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Violence Heard: The Ekphrasis of Sound from Thundering Sea Battles to Thick Silence

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[1] The study of violence has long been marked by the dominance of scopophilia, the love of the visual. There is a practical reason for this: sound could not be recorded until the late nineteenth century. In the case of the early modern period, the scopophilic emphasis is intensified thanks to the explosion of images that resulted from rapidly developing print techniques and the baroque fascination with visual representations (Van Duijnen 2019). In recent decades, however, more and more attention has been paid to the relevance of sound in our making sense of periods, situations and texts. Relatively few studies, though, pay this kind of attention to representations of violence, although there is ample reason to do so. Images and texts start to work differently, affectively, when sound is taken into consideration. This paper therefore attempts to focus on the sound of early modern violence, by considering the acoustic analogy to what in the field of texts and images has been defined as *ekphrasis*. Our argument is that in its transformation from a classical rhetorical concept to a modern literary concept, ekphrasis lost its voice, and, by implication, its sound.

[2] We will develop our argument in four steps. First, we will define what we mean by 'ekphrasis of sound' and illustrate its relevance for the representation of violence. Second, we will focus on how ekphrasis of sound involves the imagination of space, both in terms of a source and of a surrounding. Third, we will deal with the symbolic aspect of ekphrasis of sound, since the experience of sound is different from the way in which sounds acquire symbolical meaning in texts. Finally, we will focus on representations in which sound acquires its force through forms of silence, as an expression of threat – and we note beforehand, here, that silence is not the absence of sound.

1. Ekphrasis of sound: vividness in the representation of violence

[3] In a study titled *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*, Ruth Webb shows how modern definitions of ekphrasis deviate from its original use to describe a rhetorical concept. In modern literary criticism, ekphrasis is usually seen as a text or textual fragment that engages with visual art or that is considered in the competition between the textual and the visual in terms of *paragone* (Mitchell 1986, 1994). In the modern literary context, a few paradigmatic examples of definitions of ekphrasis are, as mentioned by Webb: 'the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art', or 'the verbal representation of visual representation' or even more basic 'words about an image'. Yet according to Webb, a classical rhetorical definition of ekphrasis would be 'a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes' (Webb 2009: 1). When Caspar De Jonge (2016), building on Webb, dealt with ekphrasis in the context of rhetorical education, he pointed out two differences between the ancient *rhetorical* concept of ekphrasis and the modern *literary* understanding of the term. According to De Jonge, firstly, descriptions of objects or works of art are hardly ever mentioned in rhetorical exercises; they deal, rather, with descriptions of persons, events, times and places. Secondly, ancient rhetoricians focus on ekphrasis because of their concern with the impact on the recipients' minds. Ekphrasis is aimed at how the reader or listener can somehow be turned into a spectator who feels present at the scene described (De Jonge 2016: 210).

[4] What the classical rhetorical definition of ekphrasis shares with modern literary definitions, then, is the exciting intercommunication of speech and view, words and images, verbal and visual. Yet there are three pivotal differences. One difference is that literature concerns the written text, with its descriptions, that is mostly read in silence. The classical definition concerns the spoken word of orators who are listened to, operating rhetorically and, at times, theatrically. A second point is that the subject of classical rhetorical ekphrasis is not restricted to objects of visual art, as is the case in the modern definition. Instead, the subjects that were considered particularly appropriate had more dimensions than a mere silent object: they concerned people, events, times and places. The third difference is that the aim of ekphrasis was not the description in itself but the impact on the listener's mind (De Jonge 2016: 209-210). The classical rhetorical term for this impact is, as De Jonge mentions, *enargeia* (ἐνάργεια) which can be translated as 'sensory vividness'. It concerns the experience of any audience's being, as it were, present at the scene. In recent studies this effect is also called 'immersion' (Allan, De Jong & De Jonge 2017).

[5] Since description is not the purpose of ekphrasis, De Jonge points out that it is misleading to translate ἔκφρασις as such. He explains that the verb ἔκφρασειν means 'complete telling' or 'complete showing': the prefix ἐκ- expresses integrality, completeness and thoroughness. This, we will translate in what follows as an issue of detailed-ness, which has as its aim the vividness of a representation. The verb φράζειν, in turn, means 'to communicate' or 'to tell' and has, since Homer, a visual connotation, which links it to 'showing' (De Jonge 2016: 210). Yet this showing is again multi-sensory, just as people, events, times, and places are multidimensional and multisensory. If the aim is to evoke them as completely as possible one cannot only call upon the mind's eye, but has to involve the mind's ear as well.

[6] If classical rhetorical ekphrasis wanted to turn the listener into a spectator, the subject matter that this spectator was supposed to behold could not be complete so long as sound was not in play. Perhaps the visual connotation of φράζειν in Homer caused a shift from more general scenes to a focus on specific objects considered fit for ekphrasis, to visual art. But if we move back to the original topics (people, events, times places), we have to assume that ekphrasis had an acoustic component. Perhaps this acoustic component has not been stressed in the Greek and Roman schoolbooks because it was self-evidently present in the voice of the orator. As stated earlier, in its transformation from a rhetorical to a literary concept, ekphrasis lost its voice. Yet in working by means of an ekphrasis, the orator presents a detailed story in a theatrical manner, evoking in its completeness a clear presentation for a listener, who is turned, as it were, into a spectator of the presented event. Accordingly, although visual terms dominate in relation to ekphrasis, its aim (*enargeia*) is not restricted to the visual. Sensory vividness implies all the senses and thus opens the door to the acoustic. The relevance for the representation of violence will be clear: sound is pivotal in not keeping violence at a distance but making it felt.

