of

how memory survives in scraps of nostalgia and sharp shards of memory, incomplete scenes and conscious forgetting. In desolate, abandoned school rooms, a dusty violin lies on a bench. As if the children had left music practice one afternoon, then never returned, four red music stands wait for students, along with a flute, a trumpet, a violin bow, faded sheet music, a mandolin fixed to the wall, a backboard leaning against the wall, sheet music on a stand. A guitar lies on the floor in the dust, one more scrap among paper scraps. In the intensity of their silence, a faint music asks to be heard, like the slow heartbeat of a hibernating creature buried under snow.

Black

In Ad Reinhardt's beautifully handwritten notes, he returned again and again to words such as 'silence', 'soundless', 'stillness' – in *Twelve Rules for a New Academy* he wrote 'No noise. "The brush should pass over the surface lightly and smoothly" and silently' (1975: 206-7). But then again, he said elsewhere, 'No such thing as emptiness or invisibility, silence.' Is it possible to say that his black paintings are 'silent', and if so, how can all monochromatic paintings, white, black and all shades between, be equally silent? Standing for a long time in front of Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, 1963*, in New York's MOMA, staring into its depths, I felt myself passing into an abyss, was forced eventually to look away. The black is not simple black but a grid of squares, a reddish tone in the corners, a cross made up of a blueish-black vertical and a greenish black horizontal; prolonged looking releases this formal structure to the eye, yet the darkness of the painting still induced a form of vertigo. The falling was not a literal feeling, like falling down a well, more passing through the

surface into something more complex and infinitely rich. I came away feeling dizzy.

Looking at other monochromes in MOMA's collection – Yves Klein's *French*, Brice Marden's *Grove Group*, or Robert Ryman's horizontal *Pace* – is, in each case, a distinctly different experience. This is also true for comparisons between the varied white surfaces of Piero Manzoni's *Achrome* series, made in the late 1950s and early 1960s. All of them convey varying degrees of activity or energy. His materials shape the beholder's engagement, in one case bread rolls dipped in kaolin, looking at once like a baker's tray but also the faces of worn Neolithic figurines. 'In extending the reach of the achromes in 1960,' wrote Matthew Gale in his essay, *From Alphabet to Zone*, 'Manzoni adopted a variety of materials that were inherently white and thus fulfilled the requirement of neutrality. Cotton was one of these as he aligned square pads, wads or cottonwool balls. Just as with the kaolin achromes, cotton afforded subliminal medical associations' (2005: 83). Whatever these inevitable associations of white dough, white flour, a white apron, white tiles, white uniforms and the silence of kneading or sickness, Manzoni was thinking of white that is nothing but white, a state of pure becoming.

Shhh

The visible sign of the shhh returns to painting with Odilon Redon's *Silence*, c. 1911, the face of a woman framed in an oval, as if looking absently at a mirror. Two fingers are pressed to her lips. What kind of silence is this; what cannot be said? We have no way of knowing.

Footsteps

Dublin, the National Gallery on Merrion Square, conscious of treading the boards that Samuel Beckett had passed over so often, looking at paintings that he may have studied: *Vertumnus and Pomona* by Nicolaes Maes, a beautiful gathered atmosphere out of which small details shine, like the key that hangs from Pomona's dress; Rembrandt's wonderfully atmospheric *Interior with figures playing the game 'La Main Chaude'*; Gerrit Dou's *An Old Hermit Praying*; Metsu's *A Man Writing a Letter* and *A Woman Reading a Letter*, Cornelis Bega's *Two Men Singing*, a gloriously abject scene, the room full of junk, a bass viol propped up with all the other rubbish; Chardin's elegant *Card Tricks*, which made me think again of Muñoz, and Goya's mysterious, erotic, sepulchral, silent *Sleep*. As a counterpoint to looking at all this silence and noise, the sound of my boots echoed in these resonant spaces, just as Beckett's footsteps had echoed so often in the 1920s. His pacing play of 1975, *Footfalls*, may have been influenced by this sound: 'Ruby Cohn remembered Beckett stopping at this time in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin,' wrote James Knowlson in his biography of Beckett, 'and asking her to listen to the sounds of the footsteps on the hard polished floor. But we do not know whether this happened before or after the image captured his interest' (Beckett, 2006: 239).

Ear

On the flat page, a drawing, within an irregular, rectangular frame of cross-hatched diagonal pen lines, of an ear. The ear lacks a head. Lines slash across the ear, not violently, but like static, or sleet. The outer edge of the ear looks perforated, and the ear canal is dark, abnormally large, a well, a cave. The title of the drawing is *Untitled*.

