Sonic Scope: New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture

Between the Dark of the Nighttime Woods

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ABSTRACT

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I became interested in sound as something that is fundamentally unstable. In a period of my life determined by constant movement between different cities and as I found myself beginning to transition into a non-binary identity, sound and sonic theory became a greater metaphor through which I could understand myself. In this text, my prose encounters a range of philosophical and theoretical researchers as my reading of these authors punctuated the last years of my life. Through anecdotes and metaphor, this writing seeks to describe the overlap of sonic theory and transness with my own experience, and track the change within myself over the past three years.

Content warning: This article may contain language which may be offensive to some readers.

Sounds begin with intermediate distances, around the size of a loaf of bread and other ordinary things that are well understood. Maybe like the space between your friend's throat and your own when you walk around together. I mean precisely the length of a rash of eczema on my neck or the space between a theremin player's hand and the instrument's antenna. These distances are intermediate in that they can be experienced easily, along with others, like a three mile stretch of woods. This intermediacy is where sound is best understood because it is where our bodies, the perpetual object of introduction, first meet sound.

It was nothing more than the short length between my mouth and my ear, a line running north across my cheek, that gave me away. In my head, my voice had always been fine, or I'd never really thought about it. When I was small the playback of a camcorder told me something different, the same way it tells everyone something different: that their voice and also my voice is grating and strange. Somehow, suddenly, a part of myself was foreign to me. A gap appeared there, the distance between all the different versions of myself that might exist at any moment, or who I thought I was and who I most likely actually was.

It feels important to note that this gap is not a void. It took me only a few more listens to realize that my voice was beyond grating, beyond strange. It was high and markedly effeminate. Phone conversations with strangers were almost always carried out as if they were being had with a young girl, not a young boy. And the gap overflowed, and I didn't know what any of it meant.

1

And then it was years later and I never thought about my voice anymore. The gap was still there, though, mutating and growing all around me, still between myself and someone who I imagined I might be one day. At that point, actually, it was more like a silhouette of a person I was vaguely interested in becoming, like my toe on the starting line, knee bent but not moving in any noticeable way yet. Of course though, behind the eyes of the runner at the starting line, small calculations are already being made to calibrate already tense muscles.

It was spring, I was taking a sculpture class, I was getting ghosted by a guy who I had liked a lot, I was in love with someone else already. I remember lying on his bed (the guy who would ghost me) and seeing the palm trees with the sun setting behind them and thinking that I had done something, escaped from somewhere to make it there (Los Angeles). Sometime in this general thread, I saw, for the first time, a video of a man playing the theremin. I remember that he was playing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” which is maybe unimportant, but it was very beautiful.¹ The watching is what really held me - the player’s hands didn’t look like they were grasping at anything. They seemed utterly content to waft in the space around the instrument, tickling the emptiness and occasionally sweeping over the air the way people in a pool will splash water just for the fun of it. There, in that first time, I saw the distance of the gap, its very length and shape, outlined by the movement of the old man’s hands.

The essential job of the theremin is to distinguish the invisible from the immaterial. The visible components of the instrument set the stage, so to speak, for the magic to happen. A circuit of oscillators and filters are used to wrangle electricity through the instrument and out of the two antennas to create an electromagnetic field. Moving one’s hands through the electromagnetic field creates a disruption that is in turn registered by the instrument as sound and, if done skillfully, can be heard by a concert hall full of people as a Judy Garland classic. There are tools here that can be seen and other tools that cannot.

Gilles Deleuze thought it was important to point out that some things exist only as pure events. In *Logic of Sense*, he opens with this distinction on “the secret of events *and the becoming unlimited in which they imply*.”² Verbs being nothing more than pure verbs. I made a sculpture that half resembled a man, it was a towel soaked in plaster and cast to dry over my prostrate body. Afterward, I sprayed it with reflective paint. A woman in the crit group said that the piece looked like it could be the most beautiful thing in the world on its lunch break. Like, she said, it was still getting dressed, maybe on its

day off. The most beautiful thing in the world, but not there yet, and maybe it would never get there. It was, to take advantage of Deleuze's thinking, the becoming unlimited, forever on its way there.