[7] In the examples that follow, the mechanisms of this original definition of ekphrasis are at work, and in this context we aim to show that violence is very much a matter of sound, which may be self-evident. Yet more specifically, our aim is to argue that the bodily impact of violence on an audience may depend on its capacity to hear such sounds. To analyse this connection between sound and the impact of violence, we want to broaden the scope of classical ekphrasis by looking not only at text or spoken word, but also at images – images that work rhetorically. In all cases our definition of the ekphrasis of sound is that the level of detail in text or image contributes fundamentally to its sensory vividness, which in turn helps any audience to be, as it were, present at the scene. If ekphrasis of sound takes place in a written text, its words can turn the reader into a listener in whose mind sounds come to resound; by the same mechanism, images can turn the viewer into someone who is also open to aural perception.

[8] We opt for the phrase 'ekphrasis of sound', here, as opposed to the existing terms 'acoustic ekphrasis' or 'musical ekphrasis'. The latter is mostly used for the musical representation of an event, as in Tchaikovski's *Ouverture 1812*, in which battle scenes between Russian and Napoleonic forces are represented by musical means. In line with the modern definition of ekphrasis, 'musical ekphrasis' is used to indicate that music is describing something else.**[1]** 'Acoustic ekphrasis', meanwhile, is synonymous with 'ekphrasis of music', and is used to describe musical pieces or musical performances captured by language in a literary text. This is the acoustic equivalent of the modern idea of ekphrasis in which language is used to describe a visual work of art (Bernam 2004, Schirrmacher 2016).

2. Matters of detail: from description to telling it completely

[9] Our definition of the ekphrasis of sound is a matter of detail, which is obviously a matter of scale. Consider a poem by the merchant and poet Johannes Six van Chandelier (1620-1695), a poem inspired by the unexpected operation of an instrument of violence: 'On the cracking of my gun, against gunpowder' (*Op het barsten van mijn pistool, teegens buskruid*). The poem informs us that the narrator was at sea when his gun backfired and missed his head by a hair's breadth. The cracking of a gun is a multisensory experience with a strong acoustic component, evident in the word 'cracking' (*barsten*). Yet the description of the cracking gun, with the poet present in the cabin of a captain Blok, is so concise that it does not work as ekphrasis:

> Daar 'k hier, op zee, in Bloks kajuit,
> Myn sakpistool loste achter uit,
> Dat barstende in een klaaren donder,
> Myn hoofd voor by schoot, tot groot wonder.
> (Chandelier 1991: 569, ll. 89-92)
>
> *When here, at sea, in Blok's cabin*
> *I backfired my gun,*
> *Which bursting in a clear thunder,*
> *Missed my head by great wonder.***[2]**

The reader will form some kind of image and imagination of the sound of this event, but Six van Chandelier does not, by means of a detailed narration, make the reader or hearer as it were present at the occasion. The poem remains on the level of description.

[10] In the opening lines, Six van Chandelier deals with the history of gunpowder and then hints at something that is of relevance in relation to ekphrasis of sound. He gives the example of Apelles, considered to be the greatest painter from classical antiquity (whose work is solely known via ekphrasis). Apelles's paintings managed to render the roaring of thunder in such a way that viewers felt the urge to protect themselves against its violence.

> Die Fenix, aller schildren wonder,
> Houdt d'eer, hy 't rollen van den donder,
> Als die, uit dikke wolken, straalt
> Met barstingh, zoo heeft afgemaalt,
> Dat niemand, sonder lauwerieren,
> Het oogh dorst wenden, naa die vieren.
> (Chandelier 1991: 569, ll. 7-12)
>
> *This Phoenix, a wonder to all painters,*
> *Holds the honour of having painted the rolling of thunder,*
> *When it shines forth from fat clouds*

With outbursts, in such a way,
That none, without laurels,
Dared to turn his eyes to those fires.

This example demonstrates how ekphrasis of sound might work through images. Apparently, Apelles' painting caught the thunderstorm in such detail, completeness and vividness that the average viewer might experience the thunderstorm in all its dimensions, not only seeing the fat clouds but also hearing the rolling of thunder. Thus, the viewer is also turned into a listener, because the painter managed to paint 'the rolling of thunder'.

[11] One clear example of successful ekphrasis of sound, as the detailed textual or visual capturing of sound with vividness as effect, is the painting by Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707), 'The canon shot' (*Het kanonschot*, 1680):

Figure 1. Willem van de Velde the Younger, 'The cannon shot', 1680, oil on canvas, 78.5 x 67 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Object number SK-C-244.

The title already indicates that this picture has sound as its subject. The sea on the painting is almost completely flat, and its surface not only reflects the light, but would also form the most effective acoustic ground for reverberating sound. Wind and waves could attenuate or partly overrule the acoustic strength of the explosion, but the flat waters amplify the sound of the shot dramatically. An indication that this painting should be experienced acoustically is the fact that we do not see the side of the ship where the canon is actually fired. Only a

little light from the canon's flash is visible to the left side of the ship, but the actual explosion is not visualised. Instead, we see the cloud of smoke stretching out over almost the entire width of the painting, indicating the thunderous roaring of the canon over the still waters.

[12] The picture captures something, here, that is an often-ignored aspect of sound. Whereas vision is immediate, sound takes time. Visually, the cloud is the remains of the canon shot. It is also an icon for the way in which sound appears and spreads itself through time. The cloud suggests both the immediacy of sound by means of the explosive, loud appearance of the shot – it bursts into the air in the very moment of its witnessing – and the difference between the immediate visual perception of the event of the shot and its acoustic delay. In this context, an acoustically meaningful accent in the painting is the presence of the gulls in the foreground near the water surface. Gull cries are piercing sounds that carry far over a flat sea. But in this painting the gulls are not only miniscule figures alongside the impressive war ship; their cries are also drowned out by the thundering shot of the canon. Their presence thus stresses the enormous impact of the sound that the picture captures. Another source of noise in the painting, contrasting with the stillness of the water, is the human voice, indicated by the dramatic gestures of the seamen on the pinnaces. Next to the human voice there is the sound of human activity. The warship is crowded with sailors at work, as is the pinnace to the left, the oars of which splash the water's surface as if to move away from the thundering sound, further emphasizing the way the canon shot fills its environment.