Now we are in physical space, a volume of open air, a room, a vessel in which other people move and step, murmur and clatter, pushed and pulled from here to there by their wretched whispering audio guides, as if the problems of seeing can be solved by words insinuated directly into the ear. A small, sightless man leans his right ear against a wall, listening. *Listening Figure* has no legs; his eyes are webbed, mole-like decayed fossil genes. His lower half is a giant ball, a toy that always returns to an upright position no matter how many times a child pushes it over. His arms and hands are stretched back flat against his sides. He is built for eavesdropping, built to listen in to the dull murmurs of conversations belonging to others, to whispers and secrets.

This is distinctively the work of Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz, who died in 2001. These figures in spaces might be mistaken for what we call the real world, their verisimilitude, the way they share space with their audience, yet they are presences more than figures, and these presences are an occupation of potential spaces, volumes and durations of silences, and the implicit sounds that resonate within and beyond these spaces. Take the *Conversation Piece* of 1996. One figure, the isolated one to the left of the group of five figures, is inclining its head, straining, intent on the conversation itself, though that looks as much a business of touch, presence and listening as voice. Really, it seems an examination rather than a conversation, like a blind person feeling out thoughts from a map of facial structure and musculature. The two other figures are connected by wires. Either one is pulling the other forward, or the one in the rear is holding the leader back. Actually, who is in the front? Listener or speaker, sound or silence; who leads, who follows? As I intrude into their space, I think of Mukai Kyorai's seventeenth century haiku:

Which is tail? Which head?

Unsafe to guess

Given a sea-slug. (2006[1966]: 113)

Grey

We step into another Munoz room, join another group, living among the dead: *Seated Figures with Five Drums*, five white figures sitting on strangely asymmetrical armchairs in a conversational group, each in possession of a snare drum. Solid, soft, creamy companions, dusted in flour or volcanic ash (the instant death of Pompeii's citizens after Vesuvius erupted; its residue), the composition's spectral atmosphere is suggestive of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's mid-sixteenth century grisaille paintings, *Christ and the Woman Taken In Adultery*, in the Courtauld Gallery, London, and in the Frick Collection, New York, *The Three Soldiers*. In the latter, a tiny, exquisite work, three soldiers stand in uneasy relationship to each other. Half-hidden in the background and shadowed, the colour of verdigris, a flag bearer looks up at the banner he is waving. The foreground musicians, a lighter sepia, play fife and drum: the flute player looks forward, out of one corner of the painting; the drummer balances a huge bass drum on his hip, peering into the dark corner at the rear, his drum a yellowing block of grey wax, out of Joseph Beuys. They could be playing after the end of time, the dead celebrating war's final victory, or before the mother of all battles, sounding their own death song, one foot in the grave.

Beach

The National Gallery, London: Georges Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières*,

painted in 1884. The scene is drowsy, though not idyllic: as a backdrop to the river and its boats, factories pour smoke into the summer sky. Five young men, perhaps factory workers, are grouped separately yet together. Three of them relax on the river bank, one lying, two sitting. Two stand in the river, one looking away from the group, the one wearing a hat looking beyond the edges of the painting and calling through hands cupped into a trumpet. The two figures on dry land seem to look in the direction of his shout. Except for the reaction of a small dog, nestling into the back of the man who is lying down, the feeling is not urgent; perhaps the boy in the hat has seen a friend on the other side of the river. The directionality of the painting moves in an arrow from left to right, its point culminating in the shout, a moment of sound, from which we can imagine the sound waves fanning out, opening into a mirror triangle that moves beyond the frame, into the unknown, then returns as an echo to the apperceptive dog. Strangely, the atmosphere is heavy with silence, as if the shout transcends human hearing, only disturbing the more aurally sensitive animals.

Though anticipated by the hazy, Japonistic *Nocturne* series of paintings begun by James McNeill Whistler in 1866, which in turn were closely associated with the 'impressionism' of Debussy's compositional innovations, it was scientific influences that enabled Seurat to develop a pictorial method to net those regions of the sensory spectrum that, despite their materiality, elude solidity of form: light, sound, atmosphere, fleeting sensation. The shimmering points of light and colour of his pointillist technique, visible in a formative stage in *Bathers at Asnières*, dissolved the certainties of visible reality, moving the act of seeing closer to a more immersive world of vibrations and waves. From 1890, his *Beach at Gravelines*, in the Courtauld Gallery, is empty light almost without

boundaries, a complex, enharmonic flood of high-frequency silence. Seurat was famous among his contemporaries for taciturnity.

Like Muñoz, Seurat was drawn to aspects of theatricality, yet his tableaux are eerily soundless. *Parade de cirque*, for example, captures the ritualistic aura of circus; time is suspended. A trombonist stands in the centre of the picture. On close inspection he seems to be playing, but Seurat gives the impression that all sound, all movement, has been absorbed into a gauzy fug. Similarly, his sublime conté crayon study for *Baignade, The Echo*, is unequivocal in showing a moment of sharp sound, a close-up of the boy who shouts, yet the drawing itself is the softest diffused silence, like cellophane screwed up into a tight ball, then released to faintly crackle a return to its original form. The silence is not an omission, a gap in sensory awareness, but a deliberate, provocative absence.

