

Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Sonic Vraisemblable In The Liminal Space

*“Like noise, dirt is unwanted depending on the context; soil is fine for letting trees, flowers and vegetables grow, but folks don’t want it in the house, just like people keep windows closed, especially in urban environments, to keep out the noise”.*¹

Everyday noise, with its intransigent manner disregards barriers and constraints, whilst hijacking aural spatiality. Our futile attempts to tame its feral nature by way of containment, restraint and negation; generally harboring an inherent animosity toward the uninvited sounds of the day deeming it an interfering pillager of intimacy, coherent thought and sleep ~ *“silence is all of the sound we don’t intend”*² opined John Cage. Common unremarkable noise permeates the air and mocks control, cavalier in its essence whilst coalescing with its environment; a nuisance, impervious to submission and subversion, and akin to dust and dirt in respect that all are unavoidable critical components - emblematic of mortality. The sound of the everyday, the utterance, the cacophony and the many tonalities in between are stoically rooted in the real and are often sidelined by conscious thought; ectoplasmic auditory nuisances heroic in their persistence and rightly rewarded by modernity by its inclusion in contemporary art practices. In *‘Sounding The Event’* Yve Lomax plays with concepts of noise and constitutions of the event. With mischief and aplomb musing on the lawlessness and societal impoliteness of everyday noise, she poses questions of aural hierarchy by employing examples of thinking, writing, fabricated conversations, engagements with philosophical texts and a cat’s purr.

*“ It is the sound of my voice that she wants to be touched by. Stroke her and she will move away, but speak to her and she will purr and purr. The hairs on her body quiver, yet a sound can hardly be heard. There she is humming to herself, singing her own little song, and who am I to deny that this little sound is of the world? The humans may think the world was made for them; but who are they to deny that the cat sat singing her song is in the world and of the world? Education may attempt to teach it otherwise, but I’m learning that the she-cat’s little song is an expression of the world as it continually makes itself. There is nothing incomprehensible about this, but so often, far too often we fail to listen...”*³

What sound would silence the sound of the everyday? Michel Serres contemplates in *La Belle Noiseuse* “how much noise must be made to silence noise?” I submit, noise that negates itself that noise would be imperceptible to the human or living ear; it is, or would cease to be an applicable consideration; the question

¹ Licht A. *Sound Art* Rizzoli International Publications NY 2007 pg 80

² Licht A. *Sound Art* Rizzoli International Publications NY 2007 pg 85

³ Lomax Y. *Sounding The Event: Escapes In Dialogue And Matters Of Art, Nature and Time* I.B Taurius & Co 2005 pg9

turns in on itself, the interrogation is metaphysical in address, and renders the concept of a totalizing aural subtraction to be intellectually surmised as death; bereft of the internal conversation, the heart beating in the ear, the rush of the blood in the veins, the inhalation and exhalation, the sounds of corporeality; these sonorous absences and the corporeal suspension by silence – or the noise of silence, its representation – is an unanswerable transcendental concept akin to a mythological riddle, with its fundamental question embedded in the notion of ontology?

“A representation is just a moment M of the real. All images are moments, just as any point in space is both the memory of time x, and a reflection of the space y. Is this the temporal factor frozen, or to the contrary, is it a producer of potentialities? What is an image that does not contain any forthcoming developments, any “life possibility”, apart from a dead image?”⁴

All sound / noise recordings installations are elegiac, by their very nature swan songs in reverse; lamenting their original architectural collaboration with longevity outside it's own moment of ephemerality. Recordings and documentation reside in the now but not the actuality of the event and therefore the event can only ever appear as phantasmal. Or is it? Do the eyes and ears with their particular unreliability in concerns of truth bestow vampirical gifts of resurrection, rupturing tombs and excavating the essence to shroud it in a new cloak of the contemporary? The capturing of ephemera and ether, with its temporal / fugitive materials along with the inevitable signifiers regarding the effects of time and how much change can it tolerate. When does it become a relic? Culture will always address memory in a cultural state therefore recordings / documentation of noise and sound art bear great importance in that they help us to get to the next stage, by using yesterdays to navigate an aural futurity within contemporary art.