When I say that the man playing the theremin outlined the gap, I mean a certain gap in knowledge. I saw the man's hand trace the air, touch the air, but the instrument itself remained far away. It was like a magic trick - no parts were moved, no strings were plucked and no reeds were soaked, but from somewhere there was sound. The space was from his finger to the antennae but also between two different worlds where, in one, something invisible was taking place. The result anyways, was pure sound, and in the way that sounds need to move to exist, pure verb. A thing, as much of an object as anything else, that existed only to change. Suddenly for the first time in the gap there was a material, even if it was only an invisible wave through a concert hall. It was running away from being known, I thought. It was preoccupied, rushing, somewhere, infinitely. The starting gun had fired. I imagined, over and over again, what it feels like to be touched without form, the way his hands passed through the electric field. The way we all know sound can be physically felt; *sound is a way of touching at a distance*.³ I thought about the guy who was ghosting me, about what it would feel like to be on my way to being the most beautiful thing in the world.

2

But suddenly it's nighttime and I'm in high school listening to someone scream in the woods. I can't see anything out of my window but I can't imagine that it's anything other than a banshee. I'm including this to point out that fisher cats screaming out at night sound just like banshees, but actually to say: that night I knew the banshee was there without seeing her, because I heard her until the morning came.

It's not news to mention that Westerners constructed the hierarchy that places vision at the top of the sensory pyramid. In her text, "Kinesthetic Sense and Dynamically Embodied Action," Brenda Farnell argues that there is semiotic viability beyond the visual sign, with proven importance outside western epistemologies.⁴ She argues that walking, too, is a sign, laden with knowledge and meaning.⁵ Because what is walking, anyways, but a wish to be somewhere else (a wish that can be parsed into a collection of meanings). Tim Ingold writes along these same lines, implicating sound directly: "In short, when it comes to affairs of the soul, of emotion and feeling, or of the 'inwardness' of life, hearing surpasses seeing as understanding goes beyond knowledge, and as faith transcends reason."⁶ As faith transcends reason, or to believe rather than to know. R. Murray Schafer says that before the Renaissance, God was never conceived of as an image, but instead as a sound or vibration.⁷ *I'll believe it*

when I see it feels more like saying *I'll believe it once it is undeniable to me*, to equate seeing to knowing, which is different from believing. Undeniable knowledge leaves no empty spaces for faith to grow within.

There is a reason, maybe, why God speaks to prophets instead of showing himself; more faith than reason. *Sound is a way of touching at a distance*. And kind of like Schafer said, maybe God was best as a vibration. Listening, at its best, offers a chance for an unmotivated kind of knowing, maybe beyond how we have been taught to use and pursue knowledge.

To Salomé Voegelin, the feeling up of the body by sound is what allows a break into a new kind of knowing.⁸ Unlike vision, we are immersed in sound, with no opting out. We cannot seem to close our ears the same way one can close their eyes or mouth. Sound is something of our skin, a vibrating touch or an open wound. It is made real only within our ear canals as part of us but entirely other. Evidence of the exterior world meeting us. Like Ingold, Voegelin finds meaning in this action - "It builds, in the dark, shapes with no form ... the process is emotional, binding, and contingent."⁹ Through this process, sonic knowledge destroys the boundaries between subject and object, and it is this doing that bears the most formidable fruit. Ingold described this as, "vision and hearing are radically opposed, as different as is standing on the riverbank, watching the water flow by, from being tossed in with the current."¹⁰ In the sonic realm, you can swim in the gap.

So, at six-foot-three-inches tall, my body is again a distance that I have a hard time negotiating. At the end of our session, when I raise my body from the couch in her upper-west-side apartment to stand at my full height, my therapist reminds me with a sort of disappointed resignation that I would be, actually, very tall for a woman. I am not a woman yet, and I don't know if I'll ever be one. I don't know if I need to be one, or if I want to be one. In a variety of ways, I might already be one. Sometimes I call myself trans, and I think in my head, *like transit*. I'm trans not because of where I might end up one day but because I am going somewhere, away. More than I am a woman, I am not a man, and sometimes that is enough to make me a woman. Either way, like sound, I am a woman on the move. Like any good journey, there are obstacles in my way. Like wind or breath, sound is just another way in which things can change. Like sound, I'm relying more on faith than reason.

