

Relational Listening: The Politics of Perception

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When considering the expanding *modes of listening* (see Schaeffer, 1966; Chion, 1994; Sonnenschein, 2001; Turri & Eerola, 2012; Truax, 2001), the taxonomies of listening and perception developed by theorists over the past half century, a variety of themes dominate. These themes echo an emergent understanding of the ear, an awakening of the subjectivity of listening brought about by the dawn of the Phonograph. With the invention of the Phonograph came a new ear, the prosthetic ear of the microphone, an ear that unlike our own failed to extract signal from empirical noise. It “heard everything” (Kahn, 1999, p. 9) and revealed to us how our organic ears acted as much (or perhaps more) as filters than listening receptacles (Schafer, 1994). This prosthetic ear also offered us innovative means through which sound might be captured for delivery outside of the time and place in which it occurred. In doing so “listening has in effect experienced an unprecedented transformation, which its technical equipment provokes and reveals” (Szendy, 2008, p. 10).

The discourses constructed in the wake of this discovery, and the subsequent technological developments, reflect a historicity of the (mis)understandings of listening up to that moment (Sterne, 2003). Moreover, these discourses signaled the need for a rapid reconsideration of a sense that had been backgrounded for a great many centuries. Whereas the visual world has been subject to widespread documentation, extrapolation and expressionism, the sound world had largely remained mute beyond the moment of utterance. It took the introduction of industrialization and specifically the popularization of recording, playback, and broadcast technologies for the conversation to develop with any vigor.

With growing access to affordable recording technologies over the past 30 years, first portable cassette recorders and more recently the hand held digital recorder (as well as an ever growing array of microphones for all applications), the question of how we listen has become increasingly present. We have begun to fully recognize that the execution of our auditory perception is anything but universal. Moreover, listening is a perceptive undertaking that operates simultaneously across a broad array of engagements with sonic dynamics in space over time. Listening “begins with the ordinary, by proximately working its way into what is yet unheard” (Idhe, 1976, p. 49), and also “comes to support and expose a capture in principle, of unity in difference and of the later in the former” (Nancy, 2002, p. 19). This attentiveness to perception is of particular significance for artists and curators embedded in the sonic arts. Here, perhaps more so than any other contemporary field, listening plays a pivotal role for not just understanding, but for creation. Listening, as the framework for extraction of signal(s) from the expansive flux of sound, is at the root of a great many contemporary practices that continue to progress and refine.

Placing A Listening To Sound

To contemplate our listening, it is first important to situate and position that listening. What is it we are listening to, and through, and moreover how is it this listening is enacted. What is the listener doing and why?

To listen requires the listener to be *present* in time, place, and space. The listener experiences sound as a “presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory” (Toop, 2010, p. XV). Listening then taps into the ongoing flux of sonic dynamics that persists relentlessly. Cox (2009) outlines this persisting array of sonic apparitions, proposing sound “as a continuous, anonymous flux to which human expressions contribute but which precedes and exceeds these expressions” (p. 1). Through this reading, the listener’s participation in listening attaches them, for the duration of their listening, to the flux surrounding them. Each listener therefore, by choosing to listen, creates a unique position of listening within the time, place, and space of flux, one in which they are centrally positioned (Idhe, 1976). From this position, the listener can subjectively draw out elements upon which the focus of their listening might reside. Their listening is thus unique, shaped by their attentiveness and by broader

concerns and factors not contained within the actual audition itself (Voegelin, 2010).

Ingold (2008) expands this idea of sonic flux, positioning this flux within a wider, sensory understanding of place. He proposes that when we find ourselves in an environment, or more specifically the place in which a listening is situated, we are entering a *zone of entanglement* (Ingold, 2008). These zones are fluid, reflecting in our case, the motion of the listener, but more importantly the motions and shifts of all organisms and elements contributing to the flux within that place. Thus, he argues that place, like flux is constantly changing as organisms come and go and aspects shift across time. Place does not persist in a static sense, rather it occurs (Pink, 2009). The listener therefore, by their actions within place, temporarily pierces into the endless flux of sound via their listening. This entanglement, according to Ingold (2008), demands an active participation on behalf of the listener. This participation and activity of the listener forms place and therefore, for listening to be possible and for place to *become*, we must be positioned as participant or perhaps more accurately performer. The listener becomes a performer in place, amplifying and refocusing temporal and spatial phenomena not merely through physiological means, but also via active theoretical and methodological frameworks.

