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L'acousmatique mythique: reconsidering the acousmatic reduction and the Pythagorean veil

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1. The primal scene of electroacoustic music

No story is more ubiquitous in electro-acoustic music than the tale of the Pythagorean veil. It is recounted again and again when electro-acoustic musicians find themselves in the situation of justifying why they use this strange term, “acousmatic,” to describe their music. Schaeffer, in the canonical version of the story from the *Traité des objets musicaux*, claims that *acousmatic* refers to the “name given to the disciples of Pythagoras who, for five years listened to his teachings while he was hidden behind a curtain, without seeing him, while observing a strict silence.” (Schaeffer, in AC, 76).

Variations on this theme abound, with different degrees of completeness and for a variety of highly differentiated but related ends (Peignot 1960; Schaeffer 1966: 91-99; Bayle 1993: 18, 51-52, 180; Chion 1999: 19-20; Dhomont 2002). For instance, Francois Bayle claims two important additions: first, he writes that the Pythagorean disciples were placed in the dark, a nice touch which makes the identification of the ancient acousmatic situation and Chion’s “cinema for the ear” complete (Bayle, 180); second, he writes that the *akousmatikoi* developed a special technique for concentrated listening (Bayle, 181). One can imagine that these special listening techniques foreshadow Schaeffer’s *écouter réduite*, various kinds of sonic *sofège*, or even the link between the Husserlian technique of phenomenological *epoché* to acousmatic listening.¹

Clearly, this tale organizes a set of mimetic identifications, constructing a quartet that binds two ancient terms to their modern counterparts. The composer occupies the position of Pythagoras, unfolding a musical discourse or projecting a sonic message into the dark, while remaining hidden. The audience occupies the position of the *akousmatikoi* (the “hearers,” “listeners” or “auditors”) who receive the discourse while remaining outside the veil, listening with concentration to the emissions of the master. The strength of the configuration is proportional to the degree to which these identifications, these emotional ties, bind together the quartet into a tensile structure. Past and present are stitched together in a pattern that effaces historical, cultural and technological difference. Schaeffer writes, “between the experience of Pythagoras and our experiences of radio and recordings, the differences separating direct listening (through a curtain) and indirect listening (through a speaker) in the end become negligible.” (Schaeffer, AM, 78) In the end, differences are effaced, because these differences are seen as inessential to the transmission and arrival of an ancient heritage. An acousmatic horizon, originally disclosed by the ancient technology of the Pythagorean veil, is re-lived, re-animated by the loudspeaker. By being Modern, we have rediscovered that we were always already Ancient. By stepping back from these identifications for a moment, the reason behind the tale’s persistence becomes clear. The primary role of this *tale of the veil* is as a *myth*, a “founding fiction, or a foundation by fiction” (Nancy 1991: 53), deployed to organize the interests of a community. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “Concentrated within the idea of myth is perhaps the entire presentation on the part of the West to appropriate its own origin, or to take away its secret, so that it can at last identify itself, absolutely, around its own pronouncement and its own birth” (Nancy 1991: 46). For the Schaefferian tradition, rather than think of itself as an effect of historical flux, as technologically conditioned, or as determined by the history of musical composition—in other words, rather than think of itself as passively constituted—the Pythagorean veil becomes the active origin of the acousmatic horizon, its originary experience. *The tale of the Pythagorean veil is the primal scene of electroacoustic music*, organizing its self-appropriation, retroactively founding an *arché* and projecting a *telos*. And, like all primal scenes, we should be wary of its veracity. As we unravel the verisimilitude produced by layer upon layer of *Nachträglichkeit*, we may discover that much of what was compelling about the scene was simply its ability to narrate ourselves into existence. The myth stages the origin of electro-acoustic music by self-identification; we see ourselves when viewing the Pythagorean theatre. A scene like other scenes, the tale of the veil possesses many trappings of theatrical fictions: curtains, offstage voices, a darkened auditorium, and the imposition of silence.