[13] Willem van de Velde the Younger captures sound in this picture to such an extent, in such detail and completion, that it turns the viewer into a listener, thus performing the ekphrasis of sound. The difference with Six van Chandelier is, then, the intensity of detail and completeness. Meanwhile, the image also presents us with a double quality of sound that makes it distinct from the textual or visual. Sound both has a source, and will surround the listener. It is this double capacity that is of relevance in the representation of violence.

3. The theatre of violence: surrounding sound and sound's source

[14] On the morning of August 10, 1653, the retired doctor and poet Jacob Westerbaen set himself to read and write in the quiet study of his estate Ockenburg. This estate was located about one kilometre from the coast near The Hague. However, his peaceful study was suddenly disturbed by violent sounds:

> My grouwelt van den dagh, die niet en sal verouwen,
> Doe 't huylen in myn buyrt der brullende kortouwen
> Quam stooren myne rust door 't dreunen en 't gedruys
> Van myne vensteren en glaesen in myn kluys,
> Daer ick my had geset te leesen en te schryven
> Om in myn eensaemheyt den uchtend te verdryven.
> Myn blyven was niet langh daer buyten het geschut
> My seyde, komter uyt, wat meackt ghy in uw hut?
> Kom, hoor en sie, so verre' ghy oor en oogh kunt recken
> (Westerbaen 1654: 94)
>
> *I am still horrified by the day, which I can never forget,*
> *When the howling in my neighbourhood of roaring cannons*
> *Came to disrupt my tranquillity by the thundering and rattling*
> *Of my windows and their glass in the cell,*
> *Where I had seated myself to read and write*
> *To pass through the morning in loneliness.*
> *My stay there did not last long since outside the guns*

Told me: 'Come outside, what are you doing in your cabin?
Come, hear and see, as far as ear and eye can stretch…'

Westerbaen here describes his experience of the last sea battle in the first Anglo-Dutch war (1652-1654), as part of an extensive poem on his estate. The battle – called the Battle of Ter Heijde by the Dutch, and the Battle of Scheveningen by the English – started on 8 August near the coast of Wijk aan Zee, about 70 kilometres north of Ter Heijde. It was witnessed by audiences from the dunes along the coastline. As we learn from Westerbaen's poem, the battle announced itself from a distance through sound that manifested itself close by, invisible sound waves rattling the glass. As a result, there are two sources of sound: one that has a direction but no pinpointed source, and one that is nearby and does have a source.

[15] The sound waves from afar not only move the glass: they also move the narrator. The sound speaks to him, lyrically, and urges him to come out of his study and witness the violence. The poet climbs the dunes to join the audience:

Ick kom, en hoor en sie; het dondert op het waeter,
Het vinnigh blixem-vyer met grouwelijck geklaeter
Ging uyt een dicke wolck gedreven by der zee.
Ken't Jupiter om hoogh, men kent beneden mee.
Als hy syn vlam laet sien en synen donder hooren
Geeft hy wat tusschen-tijds aen oogen en aen ooren,
Hier gaet het anders toe, het dondert even dicht,
Daer's niet een oogen-blick dat dese buye swicht.
(Westerbaen 1654: 95)

I come and hear and see; it thunders on the water,
The fierce lightning fire with horrific splatter
Came out of a vast cloud rolling above the sea.
What Jupiter can do above, people can do down here too.
When he shows his flame and makes his thunder be heard
He gives some intervals to eyes and ears,
Here it goes differently, it thunders so densely,
There is not one instant that this storm relents.

Westerbaen describes both the auditory and visual aspects of the battle. In his comparison of the sound of the cannons with a thunderstorm, the rhythm of natural or divine thunder differs from that of human artifice. The battle's thundering knows no rest, it is an incessant roaring. But the audience is given a break as the low tide draws the battling ships away from the coast:

Maer wind en ebbe nam het verder sien en hooren,
Die 't oogh den roock ontvoer, en het geluyt den ooren,
Tot dat de vloed weerom, die nae de middagh quam,
Aen oogh en ooren gaf dat wind en ebbe nam.
(Westerbaen 1654: 95)

But wind and low tide took the seeing and hearing with them,
By taking the smoke from sight, and the sound from ears,
Up until high tide again, coming in the afternoon,
Returned to eye and ears what wind and low tide had taken.

This quote shows a fascinating play with the differences in distance that work differently on what can be seen and heard. At first not much more could be seen than a massive cloud from which the roaring canons resounded. And as the sight and sound of both are removed by the effects of low tide and wind, high tide brings sound and vision closer again.

[16] One spectator who did not have such a break was Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693). Van de Velde, one of Holland's most influential seascape painters (Prud'homme van Reine 2009), was employed by the States General to record the course of the battle, much like a reporter. He witnessed it from a small boat, called a *galjoot*, from which he made sketches. In elaborating these into pen paintings afterwards, Van de Velde has a habit of not presenting the scene from his own perspective, but instead inserting himself in the galjoot into the picture:

Figure 2. Willem van de Velde the Elder, detail from 'The Battle of Terheide', 1657, ink on canvas, 170 x 289 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Object number SK-A-1365

This detail, in which one can actually see the pen in Van de Velde's hand, is part of a scene from the battle of Ter Heijde. Van de Velde's appearance in the small boat is part of a bigger picture, however, with the galjoot slightly to the left of centre, as seen below:

Figure 3. Willem van de Velde the Elder, 'The Battle of Terheide', 1657, ink on canvas, 170 x 289 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Object number SK-A-1365

Van de Velde artfully lifts up the perspective to a bird's eye view (or that from a high dune), in order to show the immense proportions of the fleets, while at the same time showing himself, drawing in the small boat in the front. The painter and his company consequently come to function as a *mise-en-abyme*. They combine both the larger audience looking at this theatre of war and spectators inside the scene of war.