Transmissions Of Perception

In *Listening*, Szendy’s (2008) text on the multiplicity of auditory perception, he poses a provocation: “Can one make a listening listened to? Can I transmit my listening, unique as it is?” (p. 5). These two questions ask both sender and receiver to consider what it is they are engaging with when listening. Rather than considering listening purely as an a priori perceptive exercise, closed and resolved, it opens the way for a new understanding of the potentials of listening. It recognizes the subjective nature of our listening, but also calls us to consider how we might transmit our listenings and moreover realize the possibility to listening to a listener’s listening.

Transmission of a listener’s listening is a proposition that has risen with the dawn of Phonography (Kahn, 1999). Moreover, it is a phenomenon that has emerged specifically in conjunction with the recorded sonic arts, practices such as field recording. It takes into account the position of the listener, not merely as consumer of sounds in space and time, but as composer of it.

Toniutti (1999) outlines a spatial reading of this positioning arguing that the listener defines (and records) a *space* from within *the space*. Implicit in this definition of space is a shift away from the early phonographic and ethnographic pre-occupations with the microphone's abilities to document and furthermore present materials as objective and *real* (Kittler, 1986; Filene, 2000). Toniutti (1999) also recognizes that by defining 'a space' a listener's listening reflects a series of considerations, not just the physiological, but concerns of aesthetics, dramaturgy, politics, and spatial (if not temporal) composition.

This consideration, of the listener's listening, is one that makes way for the contemporary experiences of art-makers concerned with listening. Specifically, it asks listeners working in the field of audible arts to reflect upon the technological and philosophical expansions of listening we have arrived at in the early part of the 21st century. Ultimately, Szendy's (2008) provocation suggests that we must investigate what a listener's listening might be.

Conditions For A Relational Listening

If we accept, in this age of accessible technologies, that it is possible to listen to a listener's listening, we must ask how is it that the listening takes place. It is here that the theory of relational listening emerges. This listening is one concerned with the possibilities of a listener's creativity, to use their ears not so much as tools for extraction of information, but more as tools of creation. It asks what is it that is being listened to/for and ultimately how that listening is transmitted. It also asks what relationship exists between the two ears of the listener who wishes to transmit their listening. These two ears, the subjective organic ear and the prosthetic ear of the microphone, must be sympathetic to one another for a listening to be successfully transmitted.

The listener's listening therefore is shaped through the agentive space that exists between the two ears. It reflects both the human ear, with its subjective filtering and the prosthetic ear, which must be manipulated by the listener in order to best represent their listening. Relational listening therefore, is a form of listening that has thus grown from, or perhaps with, the sonic arts. It opens the way for recognizing that as practitioners working with sound, listening plays a critical role in the conception, creation and execution of audible (and other soniferous) artworks. It offers listening for

contemplation beyond a technical function of perception and moreover highlights the innate creative possibilities of transmitting listenings.

This duplicity of listening, required to create a situation where a transmission of listening can occur, requires the listener to position themselves not just temporally or spatially, but moreover within a broader socio-cultural context. This context reflects the artistic or creative intent of the listener, it is the position that moves listening from the experiential into the transcendental. This positioning, informed by such multiple contextual frameworks promotes a creative and ultimately political listening, one that reaches beyond the functions more commonly associated with the modes of listening. When considering Chion's (1994) modes of listening, for example, relational listening exceeds or perhaps exists above of the casual, semantic and reduced modes. It asks the transmitting listener to aspire to a meta-position, one that pushes beyond any functional listening to transcends the moment in favour of transmission in another place and another time.

The transmitted listener's listening must also represent a relational horizon of listening. Ihde (1973), who defines the term horizon of listening in *Listening And Voice*, suggests a listener's listening as a porous and multilayered engagement with sound around them. He writes of sound as a field within which the listener is always centrally positioned. Specifically, he argues the sound field, "must have a boundary, a horizon, no matter how indefinite and hard to locate" (Ihde, 1973, p. 75). Ihde's (1973) conclusion is that the horizon of sound is the point at which silence falls or rather the point where sound from the edges of the *horizon* no longer reach the listener and therefore cannot be perceived. This point does not only concern spatiality, but matters of the variation in sounding agents and their dynamic flux within a given time and place. The horizon must also concede to the concerns of the listener that shape their filtered listening (Schafer, 1994).