At its best, however, much of the current state of affairs on gender orients itself around reason. It is about sharing your pronouns, knowing what to call someone, and most importantly knowing what to call yourself (so that you can tell people your pronouns and what to call you). I believe, at least a little, that what I write would feel more important if I knew how to align my exact strain of gender-variance with the proper language. Somewhere along the way, the issue of having a gender became more about the language, which is all well and good as long as you know the answers to the questions that the world is collectively asking you. But maybe, like sound, I am moving to resist answering those

questions and resist being known. Hannah Baer compares living as trans to living in a museum, complete with the knowledge infrastructure that the museum metaphor entails. Being known, in her view, entails being definable, and being definable offers yourself up to control, particularly to that of the state and subsequent institutions. I'm going to include a long quote here because I don't know if there is any better way to say this than she did:

... the truth of transness that the museum offers hasn't given me life; it's given me anxiety, it's given me self-hatred, it's given me fear and resentment and confusion and narcissism and a spiraling sense of lostness, that I'm supposed to want to rectify by making that sure everyone's pronouns are on every name tag and every cop or TSA agent is trans-competent when they pat me down... If misgendering is the problem, then we track and forcibly publicize everyone's pronouns. Then trans people will get relief.¹¹

This might be obvious, but if I could call my body after all of its change rather than all of its permanence, I would be happier. Like the culmination of Farnell and Ingold's thoughts, I like to think that sound offers a way out of this kind of knowing that Baer cautions against. The same people, or the same populations of people, who cast vision on top of the sensory pyramid, are those who Baer implicates in the management of her museum. They are the creators of the gap, made up of the contradictions and deviances that result from this kind of control. Passing, after all, is first and foremost concerned with appearances (although it goes far beyond them as well). It's about the clothes you wear and what your body looks like. To pursue sound is to, maybe, try and know in a different way.

This is not to say that we should understand those around us by the sounds they make. This way of thinking comes up against barriers as well - Anne Carson wrote *The Gender of Sound* about this. Since ancient Greece, people have sought to understand and taxonomize the sound of men's and women's voices. The shrill voice of a woman has long been understood as evil, and I'm sure the young men of Athens listened with equal horror as a high-pitched voice spoke back to them from their camcorders.¹²

The voice as a sound, especially for trans people, is too often inscribed in the gap that sound and transness alike seek to cross. Trans rapper Michete echoes Carson, albeit with more crassness and fewer words, in her lyrics: "I walk like a bitch but I talk like a faggot."¹³ The gap exists too between the bitch and the faggot and how we see each of them as mutually distinct entities. I walk like a bitch and talk like a faggot the same way the theremin sings "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" without ever being touched. The goal is not to shift from the sartorial and the cosmetic to the vocal and audible, but instead to view gender and knowledge with a sonically informed view. A view that looks beyond and against traditional knowledge.

I remember sitting, staring at the camcorder wondering why my voice sounded like that. And maybe I wasn't a boy then either. Like Baer, Deleuze was also caught up against nouns. In her exploration of non-visual semiotics, Farnell wrote about kinesthesia, "our sensory awareness of the position and movement of our body."¹⁴ This definition for kinesthesia could easily double as a description of the trans mindset, a constant, unheeding *awareness of the position and movement of our body*. The pain of knowing where your body is and knowing, both with hope and a sense of tragedy, how far it has to go. Changes must be made, starving or buying or growing or lasering into a new kind of sculpture that will inevitably sit, still, in the museum. Maybe in a new case, or a new room.

But in the dark of the night you can dream about leaving the museum entirely, secretly. You can run into the nighttime woods of Voegelin and Ingold's thinking, where the light has long since faded away. And you are a trespasser into the realm of phantoms and wild animals until you remember that you, without light to tell you otherwise, are part of the woods as well. You could be a phantom or animal yourself, only another echoing footstep in the darkness. A falling body hitting the ground in a dark night full of endless falling bodies, all culminating in the same *thud*.

When I pass my hand through the electromagnetic field of a theremin I hear a song about a distance over which my body moved. The song is more about the movement than the distance and it appreciates the change. This is to say that the length of a sound isn't the three miles from the pond where the fisher cat cries to my bedroom, it's the distance between a banshee and a fisher cat.