[17] Another piece is a sketch that Van de Velde the Elder actually made in his galjoot at the battle of Ter Heijde. He probably worked out the details of the drawing afterwards, but his annotations made in the course of the battle are still visible at the top: 'The last charge near midday being about two o'clock & Tromp lost his main topmast about midday' (our translation).**[3]**

Figure 4. Willem van de Velde the Elder, 'The Battle of Scheveningen, 31 July 1653: the last pass in the battle', 1653, graphite & wash, grey, 228 x 363 mm, Royal Museums Greenwich, Object ID: PAH1713. © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London. Available online at <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/141660.html>.

Even though this drawing shows the battle from sea level, Van de Velde inserts another galjoot into the picture, on the far right this time, partly covered by a cloud of smoke. The small, fast and easily manageable galjoots were commonly used by war fleets for

communication purposes (Daalder 2016: 86). This galjoot might thus have been there in the scene Van de Velde witnessed, but here it also functions as a reference to his own presence in a similar vessel, another *mise-en-abyme*.

[18] In terms of an ekphrasis of sound, the sounds of violence are part of a larger soundscape. The sea is relatively tranquil, but still forms the keynote for everything that happens. The term *keynote*, or *tonic*, indicates a sound that forms the acoustic ground upon which other sounds present themselves (Murray Schafer 1977: 9-10). Other sounds constituting this ground include the wind, indicated by the movements of the clouds and flags and sails. In themselves the latter are not sounds of violence, although they are indices to it, just as the sounds of ships moving through the waters are indexical to it. That movement is indicated, here, by the ripples of the water at the front and sides of the ships. Sounds of violence are apparent in the sailors drowning to the left, or being rescued by the pinnaces that carry off survivors of ships that have already been destroyed, as we can see between the two ships on the left. Most prominent are the clouds produced by the thundering canons, with Dutch and English ships enmeshed in close range battles. These clouds confuse the perspective of the image, or, rather, make it very difficult to define the vanishing point. As a result, the eye has to roam. Acoustically speaking, this is an icon for the way in which sound *surrounds*. It has the capacity to engulf. Iconic, here, is the galjoot to the right – referencing the galjoot in which Van de Velde found himself – deprived of any perspective by a cloud of smoke.

[19] If we compare the two reports of Westerbaen and Van de Velde on the battle of Ter Heijde it is clear that their different forms of focalisation result in a different capturing and rendering of sound. With Westerbaen, listening from a fixed point, the audience would hear the violent sounds increase and decrease with the tide, while the galjoot is inside the scene and is completely surrounded by the sounds that Willem van de Velde the Elder captures visually. The imagined reorganisation of a scene, either through images or words, allows for the pinpointing of the source of sound as coming from a distinct subject, or for a visual rendering of how sound surrounds. In both cases sound does not stay outside of the body. The essence of sound is that it may make windows rattle, that it can enter the body, that it may make bodies vibrate. In the experience of violence this is pivotal. Having dealt with matters of experience above, we now move to the question of what sounds may *mean* and the relevance of the ekphrasis of sound in that context.

4. The music of violence: symbolic sound

[20] In the same battle of Ter Heijde, the ship of one of Holland's most famous admirals, Maarten Tromp, lost its main topmast, and the admiral himself was killed by a sniper. On the occasion of his funeral, Johannes Six van Chandelier wrote a poem that describes the battle and mourns his loss:

> O! Petten, wat een naar gehuil
> Loeit, op uw strand, uit Nereus kuil.
> De donder, en de blixemmynen,
> Aan 't braaken, uit tweehondert pynen,
> Halsstarrigh anderhalven dagh,
> Om Engelands of Hollands vlagh,
> Saam strydend, konnen 't hart des kykers,
> Des Scheevlingers, en Beverwykers
> Zoo niet, met schrik, beklemmen, als
> De neerlaagh van dien strydbren hals.
> (Chandelier 1991: 604-605)

Oh! City of Petten, what dismal howling
Lows, on your beach, from Nereus' pit.
The thunder and lightning mines,
Spewing from two hundred pines,
Stubbornly, for one and a half days,
For Holland's or England's flag,
Mutually battling, could no viewer's heart,
Of Scheveningen or Beverwijk peoples,
Oppress as much with fright, as
The defeat of this combative man.

In contrast to Westerbaen, Six van Chandelier was not part of the audience that witnessed the battle. His invocation of the city of Petten is based on an erroneous pamphlet claiming that the battle started near the coast of Petten on August 8, while it actually started about 35 kilometres to the south near the coast of Wijk aan Zee (Chandelier 1991: II.631). Yet the theatricality of the event is captured again by describing its audience: the people are summoned from Petten, Scheveningen and Beverwijk, all coastal towns. In our analysis the description is again not detailed or complete enough for an ekphrasis but stays on the level of description. Yet the passage does point to another level of analysis: described sounds acquire a symbolic function.

[21] The sea is represented as a pit from which a howling sound wails (*loeit*) over the beach. 'Loeien' (to wail) is a verb that refers to sounds that are heavy, deep, long-stretched and consequently have a howling character. In Dutch, the verb is used to indicate the sound of cows, storms, large fires, and human beings in agony. In his evocation of a 'dismal howling', Six opens with exactly the same word (*gehuil*) that Westerbaen used to start his description of the sound of the sea battle: 'the howling (*huilen*) of the roaring cannons'. In describing the explosions as resonant howling sounds, the two authors give a metaphoric voice to them that connotes pain. In relation to this there is a double loaded word that calls for attention in Six's poem: 'pines' (*pijnen*). In Dutch this denotes not only pine-trees, indicating the material of which ships were partly made, but also 'pains'. The word thus conveys the pains suffered by those on the ships, but also the pain suffered by the ships themselves, built from pine trees, signifying either cries of pain or the snapping sounds of cracking wood. And there is yet other pain involved. In his lament for admiral Tromp, Six van Chandelier states that all the horrific sounds spreading over the beach of Petten could not frighten the audience as much as the news of the death of their admiral. The painful sounds he evokes metonymically indicate another kind of pain: the hurt done to a nation fighting under one flag.

