The Acousmatic and the Language of the Technological Sublime

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Acousmatics: Modern/Postmodern

The acousmatic, as both a musical genre and reproductive context (signified here by the term *acousmatics*), is typically positioned within the tail of high modernism that extends from *musique concrète*. Indeed, the modernist link between acousmatics and *musique concrète* is articulated in the processes of phenomenological purification – a kind of referential purging – enacted in *ecouté reduite* (reduced listening) and in the reproductive context of the acousmatic, which strives to strip sound of distractive visual presences. In more general terms, there are a numerous ways in which acousmatics may be linked to the wider phenomenon of modernism; the favouring of the abstract, the intrinsic – which is to say the *formal* – is the most straightforward. In the visual art of the modernist and high modernist periods, there is a body of critical and polemic writing that argues for the aesthetic-historical necessity of the formal. An example: the American art critic Clement Greenberg, writing in the '50s, argued for the historical necessity of 'flatness' in abstract expressionist painting, achieved when narrative, anecdotal, and perspectival elements are rejected for the 'purity' of colour and form.[1] Such a notion is easy enough to link to the phenomenological purification of sound in reduced listening and the tendency towards abstraction in acousmatic music, both of which serve to produce a certain 'flatness', not in terms of space (sound is inherently spatial after all), but in terms of the semiotics of sound; in the absence of clear mimetic links between sound and the life-world we are left with sound as materiality, pure presence.

Yet acousmatics is equally well understood as archetypal of postmodernism, at least where postmodernism is understood as it is by Fredric Jameson (in *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*).[2] That is, not as an cultural space sited at 'end of metanarratives' (Lyotard), popularized as eclectic and pluralist, but rather as an aesthetic practice emerging out of the late capitalist era characterised by a particular condition: that in which cognitive mapping of all kinds, including the mapping of sonic space and matter, becomes extremely difficult as the phenomena engendered by the

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[1] Bell and Greenberg's views are outlined by Jason Gaiger in "The Aesthetics of Kant and Hegel", *A Companion to Art Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp.127-138

[2] An understanding shared with other left-leaning observers such as the geographer David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

technosciences of the era exceed the ability of human reason to make sense of them and surpass the capacity of human imagination. To expatiate, I'll now examine unmappability in terms of both matter and space by drawing analogies between acousmatics and examples provided in the writings of Jameson and Lyotard.

Matter: *Les corps éblouis*[3]

Let us start with matter. In the catalogue to the *Les Immatérieaux* exhibition he curated at the Pompidou Centre in 1985, Lyotard writes of the insecurity invoked by the 'immaterial' realities uncovered by modern technoscience: 'The human cortex is "read" just like an electronic field; through the neurovegetative system human affectivity is "acted" on like a complex chemical organization… As a result of this, the ideas associated with the one of "material", and which lend support to the immediate apprehension of an identity for man, are weakened.'[4] The analogies between this passage, and the practices of contemporary acousmatics, are strong indeed: sound is "read" in recording and reproduction and "acted" on via DSP, resulting in the production of unidentifiable sound matter.[5] As Smalley has it in writing of surrogacy, in second order surrogacy, 'there are vestiges of human gestural activity, but I cannot find a realistic explanation for everything I hear, while in remote surrogacy 'potential physical origins are further masked… reaching a state where neither gesture-type nor physical origin can be surmised'. In semiotic terms, this describes a shift from very open connotation to denotation in which signifier and signified become identical; or, as Bayle has put it, acousmatic art 'substitute[s] image for object, to generate fictional objects.'[6] In acousmatics then, we are inevitably confronted with *concrete abstractions*, which can only be properly mapped to themselves: simulacra.

We need not, however, wander so far into non-representation to find map and territory indistinguishable; indeed as Francisco Lopez points out 'microphones… are non-neutral interfaces… they can be considered as a first transformational step.'[7] In other words, the act of recording is itself an abstraction inducing one, particularly in the poietic methods of "object-orientated" acousmatics, where close-miking becomes a forensic process, revealing sonic detail otherwise hidden to the ear, detail which may in turn be amplified to vast size, straining the perceived relationship

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[3] "The dazzled body" (1994), by Christian Calon

[4] Lyotard, Jean-Francois. "*Les Immatérieaux*", trans. Paul Smith, in *Art and Text* 17 (pp. 47-57), p. 49

[5] As John Croft has put it, 'electroacoustic music tends towards disorientation rather than mapability', in "Fields of Rubble", forthcoming

[6] Bayle, François. "Image-of-sound, or i-sound: metaphor/metaform", in *Contemporary Music Review* Vol. 4 (pp. 165-179), p. 166

[7] Liner notes to *La Selva*

between sound and source. More importantly, the forensic recording methods of acousmatics tend to treat that which is being recorded as *decontextualised* source material; isolation from a spatial, functional, or semantic context radically reframes this material and in doing so makes it possible for it to be regarded as non-representational matter, malleable and amenable to poietic will in this abstracted state.