I am not interested in debunking the myth of the Pythagorean veil, but to question the way in which the myth is applied. In other words, I am interested in how part of the electro-acoustic community appropriates its own origin through the use of the Pythagorean myth, and how the myth is used to authorize claims within “the Schaefferian tradition.” In particular, the Schaefferian tradition uses the myth of the Pythagorean veil to authorize three important claims.

1) First, it underwrites a theoretical split between the eye and the ear. The Pythagorean veil separates hearing from seeing, bureaucratizing the sensorium into distinct perceptual channels. The suppression of the eye encourages the ear to direct its attention otherwise than in everyday modes of listening. This split can then be inflected with various intensities: in a strict sense, audition can be phenomenologically investigated, as in Schaeffer’s work, where the separation of the eye and the ear provides is identified with the phenomenological *époche* (Schaeffer 1966: 270; Bayle 1993: 181); in a less strict sense, the separation of the eye and the ear can be treated as a general discouraging of visual distraction in favor of the pure auditory experience or its unadulterated “message” (Chion 1999: 19). Even in audio-visual contexts, like Chion’s work on cinema, the separation of the eye and the ear is ontologically prior to any recombination. The cinema does not present, in Merleau-Ponty’s parlance, an inter-sensorial thing. Rather, the audio

¹ For a thumbnail sketch of the history of the term “acousmatic,” see Bayle: 180-1.

and video must be synched together after the fact. From within the horizon initiated by the Pythagorean veil, cinema is little more than an elaborate act of ventriloquism.

2) Second, the Pythagorean veil demarcates a split between the causal source and the perceptual effect, which in turn justifies the establishment of a new sonic ontology (Kane 2007: 20). The emission of the object takes priority over the object itself. Or, to be more accurate, the sonic emission becomes an object in its own regard—the real object of study. The split between the causal source and the perceptual effect establishes the framework within which anecdotal sounds have received their perpetual devaluation in the Schaefferian tradition. Rather than appealing to acoustic bases or causal sources to ground sonic phenomena, the devaluation of causality encourages the theorizing of intentional objects for this purpose. Schaeffer's sound object (*l'objet sonore*) is one such example (Schaeffer 1966: 95-99) as is Bayle's split between "object" and "image" (Bayle 1989).

3) Third, the Pythagorean veil promotes a conceptualization of the acousmatic as a horizon within which the practices of electroacoustic music can be given a tradition and meaning, one that dates back to ancient Greece and continues on today through a lively development (Schaeffer 1966: 93-94; Kane 2007: 21). This practice is modeled on Husserl's work on the origin of geometry. By neglecting the difference between modern and ancient forms of technology, and conceiving of the acousmatic as a horizon opened with the Pythagorean veil, Schaeffer de-historicizes acousmatic music into a unity of transcendental sense and masks its own empirical history and dependences.

2. The sources for the Pythagorean veil

To begin, I would like to re-examine the myth of the Pythagorean veil based on sources of the life of Pythagoras that are typically neglected (or simply ignored) in the Schaefferian tradition in order to re-think the category of the acousmatic.

The most common source of evidence concerning the *akousmatikoi* and the Pythagorean veil comes from Iamblichus of Chalcis' *Life of Pythagoras*. This text, written around the turn of the fourth century A.D., is also the source for the accounts that Bayle cites in his history of the term (Bayle: 180-181), including Diderot's entry on the *akousmatikoi* from the *Encyclopedia*. The Iamblichian account portrays the division of the Pythagorean School into two classes of disciples, the *akousmatikoi* and the *mathematikoi*. A veil separates the two classes: the *mathematikoi*, seated inside the veil close to Pythagoras, were not only able to see the master lecturing but were entitled to witness demonstrations of his theories; the *akousmatikoi*, seated outside the veil, were only entitled to hear the master's propositions, but were not given the privilege of seeing the demonstrations. The Greek term *mathematikoi* is often translated as "The Students", while the *akousmatikoi*, which literally translates as "those who hear" or "The Auditors", derives from the fact that they simply heard the sayings (the *akousmata*) of Pythagoras from outside the veil.

