

LISTENING IN

In English we have the certain pleasure of spelling either “SILENT” or “LISTEN” with our Scrabble tiles. The fact of this choice reminds us that in being attentive to the situation of the present, we sense its sound implicitly, and also that this action is reciprocal. That we – Heisenbergs and Cages, all – hear too the sound of our own presence acting upon the present whenever we listen, and to this extent, we cannot know a silence unheard. Alone in the bedroom, we hear roomfulness – there is something there, in and of and around ourselves. Alone in an anechoic chamber, 73 of 100 students with no diagnosed aural impairment will report hearing unexplained hissing or buzzing noises.¹ John Cage hears his own nervous system intoning in accordance with the circulation of his blood.² Question and answer, both, are nestled in that chamber as they are within ourselves. We, questioners and answerers, both, since birth. A baby’s ears are tested in the hospital by evaluating one’s otoacoustic emissions, the cochlea’s response to and reflection of heard stimulus.³ This mutually accountable, open exchange between subject and object is intrinsic to the act of hearing and defines our proprioceptive sense of the space we’re in and the space we displace. There is always something on the air, even between stations – potential space for listening that is as round and as whole as the radio dial, signals as radial, restless.

But to make sense of any noise, we must listen closely. That is, we must bring it nearer to our attention by tuning out what else is around. Only then is its quality or its pattern – its meaning – identifiable. Human drama arrives out of such a sense-seeking impulse. A sequence of events is determined as being isolated and somewhat unnaturally interrelated, and a story takes shape. The boundaries of circumstance are delineated like the “four walls” of theatrical space that contain a play, room to play in. These are also the conditions that precipitate discretion, allowing for all those stirring secrets that become slightly less so via their voicing, the same secrets that in turn delineate our sense of annunciated, contained selfhood apart from boundless silence. A young Walter Benjamin recognized that “conversation strives toward silence” while the self-conscious monologist regards the promise of all that whole nothingness as an encroaching threat (for what is more of a threat to speech than silence?). Thus, “the unproductive person never reaches that frontier.” Enraptured by the sound of one’s own voice weaving a tidy interrelation of question and answer, “[s/]he hears neither speech nor silence.”⁴

What can jolt a speaker from such internalized listening? Within a closely interrelated system (a context one could call “home”), what or where is the outside? A sudden commotion is heard echoing up through the air vent when one had hardly been aware of the vent only seconds before. But here it is: different sounding air. “Filtration can only be distinguished if the reference sound” – the psychoacoustic makeup of a given area – “has been heard and memorized,” note Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henri Torgue in their philosophical-leaning guidebook, *Sonic Experience*. A radio voice or telephone voice is determined to be outside of the present context not because the voice, itself, is unfamiliar, but because the voice is incongruent with the sound of the immediate area the listener is inside of. A surprise is a situation not yet fixed into memory. Thus, the phantom voice – familiar or not – poses an incursion.

I heard a story that struck me as devastating, so much so that I can't seem to shake it. It's a story of a slightly different sort of incursion characterized by a conversational exchange occurring in two painfully discordant contexts at once. The story is: a woman who was conducting an extramarital affair answered her phone at her boyfriend's house. It was her husband. She put him on speaker so her boyfriend could listen in. In hearing the story recounted, I interrupted to ask if the woman's boyfriend was also married. Had he ever been married?, I followed, causing a slight rupture between us. Did he have the sense or bearings, I couldn't help but wonder, for the context to which he'd been privy via his listening.

Michael Feingold wrote in 1977 in the *Village Voice* that he resented "being made to participate in [the] morally dubious act" of listening to Spalding Gray's private telephone conversation with his late mother's psychiatrist that was played aloud during a crucial scene of *Rumstick Road*.⁵ He "felt cheapened," he said, being implicated as a party to a highly charged situation that was not his own, becoming in essence a phantom to it. Feingold explained that while he certainly took offense to the invasion of the doctor's privacy, it was Gray's slick maneuvering "to rivet the audience's attention" that disturbed him most.⁶ All who were present at the performance had become involuntarily *fixed* and *fastened* to the trauma being discussed onstage via their aural witnessing to it, an irrevocable re-placement of so many selves intermingling within the sphere of that closed, listened space. Perhaps the boyfriend-Feingold had been married before. Perhaps he'd been on the other end of the receiver.