Space: *Le vertige inconnu*[8]

Acousmatic space is equally symptomatic of the unmappability of '"immaterial" realities' generated by contemporary technosonics. To pursue this, I turn to Jameson's analysis of the architectural spaces of postmodernism. In the concluding remarks to his phenomenological analysis of Los Angeles' Bonaventure Hotel, Jameson writes: 'this latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surrounding perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.'[9] According to Jameson, in breaking from the ordered, hierarchical and subject-centred spaces that typify modernism, postmodern space refers to nothing but itself, in endless refractions and permutations, making it extremely difficult for the human subject to locate and navigate within them. Acousmatic space is exemplary in this respect for it is inscrutable: the vertiginous play of composed and diffused spaces confounds cognitive mapping, not only because there are no holistic life-world models for what we find ourselves immersed in, but also because we cannot reconcile where we are (listening space) with what we hear (composed space). Like the computer, the black box of the loudspeaker 'articulates nothing but rather implodes.'[10] Once again signifier and signified are identical – we are dealing with hyperreality or *depthlessness* – stereo-porno as Baudrillard has put it.[11]

We have observed then, that acousmatics articulates acoustic matter and spaces no longer delimited by models provided by the life-world. First order surrogacy, the link between sound and human instrumental gesture, is the final point of contact between acousmatics and the real, a somewhat erratic connection given the abstraction induced by recording. Indeed, is it not perhaps the case that the idea of referentiality itself is symptomatic of poietic and esthesic desire to maintain an anchor in the face of the dazzling and vertiginous scapes of acousmatics? This should not be mistaken as a call for a 'return of the real' (Hal Foster), for a superlative mimesis – there is already enough of this rhetoric in the music technology industry – rather, it is a recognition of the tendency towards the unmappable in acousmatics'

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[8] ''Mysterious vertigo'' (1993-4), by Gilles Gobeil

[9] Jameson, p. 44

[10] Jameson, p. 37

[11] Baudrillard, Jean. *Seductions*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990). pp. 28-36.

aesthetic, which in its production of concrete abstractions, an excess of the real, 'undermine[s] the world's apparent factuality.'[12]

The technological sublime

What has the preceding discussion to do with the concept of the sublime? So far my exposition has focused on acousmatics as generating unmappable matter and space, hyperrealities with a disorientating esthesic status: when sound and source are indistinguishable, we are left facing thingness, presences which human cognition appears inclined to hermeneutically attach to the life-world, even when no such relation can be adduced. Inherent in this is an affect core to the experience of the sublime: the simultaneity of pain and pleasure, terror and delight. Listening to acousmatics allows the pleasure of experiencing sonic matter and the imaginative play its ambiguities arouse. Pain, or at least frustration, arises from the experience of being unable to *resolve* these materialities by mapping them to the real, to the life-world; this referent, if it even exists, appears only as vestigial fragments and labile traces. As Lyotard has put it: 'the sublime is the affective paradox… of feeling… a formlessness for which there is no image or sensory intuition…'[13] This suggests that acousmatic discourse may be built on the tensional binary of mimesis and abstraction, an idea popular amongst acousmatic composers but one which, on my reading, warrants greater critical attention.[14]

What is it though, that makes this a sublime a technological one? At a poietic level, technology is of course inherent to acousmatics. This mundane observation suggests a more telling one: in acousmatics the nature of abstraction is technological, as the generative and investigative capabilities of technology, despite its human origin, have long since outpaced us.[15] This pushes acousmatics towards adopting an aesthetic of referentiality, partly because it is a more cognitively 'natural' option than is abstraction, partly because it is hermeneutically richer than the facile fact that technology is the actual referent in much acousmatic music, and because culturally it offers access to a tradition, a history, in the form of realism. Moreover, faced with the sonic fecundity of technology, the acousmatic composer becomes a bricoleur, sorting through and trying to make sense of the mountain of sonic material produced by the very technology the composer claims mastery over. In its prodigality, technology is a second nature, blindly self-reproductive, and in the sheer extent of matter it produces technology rivals if not outstrips first

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[12] Baudrillard, *Seductions*, p. 65.