Bayle's reference to the rigorous silence of the disciples also derives from the Iamblichian account. After seeking entry into the Pythagorean School, Iamblichus writes that a candidate "was compelled to observe silence for five years." After this period, "those who by modest dignity had won his approval as worthy to share in his doctrines, then became *esoterics*, and within the veil both heard and saw Pythagoras." (Iamb., §17) The period of silence was an initiatory rite, after which one moved inside the veil, to hear the proposition and see the demonstrations. Consistently, Iamblichus describes the position of the disciples as *exo sindonos* (outside the veil) or *entos sindonos* (inside the veil). According to Liddell and Scott, the word *sindon* (σινδων), means "a fine cloth, usually linen," but also "anything made of such cloth," such as a shroud or winding sheet, a napkin, a sheet, etc.² It is from this division of the Pythagorean school into camps placed inside and outside the veil that the terms esoteric and exoteric etymologically derive: *eso-* and *exo-* being prefixes for inside and outside, respectively.

As Iamblichus states, the *akousmata* (or sayings) of Pythagoras were of various kinds, but often stated in a cryptic form, as "symbols" whose "significance and arcane intentions" required "liberating them from their enigmatic form... The result is that they who present these symbols without unfolding their meaning by suitable exposition, run the danger of exposing them to the charge of being ridiculous and inane, trifling and garrulous." (Iamblichus: §23) Simply put, the *akousmata* were coded statements, allegories or other rhetorically figured utterances, suitable for unlocking only by those who possessed the proper interpretative key.

Iamblichus' account of the allegorical nature of the *akousmata* agrees with descriptions of the Pythagorean School given by Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata*, a text written slightly earlier than Iamblichus' *Life*. However, there are some grave differences between these two texts, differences that impact directly on our reading of the Pythagorean veil. In Clement's account, we still have the *akousmatikoi* and the *mathematikoi*, but no longer does a veil hang between the two groups. The classes are differentiated, not by spatial location, but according to their level of "genuine attachment to philosophy," the *akousmatikoi* being aligned with the curious multitude, and the *mathematikoi* being aligned with the genuine students of philosophy. (Clement: Bk. 5, §9) Yet, the veil is not absent in the Clementine account, but its function has radically changed. It has become aligned with the question of allegory. Clement poses a rhetorical question, "Did [the Ancient philosophers] then, by veiling (*katakrupsantes*) human opinions, prevent the ignorant from handling them; and was it not more beneficial for the holy and blessed contemplation of realities to be concealed (*epekruptonto*)?" Both the words *katakrupsantes* and *epekruptonto* share a common root, the verb *krupto* (κρυπτω)—the root from which we derive the word cryptography—which means, "to hide, cover, cloak; to cover in the earth, bury; hide, conceal, keep secret." (Liddell and Scott) The veiling, hiding, or coding of the *akousmata*, preserves the meaning of the discourse from the uninitiated or ignorant. The *akousmata* are themselves veiled.

² Thanks to David E. Cohen for help with the Greek translation.

A few lines later, Clement explicitly ties the veil—or better, the veiling of discourse for the initiated—to the question of allegory. Clement states that Pythagoras and Plato concealed many things, that:

“even those myths in Plato...are to be expounded allegorically, not absolutely in all their expressions, but in those which express the general sense. And these we shall find indicated by symbols *under the veil of allegory* (ὑποπαράκαλυμματα τῇ ἀλληγορίᾳ). Also the association of Pythagoras, and the twofold intercourse with the associates which designates the majority, the *akousmatikoi*, and the others that have a genuine attachment to philosophy, the *mathematikoi*, hinted that something was spoken to the multitude, and something concealed from them.” (Clement: Bk. 5, §9)

The word used to describe the veil of allegory in this passage, *parakalummata*, means “anything hung up; a covering, cloak, curtain.” (Lidell and Scott) It clearly could be referring to an actual veil, were it not for its connection to the idea of allegory. Here the literal veil becomes wrapped in figural language, and through a strange transmutation, the status of the veil changes. Not only is veil used as an allegorical figure, it becomes the figure of allegory. The veil is the figure of figurality, a figure for hiding and troping language beyond its transparent or literal usage.