In Steven Soderbergh's 1989 *sex, lies, and videotape*, James Spader's voyeur, Graham, is a connoisseur of the recorded confession and yet, he is never shown to actually achieve the enjoyment he purports as the sole reason for his illicit archive's existence. In an insert shot of Graham's videotape collection neatly housed and ordered in its wooden cases, his handwritten labels indicate that he's been pursuing his "personal project" for at least two years. His pursuit is by now professionalized. He quickly and flatly informs his subjects that the recordings are strictly for his own masturbatory use as if the promise by now takes too long to recite. And yet, as accustomed as he must be to their playback, he cannot seem to reconcile the fracture in the tapes' context, of women neither here nor there. Twice we see Graham seated alone naked while a video is playing. We see him touch his chest. Then, he is interrupted by a knock at the door or, in perhaps the most heartbreaking scene of the film, he turns away, fraught with an inner conflict that threatens emotional outburst. From outside the frame, a reclining subject asks, "Do you think I'm pretty?" Graham presses his eyelids together as he hears himself reply feebly, "Yes."⁷

Sitting in a therapist's waiting room, one might notice a small device – sometimes round, often white, the shape of a smoke alarm or a doll's hat box – plugged in, perhaps tucked away in the corner. In order to prevent voices from filtering between the spaces of the inner office and outer reception area, the therapist uses manufactured masking tones (i.e. white noise) to acoustically conceal the private confessions of his/her clients. The phenomenon of masking tones is a complex one. Depending on the circumstance, the mask might be the background sound – the steady car traffic that obscures a

bird's mating call – or the mask might be more distinct, less atmospheric. It could be the honking of anxious motorists whose frustration mounts at the precise moment one has worked up the courage to coo, “I love you” into another's ear. Physiologically, this process of confusion and recognition comes in waves. Neurologists describe “a pattern of excitation in the cochlea that either swamps or suppresses the activity due to the target sound” – that sound one would choose to listen closely to – “so that the target is no longer accurately represented in the auditory nerve.” The cochlear response is reliably documentable though the effect, itself, is less so. In trials, the exact same target sound might be distinguishable through its mask on one occasion but not on another.⁸ Which is to say that masks affect us differently at different times. A mask is not only used for hiding one's identity but also for adopting a new one. In this way, it reveals as it conceals. Writing specifically about the effect of masking in regard to the moving image, composer and sound theorist Michel Chion explains that “the impression is created that were the sound not there, we would hear another one suggested by the image but not heard.” Incongruence almost always betrays the presence of a mask. But furthermore, while “every sound has the potential of masking another,” the masking effect creates the distinct possibility for phantom sounds to emerge, sounds we fully expect to hear – or may even seem to experience sensorily – but that are, in fact, not there.⁹

Not long after the woman confessed the details of her affair to me over dinner, I found myself working intensely on a project with her husband. In the restaurant only a few weeks before, she and I had cried in anticipation of the inevitable cataclysm looming on the horizon and now I was spending hours on end with him, nestled in a small room. Two incongruent conversations competed for prominence: one that was spoken aloud between us in which we weighed the considerations implicit to the project at hand, coupled with an internal, dislocated monologue in which I recounted the details of the phone incident that had so upset me. Each, at times, masked the other. Although I felt certain that I could not reveal what was coming, I caught myself several times sounding like a radio tuned between frequencies of knowing and not knowing. I asked him as casually as possible if he could see himself being happier in another city.

In the inside, it would seem, the story is still so deafeningly present and yet just beyond it, moving outward in radial waves, there are other stories, other chatter on the air, other husbands and wives. And still beyond that – somewhere –is silence. I can hear it.

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