[13] Lyotard, "The sign of history", in *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)

[14] See Luke Windsor's "Through and around the acousmatic: the interpretation of electroacoustic sounds", in *Music, Electronic Media and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)

[15] See Manual De Landa's concept of the 'machinic phylum', in *War in the age of intelligent machines* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

nature. Moreover, the relationship of humankind to this second nature replicates the experience of the encounter with first nature and with art: the sublime, in Burke's sense, as that which threatens to efface the subject through its size, scope, power or unknowable nature.

The mountains of concrete matter that the acousmatic composer grapples with, or the non-referential sound-images that confront listeners in concerts, are exemplary of the technological sublime. Nowhere, though, is this phenomenon more intense than in an acousmatic concert involving a 'loudspeaker orchestra', or the spatial simulacra of ambisonics or wavefield synthesis. Here, acousmatics is paradigmatic of the technological sublime in a number of ways, a few of which I'll now outline. Firstly, the sensory deprivation of the darkened chamber of the acousmatic is an instance of what Burke calls privation: 'All general privations are great, because they are terrible: Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence.' Secondly, the sonic power of diffusion systems is often enormous and capable of burying listeners in sound, often immediately out of silence. According to Burke's definition, this threat of effacement is an instance of terror. Thirdly, returning to an earlier point, the spaces that can be generated by an ensemble of loudspeakers are entirely mobile and unpredictable; the listening space may be transformed at any moment into any number of possible composed spaces and in this the listener encounters the possibility of infinitude. Such an experience is productive of the sublime in a Kantian sense: the inability of the human mind to represent, that is, to imagine, the sublime object.

In other words, acousmatics is in line with Jameson's description of the "ideal" postmodern work as seeming 'somehow to tap the networks of the reproductive process and thereby to afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or *technological sublime*, whose power and authenticity is documented by the success of such works in evoking a whole new postmodern space in emergence around us.'[16]

Modern/Postmodern: flatness and depthlessness

At this point I should like to begin to draw together various threads in the discussion. In opening, I linked the formal *flatness* of abstract expressionism to the semiotic flatness of acousmatics. Here the intention was to show that acousmatics is exemplary of modernism. Immediately following this, however, I argued that acousmatics might equally be considered postmodern in its unmappable *depthlessness*. What is it that distinguishes the formal flatness of modernism from the depthlessness of the postmodern, and how might this distinction resolve in terms applicable to acousmatics? For Jameson, the distinction is to be made partly in terms of affective content: the flatness of an abstract expressionist painting, despite its

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[16] Jameson, p. 37 (emphasis mine).

non-referential form, retains an interest in the meanings it may evoke in the receiver, it *expresses*, hence it is possible to speak of the content of an abstract expressionist painting, content which may also be understood in the relation of the painterly object to the history and tradition of painting (at very least through rejection). The depthlessness of a postmodern object, however, is due not to the formal flatness it may share with the modernist object, but to its lack of content, its disinterest in affect and meaning. Moreover, the depthless object conveys no sense of history and cannot be located in relation to tradition, for depthlessness implies that both history and tradition are simply image banks from which to download.[17] These differences may be further articulated via Lyotard's concepts of *melancholia* and *novatio*: the modernist work, having moved beyond representation into *novatio* (the free play of formal properties), is nonetheless nostalgic for the lost content of representation, which it clings to in the affect it is designed to arouse. By contrast, the postmodern work is all *novatio*; there is no *melancholia* for content, no attempt to hold on to it in affect.[18]

At this point I would like to hazard the following: that acousmatics' discourse is characterized by *novatio*, free play of the intrinsic, founded in technology; thus the genre is fundamentally postmodern in terms of its ontology, methodology and semiotics. This combination effectively denies acousmatics access to familiar representational and affective content for the genre is radically isolated and abstracted from referentiality, from the real, as I have outlined. Yet, there is a schism at the heart of acousmatics: even as its ontology, methodology and semiotics are thoroughly postmodern, the bulk of its practitioners hold to the modernist roots of the style, found in the era that produced *musique concrète*.[19] This attachment emerges as *melancholia*, nostalgia for lost contents, in two primary senses, which I will now outline.