3

Now it's winter and I'm moving again. I've escaped my escape twice over. I'm trying to figure out when I'll be in the same place long enough to commit to getting my facial hair lasered off, hoping for the new year. I started shaving my legs but ran out of time before I had to go meet a friend so I walked around for a few hours with a hairless thigh, and took a picture to share with the caption "molting, again." I fell slowly out of love with the person I was in love with before, and I can't tell if things would've worked out better if I was more or less of a woman (by the same measure, more or less of a man). I'm thinking about signing a year-long lease in the Lower East Side and I can't help but wonder if sound ever rests. Maybe it wants to take off its shoes to sit on the couch and pet its roommate's cat. I'm only saying all of this to talk around the fact that sometimes I wish the changing would stop. I'm asking after a kind of unknowing that doesn't always mean outrunning knowledge. I want to feel less exhausted when I look at myself in the mirror. I want the hair to stop growing back. I'm trying to find a

way to sit in the darkness of the forest, not to be so scared that I want to run back, through the trees, to the museum. I think about this often.

To be honest, I got bangs. But I try to comfort myself anyways. As we know of it, the universe also only exists because it is traveling, rushing away from itself and creating more and more distance between its beginning and its end, creating time in all that space. Existing is continued and constant movement; I listen to the same songs and re-read the same excerpts of the same novels, again and again. I re-watch the video of the man playing the theremin with my finger over the speaker, feeling the many ways a sound can feel my body.¹⁵

Sound is about my body because I don't know my body in the same way that I don't know how far away the sound has traveled once I open my mouth to say, "I don't know my body." The image of myself is always outrunning the sound I make at 186,282 miles per second in a vacuum (and it is worth noting that sound can't travel in a vacuum at all). While my gender goes up against knowledge and perception, I am often made real only by faith. If I am going to try and know my body, I really only want to know it in the same way I watch the theremin player's hands, when I can find joy in letting something remain unknown, made real by faith.

At the end of this (essay, day, month), I like to think about the moment when all this distance goes up against whatever the universe is expanding into and/or against, because it's not also distance. Distance requires a point A and a point B, but past the edge of the universe, everything ends – there's a new kind of emptiness that is completely unknowable, but most definitely there. Here, I like to conjure up a sound in my head that, I imagine, is gurgling and spilling over the edge of the universe into whatever comes next or was there before; the sound of being on your way to becoming the most beautiful thing.

Acknowledgments

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Biography

Jack Hjerpe is a student and artist based out of New York, NY. They are currently an undergraduate at Columbia University, pursuing a degree in history. In their art practice, they work in drawing and performance art, as well as writing. Their work primarily explores themes of sentimentality.

Footnotes

1. Peter Pringle, "THERAMIN – Over the Rainbow," January 10, 2009, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6KbEnGnymk>. [↵](#)
2. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 9. [↵](#)
3. Murray R. Schafer, "Introduction," in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1997), 3-12.
- According to Schafer, sound is felt physically in the body at around 20 hertz. [↵](#)
4. Brenda M. Farnell, "Kinesthetic Sense and Dynamically Embodied Action," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 132-144. [↵](#)
5. *Ibid.* [↵](#)
6. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 246. [↵](#)
7. R. Murray Schafer, "Introduction," 3-12. [↵](#)
8. Salome Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010). [↵](#)
9. Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 24-25. [↵](#)
10. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 244. [↵](#)
11. Hannah Baer, *Trans Girl Suicide Museum* (Los Angeles: Hesse Press, 2019), 135. [↵](#)
12. Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound" in *Glass, Irony, and God* (Cambridge Mass.: New Directions Books, 2005). [↵](#)

13. Michete, “Back of the Truck,” 2020, *Spotify*,
<https://open.spotify.com/track/7jWlXEeVyGQGpTnuw5T1zu?si=efqMqlg2Tg2c2HZHyhJSQQ>. ↵

14. Farnell, “Kinesthetic Sense and Dynamically Embodied Action,” 133. ↵

15.

And still there are other ways sound can be felt, in the heart, like a tremble in one’s voice or when Scott Walker sings, “The rivers inside me still flow/ to the sea of your hands.”

“Two Weeks Since You’ve Gone,” Scott Walker, in *Scott 3*, Mercury Records, 1969, *Spotify*,
<https://open.spotify.com/track/5ljpyeiIsS4jox4BOCijb6?si=nU8F4qgORQeIGtzxYbXZ3g>. ↵