

Towards a Cultural Psychoacoustics

by 3,14's text contributor **Johnny Herbert**

an “acquaintance” with the vicious “ambivalence” of learning to love a slave-owner you hate when rearing and loving the children he forced you to have by him. “Few really listen to this music”, the narrator states. “At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act.”

Harking back, for our context here, to the ideas of Freud we touched on above, Ellison’s rendering of the ability of listening to (in)capacitate, (de)energise, and (de)motivate is interwoven with the narrator’s self-described invisibility, producing, in that incandescent basement, a “vision” of listening of a wholly different order to the listening our media devices are built around. Taking this further, with writer Fred Moten we might say that Ellison “knows you can’t really listen to this music”³ because he understood that it required a kind of experience in which a listening situation, just like improvisation, opens into a pursuant, hallucinatory imagination, channelling overtones of other situations back into the contemporary; a mere habitual listening will not suffice. Moten goes on to ask a crucial question that I will paraphrase: can this kind of listening disrupt the habits and prejudices of visual-based recognition?

This might be an important question for cultural psychoacoustics.

Camille Norment subtly modifies the field of psychoacoustics when stating that her work “utilises the notion of cultural psychoacoustics.” She has defined the latter as “the investigation of socio-cultural phenomena through sound and music—particularly instances of sonic and social dissonance”, asserting that these phenomena work “through sound as a force over the body, mind, and society.” Setting a stage for Norment’s piece *Triplight*, being exhibited at Kunsthall 3,14, I would like to further consider what we might think of as “cultural psychoacoustics”, drawing from Ralph Ellison’s description of listening in his landmark book from 1952, *Invisible Man*. Written just before the production of the Shure microphone Camille Norment uses in *Triplight*, at the cusp of the large-scale uprising of the American Civil Rights Movement—and no doubt ringing in the heads of some of its participants—the sketch of a “new analytical way of listening to music” in the celebrated and much studied prologue of *Invisible Man* (not to be confused with H.G. Well’s science-fiction novel from 1897, *The Invisible Man*) might be a blueprint for a practice of cultural psychoacoustics.

Emerging from the broader and ostensibly more experimental 19th century field of psychophysics, psychoacoustics looks to quantify the relationship between intensities of physical stimuli and an individual’s perceptions of those stimuli. A particularly notable figure within the earlier field of psychophysics was Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887). Fechner successfully defined the relationship between stimuli and perception, constructing a principle (the Weber-Fechner law) showing the diminishing returns of increased stimulus above a certain intensity level. This led to a gradual modelling of the senses, driven, and for some psychoacousticians still driven, by a quantified metric of “just-noticeable difference” (JND), wherein stimuli differentiation becomes perceptible for a subject.

Many of the experiments undertaken by psychophysicians were almost akin to a proto-cybernetics, using modelling in a similar fashion to infer behaviour and/or response. Such modelling, of course, smuggles in an idea of “the human”, a “standard” sensible subject, a smuggling all media technologies under-

3 Fred Moten, *In the Break*, 67.

take, no matter how customisable they are—a notorious recent example of the problems this can lead to is the discovery of racial bias in facial recognition software. The intertwining of the study of human perception with media technological function—with efficiency, prediction, and the manufacture of surplus value—has led to sensory models made for economic ends that then begin to guide human preferences (e.g. generations that have grown up to prefer the sound of heavily compressed mp3s rather than higher resolution sound sources.)

However, emphasising the ‘psyche’ aspect of psychoacoustics, we can also say that all this perception modelling also contributes to transformations of *affect*—unconsciously registered stimulation—something 17th century polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had come close to when noting when ruminating on how “minute” and “insensible perceptions” “make themselves felt”¹ rather than specifically perceived. This negativity—imagining the phenomena we *don’t* perceive—is perhaps something to which cultural psychoacoustics must constantly tend. Different to a history of science or a history of technology, it is on the fringes of the “just-noticeable difference” and its resonating affective afterglow that we might imagine cultural psychoacoustics to be operating, offering a counter-model to the model of listening psychoacoustics works out from.

Curiously, Fechner was the source of two key aspects of Sigmund Freud’s work: the central idea of the pleasure principle and the phrase “another scene” to describe the unconscious. I would assert that some of the tools and concepts Freud developed for psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic listening offers a useful set of strategies for negotiating the the “negativity” of cultural psychoacoustics as we’ve construed it so far, here. Freud’s “Ver-” concepts—negation, repression, foreclosure, disavowal, condensation, and displacement (*Verneinung*, *Verdrängung*, *Verwerfung*, *Verleugnung*, *Verdichtung*, and *Verschiebung*)—in tandem with what Freud stipulated as a practice of “floating attention,” offer resources to develop a type of listening in which an analyst is to listen not to the “report” of what is being said, but to all the potential conditions of what is being said,

but to all the potential conditions which might make something being said important *to* be said.² However, as psychoacoustics is not just about listening to language, perhaps we can say, adding to what we have already learned from Leibniz, that cultural psychoacoustics is a practice of listening *around* the modelled subjects the environments in which we hear are catered to, that there’s a necessary errancy, a “floating” to this listening.

“Around”, here, invokes Ellison’s *Invisible Man*; the unnamed narrator of the book speaks of listening around corners: “[T]o see around corners is enough (that is not that unusual when you are invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action.” The narrator’s sensation of hearing around corners, an auditory awareness interlaced with social paranoia and a pursuant imagination, may have been cultivated by the basement in which the narrator “hibernates”, a room illuminated by 1369 filament light sources, aiding an illumination of the “blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa”. With the “dead” (unreverberant) acoustic of the basement, the narrator’s stated plan is to add four more radio-phonographs to the one already set up, possibly enabling a fulfilment of the narrator’s desire to “feel [the music’s] vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body.” Particular to this desire is the chance of hearing five recordings of Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue” at the same time. “Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music.” The narrator continues: “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of the nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’s music.”

Ellison goes on to specify a listening that hears women singing spirituals in Armstrong’s sound, hears the pleadings of young girls with slaveowners, hears

1 Gottfried Willhelm von Leibniz, *New Essay in the Human Understanding*, 54.

2 Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič have considered these concepts in detail. Mladen Dolar, “Hegel and Freud”, *e-flux* #34, 2012; Alenka Zupančič “Hegel and Freud: Between Aufhebung and Verneinung”, *Crisis & Critique* 4:1, 2017.