“There is no difference in dimension and reality between original sound and the recorded and reproduced sound as there is between real objects and the photographic”⁵

I agree with the Balazs quote to the extent that the space between the real and the reproduced whether sound or image is arbitrary but there *is* a *difference* between the original and the reproduced and I think about Barthes and the photographic corpse and conclude that the phonographic corpse is its grave fellow. In educational institutions, galleries, cinemas, theatres, listening, seeing auditoria we are involved in aural and visual séances (seoir) the medium being nascent time, forever conjuring up the original phenomenon through reproduction; yearning for the slippage and seepage of one moment to be embraced by the moment that belongs to us, a commensal collaboration between the living and the dead – people / time / moment -where the membrane which separates the two almost becomes diaphanous in its anticipatory tensions.

⁴ Bourriand N. Relational Aesthetics Le presses du reel 1998 pg 80

⁵ Silverman k. The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice In Psychoanalysis In Cinema. Indiana University Press 1985 pg 42 re; Bela Balazs

“Since history never gives back the same formulas / recipes and any authentic representation of the past always implies a radical recreation or reinvention”⁶

Life and critical obligation is tied to the pursuit of engagements with talking, seeing and listening resurrections and even if the encounter is *our* first introduction, documentation has to stand up to continual reiteration and activity. Archives are critical to the event in their posthumous positioning, acting as memento mori yet responsible for the rebirth of the work to the new audience; whether imbued with the original concept or presenting an alternative proposition. We are blind and mute and can only rely on what cultural keepers of history have chosen for posterity with the archive, reproduction and documentation to guide us, the eye of the Other.

“Still this spectator who is forced to be deaf cannot avoid hearing voices – voices that resonate in his or her own imagination”⁷

More thoughts on a poetics of encounter and sonorous urbanism call to mind a film watched in childhood; *The Wind* (1928) directed by Victor Seastrom and starring Lillian Gish. Filmed in the Mojave Desert it was one of the last silent films to be made and placed itself firmly in the intersection between the transitional period of silent / ‘deaf’ films and talkies. The protagonist in the film is the wind itself (or the representation of) and stars alongside Gish as a woman alone and destroyed by the winds auralty, and insistent phonography which eventually is pivotal in her hurtle towards madness and illustrates a woman at odds with the community she lives amongst. My childhood spectator conjured up *The Wind* bringing with it the horror of cinema through naïve eyes and ears and prodding the sensibilities of the more measured intellectually reasoned adult – the haunting of oneself by oneself. Memories of childhood viewing, sight, geography, and architecture entering the intimate self.

In the film the tumultuous sound of the wind throughout rendered any of the characters human concerns of displacement too feeble to fight and had to contend with the environmental bellowing intensity. It rapidly erodes and exemplifies the depreciation of the woman’s mentality. The film serves to make comparisons between human fragility and the ferocity of nature. If the deafening roars of nature could cease, maybe the human protagonist could access stability, but the malevolent cacophony steadfastly destabilizes her psychologically and physically and acts as a mirror projecting her interior maelstroms. Form is given to the wind with the use of swirling cloaks of sand blown up with the gales, which subsequently seep into the cracks of her home. There is no escape, no reprieve as we watch her mental state crack in empathy with nature and in recognition of its disequilibrium. Symbolically the wind emphasized by bluster, fickleness and unreliability and is synonymous with breathe, the spirit and spiritual fluxus. The invasion of the tamed domestic space by the sand and wind both shrouds and covers secrets while simultaneously exposing and unveiling truths (a murder), its paradoxical nature is contained within the movement of material and sand, and renders her

⁶ Guattari F. *Space and Corporeity* Columbia Documents of Architectures and Theory Volume 2 1993 pg 143

⁷ Chion M. *The Voice In Cinema* Columbia University 1999 Press pg 8

helpless in the futile attempts at shelter from nature both outside and in; the seepage from outside into the interior cracks of her psyche, heightens a non- ideological relationship to nature reminding us of the continual reverence we must hold toward it. The space of the wind in effect and affect dislodges and dismantles the psychological and geographical space with its malevolent unifying of exterior and interior, creating a state of decreation on the landscape and the victim. In the final cut Gish is shown to have defeated the wind that acts as a visual metaphor for her interior battles and eventual triumph but this ending contradicts the original ending of the film (which had to be re-shot due to studio pressure) and was incongruous to the finale in the book by Dorothy Scarborough on which the film was based. . The true ending carries through the unintentional cruelty of nature winning out and eventually blowing her sanity out of her mind and tossing it like tumbleweed across the desolate plains of the desert, forever irretrievable.