Without question, the Clementine account clearly questions the univocity of the Schaefferian tradition’s dependence upon Iamblichus to define the term “acousmatic.” This univocity has always unquestioningly assumed the derivation of the term “acousmatic” from the *akousmatikoi*. However, “acousmatic” can function as both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, referring to a particular kind of listener, we are clearly dependant upon the tradition of the *akousmatikoi* (as in the sentence, “Why did the acousmatic cross the road?”); but as an adjective (as in the phrases “acousmatic sound,” “acousmatic listening,” or “acousmatic music”) it is probable that the term refers not to the *akousmatikoi*, but to the *akousmata*. There is no reason why then we should be privileging “acousmatic” as referring to hearing without seeing the cause over another sense of the term, as referring to a cryptic or coded utterance or statement—an allegory, destined for the initiated.

3. Consequences of the Clementine reading

Perhaps one could simply argue that the meaning of the term is stipulated through its entrenched use. But, if so, why has the full account of the myth never before been articulated? Why have we not been in a position to evaluate or question its stipulation? Why have not the alternative possibilities been excavated? Furthermore, how can we be so certain, after Derrida, that we are the masters of our language, that we determine its history and meaning? Shouldn’t a good phenomenologist like Schaeffer be interested in the anamnesis of ancient meanings preserved by etymology, despite our forgetting? Re-activation is the condition of the possibility of phenomenological presence. At the very least, let us imagine for a moment what would happen if we inflected the term with its Clementine sense. How would such an alternative reading impact the central claims of the Schaefferian tradition? In my estimation, it would make an impact in three significant areas:

- 1) First, it would impact upon the over-determined division of the eye and the ear, as theorized in the Schaefferian tradition. The Clementine reading makes no explicit mention of any visual concealment, of any hiding or masking of sources. The bureaucratization of the senses, the separation of the audible from the visual would be dramatically reduced. Perhaps one could relax the ban on the moving image or the taboo on the performing body, these central tenets in the Schaefferian tradition. Perhaps for once and for all, we could question the un-interrogated assumption that causality is fundamentally visual, that sounds are emissions which depart from the order of causality only to define a separate ontological realm of purely auditory values. The emphasis could shift away from the conditions of apprehension back toward the message or point of what is being presented. Do we *understand* what we are hearing, what is being said to us? Or are we still assuming that the medium is the message, that the mode of production (fixed sounds, live diffusion, the acousmonium, the loudspeaker, etc.) *constitutes* the point. Are we still in the grip of a technological obsession about our practices, one that fixates on the form of the medium while ignoring the content of what is presented—or can we conceive of our acousmatic practices along the axis of their communicative efficacy?
- 2) Second, the Clementine reading would impact upon the question of modes of listening. The old emphasis on residual listening, or other modes of listening that reduce the presence of semiotic aspects of sounds would be greatly diminished. The new emphasis would be placed on understanding, not apprehension. Concomitant with this move away from reduced listening would be a move away from morphologies, typologies and epistemological approaches to the theory of electroacoustic music based on eidetically reduced sound objects. The ontology built on the sound object underemphasizes questions of figurality, topology or symbolic meaning and purpose, and cannot account for the intensities and possibilities of rhetorical unfolding. Rather than proscribing listening from hearing referential clues, perhaps we can focus on the multiplicity of aspectual listenings—as one would unfold the implications and possibilities of an allegory. Can acousmatic music take its clue from other disciplines in the arts and humanities, which have re-engaged with the questions of rhetoric and overturned vestigial modes of structuralist and formalist thinking? Rather than pose the question, “Here are a set of works, how can we categorize them?” maybe we should be posing the question, “Here are a set of practices, how can we trope them?”
- 3) The Clementine account undermines the construction of the acousmatic as a “horizon” or “tradition” (in the phenomenological sense) which dates back to Ancient Greece by promoting a concept of the acousmatic capable of acknowledging its own historicity. I have written elsewhere (Kane 2007) about the way in which Schaeffer modeled his ideas on Husserlian phenomenology, not only by establishing the analogy between the acousmatic reduction and the *epoché* but by establishing, along the lines of Husserl’s writings on the origin of geometry, the acousmatic reduction as inhabiting a horizon originally opened by Pythagoras. To put it bluntly, Schaeffer conceives of the acousmatic reduction as a re-activation of an “originary experience,” thereby erasing the distinctively modern aspects of *musique*