Firstly, we might observe that the genre places significant poietic and esthesic emphasis on the ontology of its discourse in representational source material. The compositional method of "classic" acousmatic music, in which referential source material forms a touchstone for quasi-thematic processes of development and recapitulation, is yet only obliquely concerned with the meanings of its sources, as my earlier discussion of forensic recording would suggest. Source material, physical objects, are not subject to the kind of phenomenological and hermeneutic analysis seen, for example, in Gaston Bachelard's work

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[17] On a Jamesonian reading, it is difficult for the viewer of Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* to respond affectively to this object, the depthlessness of which is not calculated to arouse a feeling of the sublime as is the flatness of, for example, Barnet Newman's *The Voice*. Moreover, the flatness of Newman's *The Voice* is still an organic flatness, a product of painterly technique allowing the viewer to interpret this praxis humanistically and relate it to a tradition of painting; whereas, Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a photographic negative, bears no trace of human action and has no ontology beyond the technological.

[18] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, trans. Bennington and Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). I am grateful to John Croft for alerting me to this aspect of Lyotard's thesis.

[19] It might also be observed that this apparent contradiction with acousmatic culture, is itself symptomatic of the postmodern: given the hypothetical predilection for diversity within postmodernity, it might be regarded not as a contradiction but as an idiosyncrasy, an eclecticism, and therefore not in need of resolution.

on space.[20] Rather, these materials are instrumentalised as a means to beget a poietic process matched to the reproductive technology that enables acousmatic music; a process in which mimesis, strict reproduction, rapidly gives way to processes of transformation, distortion and fragmentation, directed towards the construction of hyperrealities which supplant the objects that provided the starting point for the process.[21]

Secondly, at both esthesic and poietic levels, there is something of a *doxa* within acousmatic culture to ignore or expel traces of the technology that is the genre's lifeblood. The following phrase from Smalley's seminal spectromorphology essay is paradigmatic in this respect: 'ideally the technology should be transparent…'[22] In my reading of acousmatics, this amounts to a concerted effort to ensure that the technology and technological operations forming the basis of acousmatics' *novatio* do not depose human sovereignty over the compositional process[23], nor obscure its vaunted representational content, nor insert themselves as foreign bodies with the discursive flow.

Put otherwise, the culture of acousmatics identifies itself, *a contrario*, as modernist in its attempt to expunge what marks it as postmodern. Acousmatics is postmodern in that it is technological to its very core, but this technological basis is denied because the modernist imperative to refer, to represent, via life-world mapping pace the work of Smalley and Luke Windsor, is central to acousmatics' ideology. We might also observe that the referential imperative emerges because the life-world is the only content this essentially traditionless genre has to draw on.[24] Yet, the ontology and methodology of acousmatics, and the resultant semiotic status of abstraction and/or non-representation, means its practitioners struggle to work with or convey such content, a task better undertaken by genres whose concerns are less intrinsic and techniques less technologically mediated.

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[20] *The poetics of space*, trans. Marie Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)

[21] Jonty Harrison's *Klang* might be taken as paradigmatic in this respect.

[22] Smalley, Denis. "Spectromorphology: explaining sound-shapes", in *Organised Sound* Vol. 2 No. 2 (pp. 107-126), p. 109.

[23] To talk of *composition* is to accept the trope of mastery of means and materials, even in the extreme case of Xenakis' dynamic-stochastic synthesis works such as *Gendy 3* (where mastery works at a few steps remove from the moment to moment evolution of the musical surface). Cage's rejection of this trope is what identified his aesthetic as a radical one within the high modernist era; little wonder then the high regard in which he is held by theorists of aesthetic postmodernity.

[24] Indeed, the semiotic status of all music would suggest that content-driven discourse is ruled out, as is affect, at least when there is no convention by which certain sonic materials may be interpreted; objects in the physical world, used as acousmatic source material, cannot be decoded as joyful or sad in the same way that minor and major chords or keys can be.

Yet acousmatics might also be understood as a means by which to grapple, cognitively and affectively, with second nature – technology – and the unmappable worlds it forms, the experience of which we have identified as the technological sublime. In this sense, content and affect must be discomfortingly matched to brave new worlds engendered by postmodern technosciences and composition must expand its view of the poietic process to a collaborative one in which technology is a verbose, if ineloquent, partner.[25] In both cases, the traditional subject (the composer) and traditional subjects – especially the real, the lifeworld –, are dispersed, diffused, through the fission and fictions of technosonics. Which is to say, the technological sublime is a fundamental feature of acousmatics as an instance of the postmodern, and that acousmatics is at its best when its language, knowingly or otherwise, admits the inherence of unmappability and depthlessness, as well as the productive indeterminacies of this form of the sublime.

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[25] Simon Waters makes similar points in "Beyond the acousmatic: hybrid tendencies in electroacoustic music', in Emmerson (ed.) *Music, Electronic Media and Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, pp. 56-86), p. 58-60.