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Citation

Brar, Dhanveer Singh and Moreno, Louis. 2021. Notes on Listening and Hearing. In: Jeanne van Heeswijk; Maria Hlavajova and Rachael Rakes, eds. *Toward the Not-Yet: Art as Public Practice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN 9780262542500 [Book Section]

Persistent URL

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Notes on Listening and Hearing

Dhanveer Singh Brar and Louis Moreno

Just as only music awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear—is [no] object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers—it can therefore only exist for me insofar as my essential power exists for itself as a subjective capacity; because the meaning of an object for me goes only so far as my sense goes (has only a meaning for a sense corresponding to that object)—for this reason the senses of the social man differ from those of the non-social man.

Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

We are part of a group called Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective. It sounds grand, but really it's just the name for a group of friends who listen to music together every now and again. The name Le Mardi Gras is taken from a bar in Pittsburgh where the collective was conceived. In the early summer of 2019, while we were in another bar in New Orleans—either Big Daddy's or The Friendly Bar—waiting for the rest of the collective to show up, we began to think about “listening” and wondered whether there was some difference between the act of listening and the work of hearing.

The ability to listen is said to be one of those qualities that distinguishes a person's character. If somebody is thought to be a good listener, the idea is that they take time to understand what somebody else has said before they speak. So important is this quality that it might be considered the basic test of friendship; after all, what use is a friend who does not listen to what it is you have to say or how you feel?

More abstractly, listening is sometimes considered to measure the competence of an institution. Whether it be a university, a hospital, or a bank, every organization likes to say that it listens to those who use its services. So if an institution has failed in some way, then the appeal to listen expresses corporate humility: “we need to improve,” “we aim to learn lessons,” and so on.

In a sense then, the art of listening is what makes a human being *good*, an organization *intelligent*, and a society *civil*. Which means that if listening suggests ethical integrity, then it

also makes a value judgement. Listening is more than just hearing. Hearing is simply the use of the ears, whereas listening requires an investment of concentration. Listening is a practice, and therefore needs effort, whereas hearing is lumpen, casual, and effortless. In short, listening is active, while hearing is passive.

But herein lies a problem: if listening is active, then it indicates an exertion of force, and as such, can produce overwhelming pressure. Take the two examples. If a friend reads too much into what is casually said, then their oversensitivity can damage a relationship. Or on a more abstract level, a perennial fear of contemporary daily life is that we are surrounded by listening devices computing sonic traffic for some unknown economic gain. The appeal to “deep listening” as a collaborative model perhaps requires us to go back to first principles, and to think a little more about what it is that makes it possible not only to listen carefully, but to recover a social feeling from what we hear.

Perhaps what we need to do is to consider what the sound of music does to the sense of hearing. This is what the young Marx had in mind when he said that what music enables is the discovery of a dormant sensuous power or a gift, if you like. Music turns the sensory work of hearing into a powerful mode of expression. But no amount of deep listening will help you hear music if you exist in isolation. Music, Marx suggested, is the sensuous modality that indicates not only company, but society. As such, music can train, configure, and rearrange how all the senses are composed in relation to each other. Within this is the following suggestion: if the senses have been cultivated over time, they may well be constrained and trapped in certain habits of thinking and listening. Thus, these habits of listening may require retraining and reconfiguration. If the five senses culminate in a model of sensuousness which privileges the individual, Marx asks the question, ‘what kind of music can attack the conditions which made this “nonsocial man” possible?’

Let’s turn then with two other exemplary social people. Amiri Baraka made a distinction between listening and hearing—Gil Scott-Heron lived inside it. Baraka started to delink listening from hearing in the midst of his encounters with John Coltrane and Billie Holiday. What led him toward this delinking was the realization that listening could only ever access the merely

musical, but hearing opened up something else. Baraka's embrace of hearing was not simply a critical move; instead it was designed to obliterate the very conditions of the critical posture itself. Hearing the music offered a fleeting entry into salvation, escape at a moment's notice from the ugliness and brutality of the world, as opposed to its extension through the objective claims of listening. The abandonment of listening and the step into hearing allowed Baraka to become what he became, a *sensitive*: "beautiful has nothing to do with it, but it is."²

Scott-Heron was another for whom *sensitive* was a more suitable descriptor than poet. He, too, was given an education in hearing by Trane and The Dark Lady of the Sonnets. Yet "given" and "education" are the wrong terms to use here, because from all available evidence it appears that Scott-Heron did not have to learn to hear, it was always with him. This capacity to hear from the outset gave him what Baraka had hit upon in his twenties: a tremendous attunement to peace, beauty, and the search for salvation that could only occur through the music. "[M]any of the shapes of sound and concepts have come upon me from no place I can trace, notes and chords I'd never heard, thoughts and pictures I'd never seen—and all as clear as a sky untouched by cloud, or smog, or smoke, or haze."³

Yet Scott-Heron's hearing came at a price. Living inside of it might have been wonderful, but hearing also gave him something else that was, at times, too heavy to carry—"a look at what most men will deny they have: an inside where all the insanity and madness of this world really hurt and enraged you."⁴

Afterwards, we shared our thoughts with our friends, but they said Le Mardi Gras *Hearing* Collective just didn't sound right...

² Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010), p. 77.

³ Gil Scott-Heron, liner notes from *Spirits* (New York: TVT Records, 1993).

⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2017), p. 281.