concrète, and effacing its continuity with earlier forms of musico-technological experimentation and musical *avant-gardism*. By questioning the characterization of the Pythagorean curtain as an acousmatic technology, and by reconceiving it as tropological screen demanding interpretation, a theoretical position emerges from which to evaluate the material and historical role of technology in the construction of the acousmatic.

4. The acousmatic aporia

I pose this alternative reading to displace and challenge our thinking about the acousmatic. The contrast is useful for grasping the manner in which the tale has been deployed as myth. These two readings lead to a productive contradiction; perhaps we could call it, after Adorno, a dialectic at a standstill. The primal scene of electro-acoustic music bears interrogation. Can we better understand this puzzling acousmatic field? Can we position the traditional reading of the Pythagorean veil as a dividing, separating, or distinguishing boundary—one which separates the eye from the ear, the proper and improper modes of listening—against a reading of the veil which cuts transversally across these categories, which blends the literal and the figural in the space of rhetorical unfolding, of disseminative possibility or a proliferation of aspects?

If we want to be good philologists and good historians, it is clear that we cannot simply endorse either of the accounts of the Pythagorean veil. Between Iamblichus and Clement, I do not see how we can definitively decide whether the Pythagorean veil was literal or figural. Despite being the oldest comprehensive accounts we possess of the Pythagorean school, both were written seven to eight centuries after Pythagoras' death, so the question of factuality is, for all intents and purposes, moot. However, the co-presence of these two discrepant accounts encourages a reading of this tale, which is, to say the least, aporetic. I pose this aporia to draw your attention to two ways in which we, as practitioners implicated in this myth, must lend an ear to the acousmatic reduction and its limits.

On the one hand, considering that Iamblichus tells his story of the separating veil in the context of Pythagoras' use of figural language, is it not possible that we, as readers, are being encouraged to read this tale of the veil as being, itself, figural? What makes us think that Iamblichus is not himself acting a bit like Pythagoras, and presenting us with a riddle that, unless "unfolded...by suitable exposition," remains "ridiculous and inane"? Perhaps Iamblichus would laugh at our lack of imagination, envisioning Pythagoras hidden behind a screen, rather than understanding the point of the figure.

On the other hand, considering that Clement possesses the distinction between the *akousmatikoi* and the *mathematikoi*, and suggestively mentions the "veil" of allegory in this context, isn't it possible that Clement is troping upon previous recountings of the literal veil? Could it be that his account knowingly winks at the literality of the veil, transforming it into a figure in homage to Pythagoras' own excessive use of figurality?

How are we to decide?

When the veil distinguishes and separates the causal source from its auditory effect, it generates a sound object (*l'objet sonore*). The veil covers up the external world, it closes our eyes, relieving us of the audible contingency of being-in-the-world, but endowing us with a certain dominion over our experiences. The veil becomes a ground, upon which we found a sonic ontology. It unfurls itself to consecrate a space where the properly sonic or properly musical occurs. Its presence articulates the limits of aural propriety and impropriety.

But when the veil is displaced, it changes from ground to figure, and encourages and provokes our curiosity about sound and ourselves. Not simply any figure, the veil is the figure of figurality, soliciting our interpretive aptitude, encouraging repeated listening and re-listening. Sound is no longer our possession; it becomes wrapped in the veil, pulled into a space of figuration that tantalizes us with the possibility of its perpetually evaded reduction. And we discover that we too are wrapped in the figuring veil. Listening becomes the allegory of our dispossession. But in this allegory, we re-encounter that of which possession dispossessed us, the contingent audibility of being-in-the-world. Perhaps the acousmatic aporia could be summed in one tiny chiasmus: groundless figure, figureless ground. It is our task to think these together.

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