Therefore, the horizon is not an absolute, but a porous plain governed by a performance unfolding within space and time, specifically the events upon which the listener is focused (Ihde 1973). Within the context of relational listening then, the prosthetic ear brings with it a second horizon of listening. This horizon of listening is conditioned by technology, but remains non-cognitive and thus must be made to reflect that of the first organic listening. Being non-cognitive means that the concerns of the listener are democratized, reduced or potentially, in some cases, not perceived at all. It

is this expanding or collapsing of these two horizons of listening that plays a central role in the successful transmission of the listener's listening. Without a context through which these two boundaries of listening can be brought into relation, there remains a gap, or more importantly an in-articulation, with regard to the transmitted listening.

The first horizon of listening, the organic, is innately interior in its form (Idhe, 1976). It is a psychological listening, one shaped within the concerns of the listener. It is an expressionist listening (Schafer, 1994), one that is empathetic to the listener's desires and creative compulsions. This listening, as creatively intended, therefore carries with it a desire to transmit expression or experience beyond those modes of listening concerned with the experiential comprehension of that time and place. The listening emerges from spatial and temporal engagement with echo and recurrence in other times and other spaces. The second horizon of listening, collated through the microphone does not bear these concerns, rather it listens externally, a pure receptacle within which sound is captured but not considered (Kittler, 1986). It is the devices through which transmission is made possible, but must be made to serve the listener's listening. It is therefore the ability of that listener seeking to transmit their listening to understand the implicit roles of both these listenings, and moreover to occupy the space between them, creating a mass of connective tissue as it were between the organic and the prosthetic.

Thus, it is relational listening that seeks to tether these two listenings, the internal psychological and the external technological. Relational listening provides a systemic framework through which artists and other concerned practitioners can explore the conditions of their listening, specifically in the context of the desire to transmit those listenings. Relational listening considers not just the implications of spatiality, dynamics, and temporality, but moreover the political, aesthetic, dramaturgical, and other creative forces that bear down on a listener's listening. It furthermore considers the role of the prosthetic ear as a device that creates a second horizon of listening, one which may be used to effectively capture a listener's listening by a "manipulation of sound" and potentially "enlarging the aural architecture" (Blessner & Salter, 2007, p.104) of temporal sound in space and place. Relational listening, through recognizing the potentials available to the contemporary listener, opens a conversation whereby we might meaningfully reply to Szendy's provocations, "Can one make a listening listened to? Can I transmit my listening, unique as it is?" (Szendy, 2008, p. 5).

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Lawrence English is media artist, composer and curator based in Australia. Working across an eclectic array of aesthetic investigations, English's work prompts questions of field, perception and memory. He utilises a variety of approaches including sound, installation, projection and polymedia objects to create works that meditate on subtle transformations of space and ask audiences to consider that which might sit at the edge of or beyond their perception. His pieces have been presented widely in Europe, the UK and Japan, as well as in the USA, NZ and Australia. Many of English's works draw on ideas of spatial field and relativity. He published the book, *Site Listening* in 2009, developing a new methodology for engaging with sound encountered public and environmental spaces. English has worked on a number of collaborative exhibitions, and has completed a series of public artworks, including two collaborations with Kim Demuth and Eluned Lloyd titled *Triumvirate* and *Portalis*, as well as *Sombre Verde*, a recent temporal public art piece which saw the installation of a landscaped garden and sound installation into the Brisbane City centre. As a curator, English is actively involved in the development and increased recognition of sound art within Australia, curating an ongoing series of sound related projects for the Institute Of Modern Art under the name *Mono*. He has curated exhibitions of international (and Australian) sound artists such as *Melatonin* (which debuted in *Next Wave* 2004 and continues to show through to today most recently in December 2011 as part of *Feta Dele WSK* in Manila), *Gravities Of Sound* (as part of *MAAP* in Singapore) and *Audible Geography* (for the University Of Tasmania). He has written extensively for publications orbiting topics of music, art and culture. English also directs the imprint and multi-arts organisation *ROOM40*: (www.room40.org) maintaining a steady release schedule from an eclectic array of Australian and international artists and producing a number of sound and music festivals annually including *Open Frame* (both in Australia and the UK).