[22] If Six stayed on the level of description, without enough detail to pull the reader or listener into the scene, let us now move to Holland's greatest poet, playwright and writer of occasional poetry: Joost van den Vondel. His lament over Tromp's death proves him to be an expert in using the ekphrasis of sound while giving symbolic meaning to actual sounds of violence. The passage below may make clear what the difference is between Six's description, and this one, as a matter of ekphrasis of sound.

Laet zich Europe niet verwondren,
Alscheen de weerelt te vergaen,
Toen, uit den Noortschen Oceaen,
Dat oorloghsonweêr op quam dondren,
En baldren over duin, en strant,
Een' halven dagh, en noch een' heelen;
Tweehondert dryvende kasteelen;
De bare zee in lichten brant;
De barstende salpeterwolcken,

En d'elementen altemael
Gelost van 't zwangere metael,
Op 't vlack, daer twee vermaertste Volcken
Te water, boort aen boort geklampt,
Hun' wellust schepten, in 't vernielen
Van eicke ribben, mast, en kielen,
En menschebeen, tot stof gestampt;
Dat moortgeschrey, en yzerbraecken;
De doôn en levenden, gemengt,
Gebraên, verdroncken, en gezengt;
Dat weerlicht, blixemen, en kraecken;
Zoo veel gewelts heeft altemael
Gezweet om HARPERTS te beschreien,
En 't lyck en d'uitvaert te geleien
Van Hollants Grooten AMIRAEL;
(Van der Vondel 1931: 581)

Let Europe not wonder,
Although the world seemed to perish,
When, from the northern ocean,
The storm of war came thundering,
And rolling over dune, and beach,
For half a day, and yet another one;
Two hundred floating castles;
The naked sea on fire;
The bursting clouds of nitre,
And the elements all together
Released from pregnant metal,
On the floor, where two famous nations
In the waters, clenched board by board,
Sought lust, in the destruction
Of oak ribs, masts, and keels,
And the bones of men, stamped to ashes;
That murderous crying, and spewing iron;
The dead and the living, mixed,
Baked, drowned, and burned;
That lightening, flashing, and cracking;
So much violence has all together
Sweated to bemoan HARPERTS,
To accompany the corpse and funeral
Of Holland's great ADMIRAL;

Here, the lyrical subject first evokes the violence dramatically, appealing to all the senses, and above all to the ear. Just as with Westerbaen, the theatre of war announces itself by sound spreading over the dunes and beaches. Then the actors enter the stage, a massive cast of two hundred floating castles setting the sea on fire. Vondel makes his audience feel and hear the human bones mashed to ashes, smell the clouds of nitre and the roasted flesh of those who could not escape the fire, even taste the smoke, the ashes and the salty water. And even when sight is lost as the actors vanish behind clouds of smoke or below the water surface, the sounds of screams, cannons and cracking wood still prevail. Then the lyrical subject suddenly transforms his role from being more of a theatrical director to being a composer or musical conductor who translates the sounds of violence into music. The description of the musical accompaniment of Tromp's funeral is a pun on the middle name of the admiral: Maerten *Harpert*szoon Tromp. The cacophony of violence has come to accompany harps that sing to the admiral on his last journey.

[23] A similar process takes place in a triumphal song ('Zegezang') that Vondel wrote for another, even greater admiral, Michiel de Ruyter, on his victory at the Four Days Battle (June 11-14, 1666) during the second Anglo-Dutch war. Here the musical element is even stronger; or simply dominant. First Vondel thematises the difference between fact and fiction. The ancient poets wrote about heroes at sea, about the sailors of the Argo passing through the Symplegates to fetch the golden fleece or Perseus killing the sea monster, but these were all 'lies', fictional stories. Instead, Vondel will sing praise of a real event. Yet after claiming just this, Vondel clothes the battle as unrealistically in a classical way by presenting an audience of mermaids and mermen and the god Mars ascending from the heavens. The mermaids and mermen are not just watching a performance, they are singing, and thereby fulfil the role of the choir, which formed the link between the dramatic act and the audience in classical drama. Mars is the theatrical *deus ex machina* entering the scene to designate the winner. The drama Vondel thus presents becomes a musical drama conducted by De Ruyter; the battle is presented as a brilliant composition from his hand, supported by the hand of God:

> Waer voerde oit RUITER zoo rechtschapen
> In zijnen schilt het eêlste wapen,
> Voorzichtigheit en krijghsbeleit,
> Het oogh in eene hand van boven,
> In 't midden van dien gloênden oven,
> Gesterkt van Gods almogenheit.
> Dees' zeehelt gaf de maet en wetten
> Aen zoo veel stemmen van trompetten,
> Kartouwe en donderbussse, in een,
> Als naer de zangkunst hecht geslooten,
> En rolde, op korte en lange nooten
> Den oorloghsgalm op 't water heen.
> Meerminnen meermans Tritons hooren
> Den bas en bovenzang der koren
> Van Mars, gesteegen in de mars,
> Die met de koningsvlagh quam daelen
> Al juichende, op de zeekooraelen
> In 't houte en ysre krijghsgekners
> En twijfelen der oorloghskansen.
> Nu zwijgen d'oude harnasdanssen.
> (Van der Vondel 1937: 212-213)

> *Where did ever a RUITER carry so honestly*
> *In his shield the noblest blazon,*
> *Foresight and war strategy,*
> *The eye in one hand from above,*
> *In the middle of that glowing oven,*
> *Strengthened by God's almightiness.*
> *This sea hero gave measure and rules*
> *To so many voices of trumpets,*
> *Kartaws and blunderbusses, together,*
> *Like the well-composed art of song,*
> *And rolled on shorter and longer notes*
> *The sound of war over the waters.*
> *Mermaids and mermen's Triton's horn*
> *The bass and soprano voice of choirs*
> *Of Mars, high up in the mast,*
> *Who came down with the king's flag*
> *Rejoicing, in the sea chorales*

In the wooden and iron grinding of battle
And contingencies of war.
Now the old harnass-dances remain silent.