Whisper

In the Courtauld Gallery, *A Conversation*, painted between 1913-16 by Vanessa Bell, sister of Virginia Woolf. Three women huddle together by open curtains, one leaning forward, gesturing, her two companions leaning together, as if the convergence of their ears will shape this whispered gossip into something more substantial, more secret, more dangerous. The picture is almost a mirror image of Quirijn Brekelenkam's *Confidential Conversation* of 1661, justifiably praised by Simon Schama for 'the candor and scrupulousness with which feminine gesture has been recorded in three variations: placid attentiveness (in profile), the maid's less polite hand on hip, and the emphasizing gesture of the matron – all three bound together by a triangle of gossip' (1987: 413).

The difference between the two works exposes just how much these

configurations matter: Brekelenkam's three women face the viewer; listening would seem rude, and they are set at a respectful distance, whereas the closely observed back views of *A Conversation* act as a magnet, drawing the viewer in closer. To stare into Bell's painting, eavesdropping at its periphery, is to risk discovery and all the affronted humiliations that ensue from exposure as an outsider who longs to be inside. There is something deep about this discomfort that reawakens the outsider pangs of childhood and teenage years, the ache of being excluded from cliques, gangs, the most glamorous friends, the best parties (the elusive centre of the in-crowd) that grows into more deadly adult manoeuvres of power, paranoia and elitism among the cabals and inner circles of workplace, politics, arts, exclusive clubs, secret societies, even neighbourhood and friendship. At the heart of such exclusivity is the whisper, a quiet sibilance at the edge of silence through which the richness of the spoken voice is reduced to its highest frequencies.

Buzzing

The Frick Collection, New York, *Lady with a Bird-Organ*, painted by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, c. 1751: a woman sits on a chair, turning the handle of a bird organ with her right hand, looking toward the caged songbird at the left of the picture. Her lips are sealed, but a conversation is in progress, machine and bird in dialogue, human as intermediary. Something about Chardin, his stillness, its own silence, convinces me that he was conscious, like Piero della Francesca and the chorale of angels and ass in *The Nativity*, of the curious sound of this otherworldly ensemble. His *House of Cards*, in the National Gallery, makes me think of Juan Muñoz, performing the card tricks of *A Man In a Room, Gambling*. And *L'Enfant*

au Toton in the Louvre, the boy's face patient, placid, hands still, as he waits for his spinning top to complete its circumnavigation of the table top, erratic insistent buzzing in the stasis. Hélène Prigent and Pierre Rosenberg write of air circulating in the space around the figures in Chardin's paintings, and the familiarity in this 18th century world of women with household objects and children with toys. 'These things are more than attributes,' they write, in *Chardin: An Intimate Art*, 'they are true companions, silent witnesses of a domestic world of which they also form an integral part' (2000: 68-9).

Siren

Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark, April 2009: *Max Ernst: Dream and Revolution*. Max Ernst - *Napoleon In the Wilderness*, 1941. Napoleon stands calcified, pillar of salt, carapaced in viral shell, peg-leg embedded into a tropic Elba. Plinthed on an adjacent rock, a naked woman leans in his direction, draped in seaweeds and shell growth. She holds a fantastic wind instrument, a gracefully curving, slender horn whose bell culminates in the head of a screaming green dragon. She and Napoleon are separated by a livid totem pole of balanced stones, beaked and encrusted with the kitsch outer flowerings of pink and green mosses and lichens. The woman holds the mouthpiece of the horn away from her lips, holds it with one hand, well away from the finger holes, yet it sounds in the still blue afternoon.

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NOTES

None

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FIGURES

None

AUTHOR BIO

A Senior Research Fellow at the Sound Arts & Design Department of the London College of Communication, and currently Visiting Professor at the University of the Arts London, David Toop is a musician, composer, writer and curator. He has published five books, currently translated into seven languages: *Rap Attack*, *Ocean of Sound*, *Exotica*, *Haunted Weather* and *Sinister Resonance*. As a critic and essayist he has written for *The Wire*, *The Face*, *The Times*, *Liberation*, *Bookforum*, *Arcana*, *The Soundtrack* and *Leonardo Music Journal*. His first album, *New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments*, was released on Brian Eno's Obscure label in 1975; since 1995 he has released eight solo albums, including *Screen Ceremonies*, *Pink Noir* and *Black Chamber*. Current research involves the history and theory of free improvisation; the relationships of sound, listening, space, memory and oral history; and the materiality of sound.