*“Day in, day out, whistling and howlin’ – makes folks go crazy – especially women”*⁸

The comparisons to Elija Liilisa Ahtile film *Love Is A Treasure* (2002) are obvious. In this 55-minute film made up of five vignettes *Underworld / Ground Control / Silta Bridge / Wind* and *House* it shows startling, beautiful impressions of when objects and nature vocalize with a warped specificity. Unassuming in its introductory normality, its concerns lie in the observations of the psyche, wayward interiority and looks at the auditory condition of madness, when psychosis and space, become simultaneous and how that transposes onto the auditory and visual cinemas of the mind. Originally screened on five screens it puts across the points of views (by proxy), of women diagnosed with mental illness; with strong subjectivity the narration is calm and measured with the omission of judgment, hysteria or diagnosis but as the camera pans out and elements of supernaturalism and disproportion present themselves, which could be seen as children’s fairy stories or tales of fantasy, the effects ordinarily associated with fables and the art of story telling.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Nicholas Bourriard quotes Cooper *“madness is not “inside” a person, but in the system of relationships of which that person is involved. People don’t become “mad” all on their own because we never think all on our own, except for postulating that the world has a centre (Bataille). No one writes or paints alone. But we have to make the pretence of doing so”*⁹

The intimate soliloquies we carry daily, interior conversational absurdities of practicalities, whispers of instructions, sonic diagrams of the inconsequential and necessary; personal historic memory; superimposed onto the external, uninvited and unpossessed noise, and navigation of the geographical and architectural all embroidered into the mesh of the everyday. What is to happen if scales, the calibrated systems, the hierarchies, the resonances disorientate and all the voices vie for dominance? The meshing of the intimate and public to create a psychosis, phobia or irrational fear. Ahtile’s film shows the dominance of the outside by the inside and vice versa, the futile veil that separates the two during psychotic activity has completely disintegrated. ‘Normal’ acceptable scales become redundant and in its place perspective disproportion and

⁸ MGM Studios *The Wind* 1928 Dir. Victor Seastrom spoken by Lars Hanson as Lige

⁹ Bourriard N. *Relational Aesthetics* Le Presse du Reel 1998 pg 81

what could have been taken as the pleasure of fear in children's stories transpires into the waking terror for the adult. . Architecture noise gravity, space appearance all conspire and announce malevolence and alters the subjectivity.

*"It is outside always; it is The Outside, yet it is always inside, there within the very depths of my interior."*¹⁰

Love Is A Treasure utilizes actors to narrate and act stories of 'human dramas',¹¹ and highlights the blurring of boundaries (or should that be the inadequacies of barriers?) where exteriority and interiority mutually possess each other. The reiteration of sound / voices whether belonging to us / the other, or unidentified internal reverberations making fearful the ordinarily irrelevant. Stories that are retold, reiterated over and over internally, escalate into the human drama, where the ordinary becomes extraordinary the supernormal changes to the supernatural, so that the tale / fear becomes incapturable and insurmountable, - a nightmare, the visible and auditory enunciation of madness, where labyrinths of mind and geography conjure up inordinate terrors and supposition. Many of the narrators have an exaggerated childhood memory / fantasy which had inferred through illness on to the adult psyche. Sonorous maps losing their directions – the partial subjectivity of space and place onto further time.

In *The Acoustic Mirror* Kaja Silverman talks about the simultaneous internalization and externalization of the voice where it can envelope the object from the subject and vice versa," *violating the bodily limits upon which classic subjectivity depends, and so smoothing the way for projection and introjection* ".¹²

Felix Guattari in *Space and Corporeity* comments on the subjectivation of space and stratifications of the self;

*"But any other lived space can also engage such synchronic agglomerates of the psyche that alone a poetic operation, delirious experience or passionate explosion can bring to light. In this manner certain psychotics hear voices calling them from all points in space often to insult them."*¹³

When the agoraphobic loses the phobia temporarily or permanently their relationship to space architecture and geography can become muted and normalized and the intensified feeling of bodily actuality and presence diminished. There is a void where there was originally a fearful, heightened realization and awareness of space. Awareness of movement - the actuality and problematics of movement of the 'I', the residual trace of the dispersal of phobia invariably transforms into a void. The mental balletics of logistics of transportation through the everyday, all things seemingly irrelevant to others. With the loss you morph into the environment -indifferent – and comply with the seemingly mellifluous order of the systematics of transportation through space. With this loss of heightened physical awareness, there is an inevitable trade off - fear for geographical