De Ruyter is conducting the orchestra of war, then, and Vondel symbolically shifts the sound of war to another domain by turning it into the triumphant music of victory and by structuring the battle as music. Meanwhile, he makes De Ruyter do exactly the same thing we saw Willem van de Velde the Elder do in his pen drawing of the enormous fleets at the battle of Ter Heijde. The focalising eye is lifted up to the level of a bird, or a god. It is thus creating an overview of, and giving structure to, an otherwise completely chaotic situation, while at the same time being present in the scene, in the fire of its oven, with its smoke clouding the eye.

5. Liminal silence: anatomy's threat

[24] Whereas in war scenes the sounds of violence are explicit, abundantly present and dominant, there is also a sound of violence in silence. We turn, finally, towards the silence of violent horror, or rather to two different forms of silence that are meaningful in differing ways. In 'The Sovereign Ear: Handel's Water Music and Aural Historiography', Sander van Maas analyses sound and the organ that perceives sound, the ear, in its relation to the historical and political origins of political sovereignty. His most important partner in dialogue is Roland Barthes' essay 'Écoute'.**[4]** There, Barthes develops a distinction between hearing and listening, analogous to the difference between looking and seeing. As Van Maas puts it:

> In keeping with Nietzsche, who dubbed the ear 'the organ of fear' and saw a close connection between the art of music and the dark of night, Barthes' representation of listening insists on the experience of insecurity and on acts of vigilance as points of gravitation that pull listening back, as if they were the dark matter of the ear. The history of listening would appear to resonate with the idea of sovereignty and its others (surveillance, control), including the experience of threat and violence. (Van Maas 2018: 159)

The quote alludes to a passage in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudice of Morality* in which the term 'dark' denotes a characteristic of the ear, as an outer organ with an inner cavern, or a spiral inward towards the darkness through which sound penetrates the head and thereby the body. Nietzsche's aphorism is a short one, which also notes that 'in bright daylight the ear is less necessary' (Nietzsche 1997: 143). It is in the dark, whether the dark of night or of caverns or cells, that human beings listen, in order to register what is 'out there'. Van Maas aims to analyse the relation between violence and the dark, on the one hand, and the relation between violence and silence, on the other. If the ear is the organ of fear, of insecurity and vigilance, this is not because of what it already hears, but because of what it listens to, of what is to come, unexpectedly, and if not unexpected, then feared.

[25] If the relation between violence and silence concerns this element of the threat of what is to come, then silence in relation to violence consequently has a double characteristic. In the sound of silence, it is the sound of coming violence that is imminent. Or the sound of silence is what theologist Burcht Pranger defined as *liminal sound*: 'a realm of pure possibility' (2018: 230). In the context of violence, this comes down to a feeling of 'anything may happen', even if this anything is what one already feared. This double or liminal quality of silence is evident in the following image, taken from Govert Bidloo's *Ontleding des Menschelijk Lichaams* (*Dissection of the Human Body*) from 1690.

Figure 5. Gerard de Lairesse (drawing) and Abraham Blooteling and Pieter Stevens van Gunst (engravers), 'Engraved Plate no. 70', in: Govert Bidloo: *Ontleding des menschelyken lichaams*, 1690, National Library of Medicine, Bethesda. Photo credits: NLM.

Bidloo was a trained doctor who became a famous anatomist, as well as a poet and playwright. In close cooperation with the artist Gerard de Lairesse, he published this impressive book of the entire anatomy of the human body, male and female. We are here concerned with table 70, a dissection of the left hand and lower part of the arm. Though the picture suggests nothing but silence, since the act of dissecting has already passed, the image resonates with several reminiscences and possibilities of sound.

[26] Whereas on other plates the instruments of dissection that helped to cut or saw the body are shown, in this case the instruments shown function predominantly to keep things apart, with the uncanny result that the tendons are put under tension. There is one needle at the bottom that pierces the middle three fingers to show the tendons running to the fingertips. The instrument to the right consists of three parts, with one larger comb being kept in place by two pins in order to show five tendons: two for the index finger, one for the thumb, and one for the middle and ring finger each. The compass-like instrument to the

left, meanwhile, is to separate and keep in place the two tendons running to the middle finger and index finger. The resulting image very much resembles a stringed instrument. Whereas previously we saw a sea battle that could be read and heard as a musical piece, here we have a body part that can be read (and listened to) like a musical instrument. The sounds that this silent image suggests are both harmonious and chilling, however. The sounds of dissection, on the one hand, fall under the frame of anatomy in their attempt to show the harmony inherent in the human body. On the other hand, the sounds capture precisely the practical consequences of anatomy: the perhaps soft but also sharp sounds of dissection, in accordance with the title of the volume: *Ontleding* – that is, 'dissection'.

[27] The notion of silence as a liminal sound appears to be inapplicable here if we read it in terms of what Pranger defined as 'pure possibility'. The dissection, after all, has already taken place; the violence has already been enacted. Yet as Jonathan Sawday (1996) argued, the very manifestation of dissection and anatomy in so-called anatomical theatres across Europe was a clear sign of sovereign power. As Sawday states: 'The anatomists traced the handiwork of God in each body brought to them, and thus reaffirmed the monarch's power over the bodies of people' (191). In this light the theatres posed an implicit threat to all subjects, a threat of what might conceivably happen to them. In this context, the silence of the images is indeed a liminal silence, in that it shows the thin line between subjects being able to live their lives and being subjected to torture and dissection. This liminal silence is captured, here, by tendons put under tension. That tension not only announces the possibility of their snapping, but also embodies the threat that keeps subjects in tension. They could be taken apart in a similar way. The pins and compass that are pinned in the wood connote the threat of other sounds, moreover, of things being hammered into subjects, pinning them down, both literally and acoustically.

