

Sound as Hinge / Brandon LaBelle

From *Esemplasticism: The Truth is a Compromise* (exhibition catalogue), TAG/Club Transmediale, Berlin, 2010.

I'm interested to take seriously the challenging and enriching verve of sonic materiality and the diverse experiences of auditory phenomena. To do so, I hope to follow sound as it comes to impart meaningful exchanges against the singular body, and further, how it locates such a body within a greater social weave. From my perspective, sound operates as an emergent community, stitching together bodies that do not necessarily search for each other, and forcing them into proximity. Such movements in turn come to build out a spatiality that is both coherent and divergent – acoustic spatiality is a lesson in negotiation, for it splits apart while also mending; it disrupts the lines between an inside and outside, pulling into its thrust the private and the public to ultimately remake notions of difference and commonality. All these sonic movements and behaviours must be taken as indicating a particular and unique paradigmatic structure: sound is thus an epistemic matrix generating specific spatial coordinates, social mixes, and bodily perceptions.

Following the details of this paradigmatic structure, what kind of language might begin to surface, as means to describe or to think through where we are in the throes of sonic events?

Sound may be appreciated to act as a *hinge*, bringing into contact particular contradictory forces or conditions. The operations of the voice may begin to highlight this unique ontology of sound, for the voice both gives presence to an individual body, figuring as an identifiable sound of personhood, while at the very same instant, it leaves the body behind, separating from its origin to ultimately circulate outside the self. The voice, as a special kind of sound, embodies the contradictory and dramatic force of sound to compose forms of tension: the voice hinges together self and surrounding in a seeming paradox – I am myself at the moment my voice travels beyond me. Sound in general can be heard to function similarly, creating a space that is both here and there, concrete and ephemeral; it delivers the world in all its materiality while already disappearing into the ether. Sound brings into conversation the unnameable with the nameable, the representational with the non-represented. In this way, I take sound as the very means by which we come to negotiate the challenges of presence and absence, of the real and the virtual, as they interweave into an unsteady flow of information, sensuality, energy.

The hinge of sound may come to teach us how to be present within the surges of the temporal, to locate ourselves in relation to all that disappears, or threatens to overwhelm. It could be understood as a particular form of politics, giving entry to the excluded, the repressed, the silenced through an ever-present flow of challenging noise.

To expose further this paradigmatic structure of sonic materiality, I'd like to further map out, in the form of a glossary, a set of themes or sonic figures. These may function as points of departure for travelling further into sound's particular discourse. It is my feeling that these sonic figures function as micro-epistemologies, each giving way to specific perspectives onto the world, whether in the differentiating break of the echo or the challenges found at the heart of silence. To write about sound, to house it within words, is to welcome hearing into language, as a force that brings rupture and order together, to dissolve the strict duality of rationality in favor of the work of the

imagination – that, as Arjun Appadurai suggests, may act as a form of new labor by which the intensities of contemporary culture are managed.

*

Echo – multiplication and repetition of a given sound; it breaks the temporal vector of sound, folding back on itself to appear as if from an unseen source: *who's there?* the echo speaks, giving shape to an unseen, acousmatic body. The echo brings forward a disorienting multiplication, shattering the clear arc of sound to give us the experience of difference: the echo, as an acousmatic body, a voice coming back from over there, from out of the dark, haunts the listener; it returns our own voice as if from another's, performing as an alter-ego, a shape-shifting sonority that replaces the single sound with a differentiating repetition.

Silence and Noise – the imaginary edges to auditory experience; they provide physical as well as phantasmic points against which sounds are measured, fantasized, conveyed; they gather the intensities of auditory experience, locating sound upon a philosophical and ethical scale, making volume a community issue and audition a political process. Silence and noise are an oppositional antagonism, with noise rending the system open and silence allowing all things to find their place.

Rhythm – the making of a particular order; it rivets together time and space according to certain energy expenditures, defining a relation amongst bodies and things; it is a field (the percussive) in which different orders meet, regimenting bodies while also affording acts of modulation and breakage (*to dance the night away...*); the beat is a territorial dispute, an argument; it is a violence bringing pain and pleasure together, teaching us how to find place and also how to redefine, reorganize or disrupt existing patterns.

Vibration – energetic materialization of an auditory event; it moves through given objects and bodies, shifting the particular borders of given architectures, and reconfiguring how things meet through an emphasis on contact; a tactility of sound from which we learn the sensual delight of the skin; vibration extends the sensing body, unfolds the skin toward a geographic field, putting into physical contact self and surrounding. As an undulation of pressures, vibration brings things together, giving us an experience of commonality: whereas the echo breaks sound into a differentiating repetition, a rupture, vibration creates links and bonds, togetherness.

Feedback – passing of energy between an input and an output; a communicational link between self and surrounding, feedback makes possible forms of participation within given environments; it creates a sensitive loop through which information, exchange, and transference occur. The loop of feedback importantly performs as a social-sonic field, continually shifting and modulating according to external influence, shared space, and other pressures; it makes communication a nuanced process of engagement as well as distraction.

Transmission – the transference of sound from one place to another; it charges the already propagating verve of sound with electronic energy, sculpting and contouring a given sound according to the ontology of the signal (alien communication, utopian collectivity, magic); it supplies the imagination with the very potential of flight, disembodiment, aerial dissolution. Transmission is an invisible transgression and molecular reconfiguration of the body; it constructs a new version of space by connecting multiple points, giving potential to acts of agitation and propaganda, creating community out of the air.