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Mutable audible: an operative ontology of the sound image

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Citation

Paiuk, G. (2023, October 11). *Mutable audible: an operative ontology of the sound image*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3643654>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Summary

The Audible

This dissertation explores the mutable nature of the audible. It addresses how the audible – that which is heard – is variably constituted in material, technical and collective circumstances. In the context of this research, hearing is conceived as an act of engagement of an agent in a specific milieu. The ways in which this engagement takes place are the basis for the various ways in which the audible is produced.

Traditional perspectives have addressed the variability of the audible as informed by different *listening modes*, customarily attributed to the changing dispositions of a listening subject. Or, the audible has been relegated to the private domain of the mind and therefore deemed unknowable. This position assumed that not much can be asserted about that which is heard since it concerns an individual realm, its variable nature anchored exclusively to the agency of the individual mind. My research, instead, addresses how collective, technical and material circumstances inform the way hearing is performed, and how these circumstances simultaneously exceed and enable the constitution of the listening subject. Hence, the subject is a *transductive reality*; it takes part in a process of sensing in which the sensorial is formed in configurations of engagement that articulate the relation between agent and milieu. To account for the various forms in which the audible can be constituted, this dissertation postulates the novel concept of *sound image*. This concept is neither conceived as a visual surrogate nor as a mental entity, but, rather, as a productive node unfolding in a configuration in which sensing occurs. As an inextricable and crucial part of this research, a series of artistic works is developed in order to explore the variable character of the audible.

The Sound Image

The sound image as elaborated in this thesis is founded on the theory of the image outlined by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. His theory enables the image to be disentangled from previous uses of the term: according to Simondon, the image is neither the exclusive product of a sensing subject, nor is it an independent artefact. Instead, the image is an *operation* unfolding in a cycle in which a relationship between an agent and a milieu is produced.

In the context of Simondon's work, the image can be proprioceptive, motoric, olfactory, auditory or pertain to any sensorial domain. Moreover, the image cannot be identified with a static entity or attributed solely to any of the instances across which it exists. Whether unfolding in the form of a mental simulacrum, an object or a pictorial artefact, the image is described as a node in a process that articulates a constellation of agents. It exists and persists across the functions of anticipation, reception, remembrance and invention which Simondon describes as constituting the cycle of the image.

In the stage of anticipation, the image is entwined with the capacity of movement that enables an organism to actively participate in an environment. Here, the image exists as a collection of projections inherent in the possible behaviors of body schema. In the receptive (or perceptual) instance, the image unfolds as a series of dynamically adjusting patterns that articulate the relationship between an agent and its *milieu*. By means of the performance of remembrance, the image unfolds as an energetic *bind*; the production of a detached instance in the form of a memory – an “analog” of an external circumstance – is the result of an exchange between agent and environment. In the fourth stage, within the act of invention, the outcomes of the other three functions are reorganized to re-stabilize the compatibility between agent and milieu. The image plays a temporal role in the problem-solving operations vital to the relationship between agent and milieu that, in Simondon's philosophy, characterizes the sensorial. The image is simultaneously a *result* and a *germ*.

The cycle of the image becomes therefore key to account for the variable formation of the audible as a temporal node emerging in a relational circumstance. I elaborate the concept of the sound image across this dissertation to account for how sound enters into processes of mediation, proliferation and synchronization that inform the way the audible occurs. The sound image is contrasted to other notions used to address singular audible instances, such as the vernacular *a sound* or *the sound object*. Those notions are criticized for their inability to express the contingent spatiality and temporality that characterizes every production of the audible. On the other hand, the sound image postulated in this research is able to address the various perceptual forms in which the spatial and the temporal are consolidated. Similar to how visual images entail the production of visibilities, the sound image takes part in the production of singular audibilities. Images cannot be conceived as separated from the circuit in which they occur. They imply collective protocols (which shape how patterns of attention are deployed), material infrastructures and technical affordances (that modulate how the cycle of the image unfolds).

The Role of Technology

Sound images entail technicities. Simondon addresses technicity as a mode of existence inherent to the function of a technical object in a technical medium. For example, a pictorial artefact (such as a painting or a photograph) is not *the place* of the image but a technical anchor that provides the image operation with a temporal stability. Thus, any technique that takes part in the modulation of a sensorial awareness can be considered to be intrinsic to the operation that an image consists of. Photographic artefacts become images as they take part in processes of synthesis and visual stabilization that the viewer engages with. Similarly, technologies of sound production and reproduction are part of protocols that inform how the audible unfolds. Technology does not only enable different images to occur, but also different forms in which the image

operation becomes possible. Furthermore, what the image is understood to be changes when the technical circuit that enables it changes. By acknowledging the technical articulations that allow it to exist, the image comes to be defined not by a resemblance or imitation of something real, nor by an imprinting process (*on* the mind or *on* a malleable plaque), but rather by diverse forms of participation of the sensorial in a material and temporal circuit. The form in which the image is constituted entails a way of participating in the world.

The Artworks

In and through the four works that constitute the practical component and experimental backbone of my research project, I investigate how the audible is produced, intrinsic to the mode in which listeners engage with different technical configurations of sound reproduction. Throughout *Focus*, *The Construction of an Imaginary Acoustic Space*, *Oscilación* and *Sound Theory (The Clouds)*, spatial aspects of the sonorous are rendered audible in the confluence of processes of cognitive appraisal and material characteristics of sound production and reproduction technology. The notion of the sound image accounts for the variable process in which all components in the circuit partake, from microphones and loudspeakers to the cognitive abilities of the listener.

The artistic component of the thesis is not meant to produce a historicist account of audio technology, nor is its aim to employ what could be understood as autonomous musical tools to depict the possible uses of technology. Through my artworks I explore the performative nature of listening as entwined with technical configurations. These are not pieces of music about technology, but works about how technology plays a role in the modes in which hearing occurs.

My works unfold and problematize the threshold between the fields of music and sound art as they explore sound's multifarious relationship to the real.

Music is not conceived in this context as a prefigured form of expression or an established protocol for engaging with sound; rather, it is exercised as a malleable practice which informs dispositions of engagement with the sonorous and a singular relationship between instrument, performance and audience. By addressing the entanglement of perception in technical regimes and protocols of attention shared in particular listening circumstances, musical practices come to be identified as involving different regimes of production of the audible, instead of operating in a realm of formal relationships between sound figures.

As an outcome of my research project, listening is put forward as diverse, not because it is tied to the diverse identities of subjects that perform it, but due to the miscellaneous nature of the operations it implies. The reconceived concept of the sound image plays a part in the crisis that the image in general undergoes in the current context of technological transformations. This "crisis" emerged since the beginning of the twenty-first century as images came to frequently result from composites of multifarious technical procedures (e.g., data processing, vectors, various kinds of sensors, statistics), while their ubiquity rendered imaging processes as blurred into the fabric of the real. These changes are not merely prosthetic, but raise questions as to how forms of sensorial engagement are constituted and how they entail a co-operation between material, technical and human realms. In this context, the sound image is elaborated as a relational node that articulates how an engagement with the sonorous milieu is produced.