¹⁰ Lomax Y. *Sounding The Event: Escapades In Dialogue and Matters Of Art, Nature And Time* I.B Tauris & Co 2005 pg12

¹¹ Term used by E, L, Ahtile re *Love Is A Treasure* instead of the term psychosis

¹² Silverman K. *The Acoustic Mirror The Female Voice In Psychoanalysis and Cinema* Indiana University Press 1985 pg 80

¹³ Guattari F. *Space And Corporeity*, Columbia Documents Of Architecture and Theory Vol 2 pg143

and spatial dilution. Noise becomes background noise, the once insurmountable becomes insignificant, the void is the mesh which mixes with the Others to form the collective subjectivity. The loss of fearful enchantment.

Reading texts by Helene Cixous to Jacques Derrida lamenting the loss of her myopia (after a successful operation to correct her life long affliction) she grieved for her disability. Myopia had become her permanent veil and the removal had made her too accessible to others and others to her. The blur had been replaced with searing clarity. Incognito, from her perspective now gone and had for her brought up issues of veils of truth, revealment and concealment, - she mourned for the haze of her gaze. Irrespective of the fact she could always have been seen with precision by others but now their clarity was mirrored in her eyes, the sharp external became the clear and unwanted internal.

*“The sane person is full of countless insanities and the insane person is possessed by only one. The expressive levels of the pathic temporalizations has not yet been seriously undertaken. It seems to me, however that the fallout one could bank on from this exploration would extend well beyond the narrow field of psychotherapy and would be particularly significant in the domain of linguistics”.*¹⁴

Early cinema (pre 1927) was not mute or silent, but quiet spectators had to imagine the voice, and film commentators employed by the theatres often had to interrupt the film with commentary as many of the audience were illiterate therefore could not read intertitles. Bresson claimed that there was never a mute cinema, only that the actors spoke in a vacuum therefore rendering it inaudible to the audience. Obviously the filmic characters were not mute (unless it was the demanded of the role) and bodily gesticulations and mouths forming words were apparent in their silent actors excitability on screen. The film was ‘deaf’ to audience ears and gave the viewing audience a perspective from the deaf persons point of view -a collective and participatory ‘deafness’. Silent screen stars had as many locutors as there was of members of the viewing public but with the advent of talkies the stars voice was reduced that to one – their own vocal. Mute characterization encapsulated many attributes of the narrative and their silence was imposed on the filmgoer. Although never heard, the mute was considered to be the all Seeing Eye and therefore the guardian of moral consciousness or the sinister subservient – whether they be malevolent or benevolent if they were without voice it was assumed they saw all and deemed to have more knowledge than the ‘talkers’, harboring secrets pertaining to the final word.

Because of the inaccessibility of the acousmètre, silent film relied on superimposition for the purposes of signification, simultaneity sound source, otherworldliness, and the supernatural. The voice eventually supplanted the superimposition, although the acousmètre and superimposition are still used in conjunction today to enhance one another. In silent cinema everything suggested sound. In *Sound On Sound* by Michel Chion recalls Bresson’s argument regarding cinema and the silence that we need sound to produce silence, so that the interruption of noise illuminates silence – it’s paradoxical and accurate, as all architectural spaces

¹⁴ Guattari F. *Ritornellos and Existential Affects*, The Guattari Reader, ed Gary Genesko, Blackwell Publishing pg 161 re; Robert Musil

have their own unique quietness and ambiances. Silence has to be the negative of the sound heard previously, it is the product of contrast and it is only through sound film - and not silent - that silence is possible, through either the ceasing or amplification of the noise itself. Silence is not its own entity and does not keep its own counsel. Referring again to notions explored in *La Belle Noiseuse* regarding silence, which I initially viewed as a sonic death of corporeal disintegration, I now contextualize it as a universal entity but an entity appropriating and existing with and within architecture and space; therefore reverberating in multitudinous and infinite meaning providing the global 'library' of acoustics consequently it is inexhaustible and infinite also.

*' Nature has its own language, which affects us with inexorable power. This language cannot be imitated'*¹⁵

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¹⁵ Licht A, *Sound Art: Beyond Music Beyond Categories* Rizzoli International Publications Ny 2007 pg 84 Ref Wassily Kandin

