

# AUGMENTED HEARING

Arguments for an other hearing



*Hieronymus Bosch, "Garden of Pleasures", Madrid, Museo del Prado (Detail)*

LISTENING IS GOOD FOR YOU! Where else? Where else can we sever the bond that pulls us through our lives, this "thinking," our internal (external) dialogue, our "tag-alongness"? Where else—besides in "listening"? One could consider other senses and sensory experiences: taste, wine-tasting, the moment our eyes turn inward and our whole attention is directed to the tongue ... sex ... a cold shower or a plunge into a lake ... sudden pain, burning oneself on a stove ... these last examples in particular seem to reduce the cutting of those tag-along bonds to a brief moment—in the case of sex to the moment of orgasm, the "little death," as it was once called. On the other hand, when the duration of the interruption seems more controlled, as in the case of tasting or listening, thinking isn't really switched off. The more experience and knowledge we have about wine, the more fulfilling the wine-tasting. Something similar applies to listening. Thus, the differentiation between thinking and listening is a metaphorical one. "Thinking" stands for something, and "listening" stands for something. They are forms of being-here and not-being-here. Listening means (metaphorically) "being" or "being here"; thinking means (metaphorically) "not being" or "being elsewhere." "There is

no cognitive access to the real except via terms," philosophers say<sup>1</sup>—and yet ... Alenka Zupančič's wonderfully paradoxical objection ( ... her precise thinking against a closed, terminable system, her philosophically stringent examination of absurdity, the comedy that dwells in all attempts at formulating a terminable system ... the superiority of "comedy" relative to all systems ...)—and yet! ... tasting before I realize what the taste reminds me of, listening before I assign any category—this is indeed what is differentiated by terms, but also what borders on the ineffable and differs—more than just "metaphorically" from "thinking," remembering, categorizing, associating; in contrast to these last qualities, it feels like "being here," like something "real," because here, and only here, I seem to border on something different from myself, an outside, a world perhaps. Here, and only here, I feel the coldness and ignorance of the world toward me; here I feel, too, the sole moment of sovereignty, of not being harnessed by a predetermined order. And yet, calling this "freedom" seems absurd. It is the realization that there is no choice, or that it is not I who gets to choose. The dice have long been cast, or they have been falling all along. Watching them fall after the fact: that's all the sovereignty we have.

RECOGNITION. "We recognize the object only through the concept."<sup>2</sup> So, what is the concept of music, or the concept of listening. How far does non-conceptual listening go? Kant says that opinions without concepts are blind.<sup>3</sup> But the blind can still hear very well—better than the sighted. Kant says thoughts without content are empty. But isn't listening itself thought without content? Thought *as* form—a form that is under constant threat of being filled in with content, but which in the end represents only a threadbare cadence, a gleam of deceptive harmony, the return to illusion—as opposed to 'impossible' openness, to the form left empty.

*(From: A Music That Withdraws, 2013-2015,  
in Peter Ablinger, "Annäherung", Cologne, MusikTexte 2016)*

"REDUCED LISTENING" (François Bonnet, *The Order of Sounds*, 105ff) Bonnet discusses Schaeffer's concept of "reduced listening" and rejects it with reference to Saussure (112f). On the one hand: "Reduced Listening" must not be confused with 'pure listening', with a pre-conceptual listening. Such is not at all about isolated, cut-out sounds, objects, not at all about acousmatic

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Brassier, *Begriffe und Gegenstände*, in: *Realismus Jetzt*, Merve, S.137

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, cited in Ludwig Jäger, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Hamburg: Junius, 2010, 144.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 147.

listening. On the other hand, Bonnet does not seem to want to follow Saussure completely: "Any acoustic entity (...), in the very moment that it is constituted (...) takes on meaning" - for he adds: "even if only an embryonic one" (113). Presumably, "embryonic meaning" does not go at all in Saussur's system. And if "embryonic meaning" is possible, then also who-knows-what-else, e.g. meaning without meaning, or (B. quotes Agamben): an "experience that is no longer mere sound and is not yet meaning" (B.114, Agamben 'language and death', 33).

What distinguishes "reduced listening" from 'pure listening' is that "reduced listening" is directed towards an object, a sound-object, or even sound-as-object. 'Pure Listening', on the other hand, knows no object to aim at. It may know the subject that hears, but not the identification of isolated sound-objects.

There is no Reduced Listening but there is no Pure Listening either, there is only a distinction to 'Hearing' - perhaps we should call the distinction 'Impure Listening'. This would then be the area that cannot be grasped by the linguistic conception and, on the other hand, tries to grant a space in the non-linguistic, non-meaning in listening.

But 'pure hearing' can (perhaps) exist if it is independent of the 'object', if it means hearing as such, the human being as such.