6. Thick silence: bodies enslaved

[28] In the context of violence, liminal silence is a silence of threat and fear. No actual sounds are textually or visually present, but they are suggested. Such a silence is different from, though contiguous with, the silence that is the result of a violence that affects live bodies in the present. We will define the latter silence as 'thick silence' in what follows. Such a silence is central to some of the situations described by Rebecca Parker Brienen in her study of representations of the Brazilian situation under Dutch colonial rule. As she notices, there were fairly few representations showing the real violence that characterized the lives of enslaved people. Yet the few representations we have show their 'miserable existence', driven together in 'pathetic, huddled groups' (Brienen 2006: 136). Such groups are conveniently absent in the following image, made by Pieter Nason in 1666, of Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679). As governor, he was responsible for the development of the transatlantic slave trade by the Dutch (Emmer 2005), the impact of which has been the topic of fierce debates in recent years (Fatah-Black & Van Rossum 2016).**[5]**

Figure 6. Pieter Nason, 'Portrait of Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen', 1666, oil on canvas, 232 x 171 cm, collection of National Museum in Warsaw, Accession number M.Ob.527 (187142). Photo credits: Krzysztof Wilczyński/NMW.

Johan Maurits was nicknamed the Brazilian due to his conquest of parts of Brazil. The prince is shown here in the costume of the protestant Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, of which he had become Grand Master (or 'Herrenmeister') in 1652. Defined for some time as a humanist or enlightened prince in Europe and Brazil, Maurits' reputation is currently being re-assessed. Susie Protschky, for instance, has criticized previous scholars for 'minimizing the despotic traits' of Maurits during his time as WIC governor (2011: 160).

[29] Before going into the sounds that are suggested by visual means here, there are different silences apparent in the figure of Johan Maurits and the figure to the left, who is generally defined as a 'page', an 'edelknaap' or noble boy. The same young man appears slightly differently in a painting from 1675, which shows an iron ring around his neck that suggests he is enslaved. He is represented here as a sign of Maurits' wealth and power. The enslaved adolescent points with the index finger of his left hand to a region on the map of Brazil around the Brazilian-Portuguese city of Recife, which was accompanied between 1630 and 1654 by the newly built Maurits-city on the opposite side of the river, next to the fortress. The young man's right hand holds a compass that suggests the map is not finished,

or that the city still needs to be designed and built. The fortress that should defend it is already standing, however.

Figure 7. Pieter Nason, detail from 'Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679); known as "the Brazilian"', 1675, oil on canvas, 134.5 x 107 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Accession number SK-C-1653. Photo credits: Wikimedia Commons

It is telling that the young man's mouth, in contrast with that of Johan Maurits, is slightly open, as if he is about to speak. (This is more clearly visible in the second version of the painting.) As a consequence, the image connotes two forms of violence, a violence that is characterized by two forms of silence. With regard to one such silence, the concept of 'epistemic violence' was introduced by Gayatri Chakavorty Spivak in her study *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and was derived from the Foucauldian notion of the episteme, the historical dominant that produces the kinds of knowledge that define a period with its systems of power, and that allows some subjects a voice while denying one to others. The half-open mouth of the young black man suggests he is about to speak but is not allowed to do so. Johan Maurits's silence is of another order. His silence expresses the resoluteness of power that enabled him to design and build a fortress, or to capture the slave trading posts of El Mina and Luanda (off the coasts of Ghana and Angola respectively) from the Portuguese.

[30] Maurits brought with him artists and scholars to study and chart the people, animals, plants, and landscapes of what was already redefined by the Portuguese as 'Brazil'. It is this convoy of artists and scholars that has allowed Maurits to be defined as a humanist or an enlightened prince. Most of the artists and scholars that Maurits took with him, however, would make charts, images and reports from which the violence of colonisation, conquest and slavery was absent, or only hinted at. In this context, the compass scratching or drawing on paper evokes a perhaps humble sound, but a sound of epistemic violence nevertheless. Still, the violence involved is not only epistemic. There is also the physical violence

suggested by the cannons and cannonballs at the bottom right of the first painting, and the armour that is temporarily laid down.

[31] Zacharias Wagener (1614-1668) was one of those travelling with Maurits who did not mind reporting on the violence. In this he was 'largely unique', as Brienen notes in her study on the artists travelling with Johan Maurits; especially the more famous Albert Eckhout (Brienen 2006: 134-37). Wagener is described by others as 'a watercolor painter of limited talent, yet an excellent investigator of the social life in Recife during the Dutch occupation' (De Carvalho & De Biase 2016: 50). Perhaps the phrase 'social life' is rather euphemistic here. Below we find an aquarelle he made of the slave trade as it took place in practice, in this case in Jew Street, a major street in the Brazilian-Portuguese city (De Carvalho & De Biase 2016: 44-64). The street took its name from the fact that Jewish traders, who in previous years had been chased out of Portugal to find refuge in the Dutch Republic, had now followed the Dutch to Brazil (Teunissen 2012; Davis 2016).

Figure 8. Zacharias Wagener, 'Slave market in Jews Street Recife', ca. 1641, in *Thierbuch*, drawing no. 106, © Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Photo credits: Herbert Boswank.