But perhaps Schaeffer himself misunderstood his own (reduced) hearing. When I think of a recording I made decades ago at the 'Grosser Stern', one of the noisiest places in Berlin, and compare it with Luc Ferrari's "presque rien", or with what the 'Grosser Stern' avoids altogether - e.g. narrative content, intelligible conversation, anecdotal - it becomes immediately clear that we are indeed dealing with different modes of listening. The "presque rien" mode we could also call the "radio play mode", the other perhaps the "sound" or even "music" mode. "Music" fits even when it is not music (as in the 'Grosser Stern'), because the listening is, in a sense, abstract or else aesthetic. It hears the sounds or the qualities themselves and not or less their meaning. And herewith we have a first major difference to Saussure's model.

And Bonnet's 'Agamben/Voice' move does not hold here either (cf. 114). We hear in the 'music' mode no 'voice', no 'invocation', no offer of meaning, and not even the intention to mean. Rather, in this listening we unfold a sense of the mountains before they are divided into Montblanc and other mountains (cf. 103/104, B. citing Chion).

"Sound always speaks" to Bonnet(116). His problem. There are already ultra and infrasound, sounds that do something to us without talking to us. And then there is the above distinction between clearly, connotatively and "musically" perceived sounds; i.e. differences in the degree of their linguistic ability, which at least relativizes B-s thesis and breaks the linguistic

autocracy. There is not only language. There is at least language + something else.

B. concentrates solely on the object-becoming of sound in hearing. The subject-becoming in hearing sound is briefly mentioned (76) but quickly dropped. What remains is the sound as object, and that interests me very little. The tendency (in B.) is thus to leave the subject out of it, or - unpronounced - to take it as unquestioningly given, and in contrast to that, to take on the sounds as the only given ("given-to-be-heard"). The aspect of subjectification in listening is at best touched upon, and mostly reduced to a phenomenological discourse.

"Listening speaks" (R. Barthes, quoted in B. 140) - but: does it always speak? And if so, what would be the sense of the statement if everything always speaks anyway, if speaking does not differ at all - from anything at all. If the sentence "listening speaks" is to have even the slightest content, it must get it on the basis of something other than language. Language can only be if it is formed on the basis of something else. Speaking in hearing can only occur on the background of something other than language. But what this background, this basis is, neither Roland Barthes nor Bonnet have an answer to.

"LICKING SOLES." What exactly is the difference in the way Schoenberg used the sounds and Cage did. - Of course, "use" is actually a pejorative that Cage might have used to distinguish Schoenberg's practice from his own. Cage himself wants to believe that he is not using the sounds, but letting them be themselves. "Sounds 'for themselves' is never the object of a listening" B.(158) in the section "Listening and Fetishism." Cage's sounds as sounds are trapped in their object status and in fact acquire fetish character. We can only more lick their soles. It is as if the sounds had to disguise themselves as sounds in order to arouse us.

On the other hand, the "use" of sounds for something else (an expression, a certain intentionality of the author), which seems to us so much like outdated rhetoric, simultaneously prevents the sounds from becoming objects, since they can never stand only for themselves and thus cannot coagulate into a certain ascertainable something.

"ORGAN OF FEAR". So well, 'pure hearing' can't exist like that, but there is an 'other hearing' than the one that only realizes objects. Isn't Nietzsche's image of hearing as fear exactly such a hearing without objects? In fear we do not know what we are afraid of. And at the same time we feel embedded or rather placed and delivered into that milieu which makes us afraid. So there is neither a clearly defined object nor a clearly distinguished subject.

*(from: notebook 10/2016 - 6/2017, unpublished)*

THE NO-WORD. Philosophers say that the decisive moment that opens up the world and man's being is his yes-word to the taking place of language (141). But is it not much more the no-word that decides? Is it not precisely the exit from conversation, from understanding, and the turn to 'hearing', in which the meaning is not liquidated but 'suspended', where the consciousness of that which we have just left can appear?

THE NO-WORD TO THE NO-WORD. At first glance, it may seem confusing that this 'no' is supposed to lead us precisely into that district in which no 'no' exists. But this 'no' is interpreted as 'no' only from language, from thinking. From 'hearing', on the other hand, we enter a positive area, something present, from which the non-presence of language behind it appears. And - not to forget: the actual 'no' is the 'yes'! The assent to language is the recognition of what is not there: the no.

(From: "*Musik ist nicht wahr - oder: Warum es keine Philosophie der Musik geben kann*", Köln, *MusikTexte* 155, 2017)

PURE HEARING. If there should be such a thing (similar) at all (therefore a hearing escaping semantics), then the "pure" in it is certainly not an earlier one. On the contrary, it is something that must be wrested from meaning and thus comes 'after' it: a state of suspension that leaves meaning for a moment in the indeterminate, a pirouette or paradoxical loop that presupposes meaning in order to escape it for a fleeting non-time.