One of the most prominent features in a first impression of the image, also noted by Menachem Wecker (2016), is the difference between the distinguishable, individual traders and the homogenous masses of black bodies. In terms of sound, the painting offers a clear acoustic space with individuals conversing with one another, greeting one another, and perhaps also quarrelling with one another. Then there are sounds of violence the painting evokes, with a man raising a stick against a small group of captives at the left end; the seller in the left foreground ordering the enslaved figure for sale to raise their hands in order to be better assessed by a trader; the soft sound made by the figure crawling in the sand at the right below, who is perhaps being ordered by the man in the centre to join the group with the small children in the front. But apart from these sounds of either friendly, business-like or violent human interaction – the experience of which is a matter of reading the expressions and gesticulations of the depicted people – there are two more sounds present in the scene which are distinct yet intrinsically connected. These are the sounds of the masses of black bodies and isolated, at the upper right end of the street, of the small black child playing a flute.

Figure 9. detail from Zacharias Wagener, 'Slave market in Jews Street Recife', ca. 1641, in: *Thierbuch*, drawing no. 106, © Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Photo credits: Herbert Boswank.

[32] The sounds made by the big groups to the left and in the background are indeterminable. When one zooms in on the image, the mass of bodies consists of individuals tightly packed together. Still, they form one mass as opposed to the individuated figures at the front. The massed bodies packed together may suggest a murmuring, but not a conversation. The most probable reading in this case, however, is that the groups are sitting there in silence. Opposite the large group of slaves on the left sits a small flautist. In contrast to all the interactions between individual figures in the scene, nobody interferes with this child. Not only is the autonomous position of this almost insignificant figure striking, read acoustically it is almost overwhelming. The piercing sound of the small flute must dominate the entire acoustic space, resonating against the bare walls of the newly built houses, coming from all sides, surrounding the listener. This dominant sound is not coming from the traders: the flautist is one of the black people, connected with the masses of black bodies sitting in silence. We propose to read the flautist in line with Mieke Bal's example of the nail and the hole in the wall on Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*. Both the nail and the hole, indicating where previously a nail had been, are small, almost insignificant details in a picture that can pull the viewer into a radically different reading. This is how Bal describes this effect: 'The nail and the hole, both visual elements to which no iconographic meaning is attached, unsettle the poetic description and the passively admiring gaze that it triggered, and dynamize the activity of the viewer. Whereas before the discovery of these details the viewer could gaze at the work in wonder, now he or she is aware of his or her imaginative addition in the very act of looking' (Bal 1991: 4). In this case the little flautist at the back points to a reading where the audience is invited to imagine more specifically both the sounds in the foreground and the silence in the background.

[33] Though the violence depicted remains more or less at a distance, visually speaking, it is the heavy sound of silence that may come to surround the listener, that may enter their head and body. This sound of silence becomes a sound of violence that captures the true horror of what is going on, precisely through the juxtaposition with the friendly conversations and market-place bartering, which are accompanied throughout by a silence filled with a fear not of what is to come, but a fear of what is. The flute is giving a voice to those who are not allowed to speak, a wordless expression in music. The silence at stake is distinct from the liminal silence we have seen operative in anatomy. In this case, the people depicted sitting here have long histories of violence behind them, of being captured, sold, and put into the belly of the boat (Glissant 1997: 6). They have experienced sickness and death, to then enter a radically new world in which they will be traded again. The silence here is not liminal, in terms of an opening, but is rather filled with horror. Inspired by the term 'thick description', coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), and in opposition to liminal silence, we want to call this 'thick silence'.

[34] When Geertz developed his ideas in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) he was working as an anthropologist and developing a method that wanted to provide an alternative to colonial and modern modes of studying others for the sake of instrumental knowledge. Geertz' principal contention was that people could not and should not be studied from an outside, but by a scholar *within* the given situation, and that attention

should be paid to reports by peoples themselves, that made clear how they experienced things. It concerns an attitude, then, that one can adopt. In a sense the entire method of Geertz consisted in a method of concentration on detail and context, on the expansion of attention, and, as a consequence, on scholarly or descriptive delay. This is in line with our definition of the ekphrasis of sound, which needs detail in order to make the audience present in the scene, not in a moment of quick attention, but in a mode of involvement. If experiences are to be somehow shared, they have to be sensed, transmitted and received in order to be felt and understood, which takes time. If we translate 'thick description' into 'thick silence', then, this implies a similar attitude of concentration, expansion, and delay. Though the image itself is silent, it is filled with diverse sounds, including the sound of silence. It therefore invites a detailed reading in terms of an ekphrasis of sound. It not only invites the eyes to roam, but also invites the ears to listen. The Wagener watercolour, consequently, is not something to be looked at as a testimony to violence. If the scene is to be felt and understood, all those looking at it will have to become listeners, who are willing to sense the silence, who are willing to be receivers of what is transmitted through this silence, and who will take the time to be with this silence and feel its density. 'Thick silence' is a silence packed with the close range, actual, immediate and multisensory threat of violence. Listening to it, being with it, may be uncomfortable. Still, it is necessary, as it can make us sense what the situation was in which these people found themselves, captured by the violence that surrounded them.

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NOTES

[1] Other examples include Rachmaninov's *Isle of the Dead*, inspired by Arnold Böcklin's painting, or Schoenberg's *Pelléas and Mélisande*, in which music comes to describe poetry (Bruhn 2000, 2008).**[back to text]**

[2] All translations are ours: note that the translations given do not aim to be literary, but rather to enable the reader to follow the lines and connotations of the original texts as much as possible.**[back to text]**

[3] In the original: 'de Leste charsije tegenover [altered from 'ontrent'] de Middach sijnde ontrent 2 urren [altered from 'de Vier urren'] & verliet tromp de groote steng ontrent middachs'. See Royal Museums Greenwich online collection: <**https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/141660.html**>.**[back to text]**

[4] The essay was originally published in 1976, in collaboration with psychoanalist Roland Havas; see Barthes 1992.**[back to text]**

[5] The famous Mauritshuis in The Hague, named after this prince, has been working over recent decades towards a reconsideration of the figure of Johan Maurits. This has resulted in 'shifting perceptions': see Mauritshuis 2019.**[back to text]**

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