(From: "*Unsinn*", *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 2018/06)

HEADPHONES, FATIGUE.<sup>4</sup>

The piece *Weiss/Weisslich 36: Kopfhörer* deals with the existence of different ways of noticing the world around us—with, of course, two ways in particular: with or without headphones.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The following section is—partly changed—taken from the text: "Head-hearing. Notes on Perception,".

<sup>5</sup> *Weiss/Weisslich 36* consists of a set of headphones prepared with microphones. When one puts on the headphones, one hears exactly the same thing one would hear without: one hears what exists at that moment. "... contrary to the initial expectation that what is heard within and without is the same anyway, it turns out that it is, at best, alike. However that is already a euphemism: the difference between hearing of the same environment with or without headphones is enormous. The uncovered discrepancies are those in our perception ... (from "Untitled" by Christian Scheib, in Peter Ablinger: *hearing/LISTENING*, Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2008, 110). More on *Weiss/Weisslich 36*, see: <http://ablinger.mur.at/docu1515.html>

With headphones we are primarily *hearing*. Without headphones we engage in more of a typical human mixture of hearing, seeing, smelling, thinking and talking, being hungry, having cold feet, and not wanting to forget our impending appointment or necessary errand. But the moment we put our headphones on, we are ears through and through: the world seems to want to reduce itself to a primarily acoustic phenomenon.

Headphones-on and headphones-off are thus two coexisting modes of understanding the world, or rediscovering ourselves in it. Depending on the chosen mode, the world becomes another world.<sup>6</sup>

But the difference lies not just in the *reduction* to the acoustic; in fact a simultaneous *reevaluation* of the acoustic takes place. All sounds and noises are suddenly equivalent in meaning. Events, near and far, can all at once gain the same presence or importance, linguistic and nonlinguistic noises interpenetrate each other such that it becomes difficult to concentrate solely on the messages they contain, and our mechanism for distinguishing between important and unimportant information, which is normally second nature to us, no longer works—as though we had unexpectedly slipped into a Buddhist/Cagean parallel universe ...

What, precisely, is happening here?

The membrane to the outer acoustic world—ordinarily the ear—is now ten centimeters higher than usual. The shape of the ear conch, which screens incoming signals for spatial localization, is replaced by a neutral omnidirectional microphone—or rather two microphones: one left, one right. Without the individual form of our outer ear, however, the differentiation between left and right may be preserved, but—as with a typical stereo sound—the difference between above and below is lost.

Moreover, the depth of space diminishes due to the limited quality of the microphones. Thus hearing becomes flatter. But these limitations do not lead us to hear *less*, but *quite the contrary*. It's like in photography: the same view, photographed, makes us aware of things we overlook in the actual presence of the subject.

This is all, by the way, in no way dependent on technological gadgetry. On occasion, we experience the same process without technology—right around the time when we get tired. Let us imagine the following situation: we have ridden the night train to a foreign city, barely closed our eyes on the train, and now sit, dead-tired in the early morning, in a crowded café, across from the person we were scheduled to meet. We try to concentrate on the conversation, but we find it difficult. All the chipper voices at the other tables are overly present, the chorus of mumbling and

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<sup>6</sup> Weiss/Weisslich 36 consists thus not so much of a technical setup as of a difference. “‘So what one hears,’ reads one of the early descriptive sketches to the piece, ‘with or without headphones, is the same—or: a difference. This difference is the piece.’” (Christian Scheib, *ibidem*.)

clinking of cups in the background thrust into our consciousness, making it practically impossible to keep up the conversation. Our own noise confronts us as exterior noise, and even our own voice, which we don't notice at all when we're well-rested, seems foreign.

This all goes to show: the usually functional focus on speech during a conversation is an achievement of the waking brain. And is only partially related to the configuration of the ear itself.

Conversely: the abrogated differentiation between "important" and "unimportant" signals in the fatigued brain, which makes every sound land homogeneously in our ears, allows us to experience something that can show us (as with prepared headphones) that hearing is in no way a *passive* sense, as common prejudice would dictate, but that we ultimately hear only that which we also create. Perception is therefore not a passive receiving but an active creating or also constructing.

HEAR LIKE A DEER.

A comparison is necessary here.

It can certainly be said of Buddhist meditation that it also tries to empty itself of meaning and conceptual thought. Would philosophy then label it "lost in being"? Of course, for the meditator, a term like "being" does not play the slightest role. But can't one nonetheless—or precisely because of this—assume a much greater experience of contemporaneity in the meditator than in any attempt to think being? I am not a Buddhist, but I flatter myself to think I can find something comparable in music. Of course, it is clear to me that a large part of listening to music is a kind of thinking hearing or hearing thinking, which is populated with certain conceptualisms or symbolizations that it incorporates and effectively holds at the ready in the background, or else actualizes through the difference between expectation and fulfillment. But there are also moments in hearing that are at the same time completely empty and yet reach a degree of presence that corresponds to the degree of emptiness: strongest presence with greatest possible semantic emptiness. This is perhaps comparable to sudden fright. Suppose I'm alone in the forest and it's pitch dark. Suddenly I hear a noise. I freeze and my ears are pricked to the limit. Any thought would be an unforgivable inattention. I am all open expectation. Or let's imagine a deer in the same situation. The way its movement freezes at the moment of the noise. Its survival depends on hundred percent attention. After all: the danger that it could be distracted by a conceptual thought does not exist for the deer. Arguably, it is here that the Benjaminian concept of the stilling of thought is realized in its pure or "distilled" form.

What matters is this: With Benjamin, with the Buddhists, with non-symbolic hearing, with fright, maybe even with the deer—in all these cases, stilled thinking is experienced as the most concentrated form of presence, as the closest possible approximation of contemporaneity.

(From: "Hearing hearing 2 or: Thinking Without Words",  
Heinz von Foerster Lecture 2019  
in Peter Ablinger, "Now", Cologne, MusikTexte 2022)

A DISTINGUISHING THAT DOES NOT DISTINGUISH. In hearing, at a certain point, I discovered a form of perception that can be distinguished from everyday perception. I distinguish since then between a distinguishing and a non-distinguishing perception. Whereby the latter still recognizes differences and discovers details, on the level of phenomena, on which, compared to everyday listening, it can probably even muster a significantly increased attention for gradations and nuances. But it does not distinguish on the level of evaluation: no phenomenon, no event is preferred to the other. Without this evaluation, however, there is no selection, no decision in favor of a phenomenon singled out from the whole (e.g., pursuing language), which necessarily fades out or pushes the other phenomena into the background.

IT IS MORE ABOUT MAKING "SEEING, than visible"<sup>7</sup>, more about making hearing than audible. Whereby being hearing is not immediately again only there to hear, no: being hearing in order to be hearing, in order to find ourselves or someone else connected to the world via hearing. So, in a way, it is a matter of taking on a certain role, the role or attitude of hearing, a role that is by no means from an alien script: it is our role, only we usually forget that and repress it through 'something'-hearing, or focused/attentive listening, through the listening that separates us from what we hear, confronts us with it, degrades what we hear to the object of our observation.

HEARING THAT DOES NOT SAY. First, we want to ask what that might be. Then, right after that, trying to imagine something under it, we notice how much the 'normal', everyday listening actually says: it is always spelling, incessantly translating, always murmuring the corresponding text softly, never just hearing, always reading subtitles. It is a listening that is subject to the 'torture of thinking'. Conversely, a hearing that does not say would then perhaps be a situation in which someone speaks to me, but I did not follow the content, but only the sound of what was said. This too a strategy of indifference, an anti-authoritarian subversion,

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, "Aufzeichnungen eines Blinden"/"Memoires d'aveugle", cit. Wetzell: Derrida, Eine Einführung, Reclam 2019, p. 103



the interruption of the 'torture' in which I suspend signifying by simply overhearing the 'text'.<sup>8</sup>

NOT SIGNIFYING. Even if we cannot free ourselves from signifying, from meaning as an instrument of discipline, order and oppression, to preserve, or to reconquer, even a limited, temporary freedom from meaning is equivalent to the corresponding independence from what is NOT. Because the language, the text, is the negative, only it produces what is NOT.

*(From: The Undistinguished, 2019-2021, ablinger.mur.at/docs/ununterschiedene.pdf)*

AUGMENTED HEARING. 'Augmented' because, on the one hand, it is a zooming in on a particular mode of perception: hearing is prioritized over the other senses; on the other hand, because in and through such prioritization there is an expansion of what there is to hear in the first place. 'Augmented hearing' is - in contrast to Pierre Schaeffer's "reduced listening", which, as with Cage, seeks to isolate sounds, cut them out of context and reduce them to sound 'objects' - that hearing which, while not being hindered by words and concepts, also manages without the need to not know anything at all about words and concepts. Words and concepts are given, have passed through, 'traversed', but also left behind, they no longer dominate the scene, they are like 'historical' co-players, or rather co-players that have become historical, quasi no longer completely up-to-date, in a play that in the meantime goes far beyond the boundaries of concepts, 'expands' these boundaries, enlarges the enclosure and tends to dissolve it.

*(from: notebook since 2/2022, unpublished)*

**Translators: Meaghan Burke (A Music That Withdraws), Seth Brodsky (Hearing hearing 2) and DeepL (notebooks, Music is not true, Nonsense, The Undistinguished)**

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Ablinger, *Antiauthoritarian Etude*, 2016, ablinger.mur.at/txt\_antiauthoritarian.html