**Being Singular Seminar – The Question of Listening
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Preliminary Thoughts #1

[Samuel Weber – *Singularités* ]

Let us say, following SW, that singularity has something to do with what JD called **iterability**

That is to say, **a singular instance is an instance of non-reproducibility**, which I want read in an enhanced way to problematize the very notion of reproduction and all the effects or radiant meanings it suggests (from ideology to sexuality etc.)

At the same time, perhaps contra Derrida, **I am interested in substitutability** – a kind of **radical equivalence that does not efface difference** – that recognizes the singularities of difference – without, however, granting them metaphysical status.

Why is that? A political concern. Because in the kind of radical democracy I argue for – a politics without *archē*, a literally anarchic politics, where there is no origin nor end (telos), and any actualization is just a moment of decision—a politics that creates forms, actualizes itself, but also passes immediately, that in **this anarchic democracy a position of *archē* can be occupied by anyone and everyone regardless, without exception, and only provisionally, which means that everyone is in this respect substitutable regardless of irreducible differences per se, regardless of otherness**. Is this a way to understand singularity? Good question, you tell me – and I mean this.

Preliminary Thoughts #2

Singularity vs. the One

As I imagine you know, in *The Perils of the One* I made a **clear distinction between oneness and unity.** Following Pierre Clastres’s anthropology of power in primitive societies, of society against the state, I wanted to show **how unity can perfectly exist in division**. And if/when it does not – when things become unified, properly speaking – then society is subjected to the metaphysics of the One, to a sort of monosemantic or monovalent condition, which is always metaphysical and external.

Now, obviously **unity is also not totality necessarily**, certainly not in Hegelian terms (at least in the sense that I prefer to keep **Hegel to the Adornian perspective that refuses the Absolute)**, whereby the dialectical is anarchic – no *archē* no *telos*.

I understand Gregory your position that singularity is, in Hegelian terms, not particularity but to me this makes the universal also, in that respect, not absolute—in my terms, differential or, as Balibar, says ambiguous.

I cannot say much more about that here – although I often say I am a Hegelian, I am an idiosyncratic Hegelian and I am certainly not an expert in Hegel. I’m rather poetic about Hegelian dialectics, not properly philosophical. But we can discuss this more.

Certainly, I will say one thing: that, say, the search for the singularity in physics, which comes with the desire and aim for establishing the Theory of Everything, which is an Absolute, is not attractive to me. **If singularity is to mean perfectibility – totality in an absolute sense (not talking Hegel here necessarily) – it’s not an interesting concept for me**. If it is **closer to impermanence, uncertainty, permeability, instability – even more so, inconceptuality, or whatever exceeds the conceptual**, challenges the authority of the concept, etc., then I am willing to entertain it anew.

But what is that?

Here, I come to the topic of listening, which is my new project, very preliminary and virtually unknown as to what it will involve quite.

Very quickly, just to give you an idea of the project:

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I am interested in a meditation and exploration of the notion of listening in its vast terrain of significances – obviously, **cultural, historical, and political, but also anthropological, musicological, neurological, and aesthetic in the strictest sense of the term**, which literally concerns the work of the human senses always in relation to other humans, bodies among bodies. To the degree I can envision the project in its completion, I imagine both **a sort of history – of a notion, but also of sets of attitudes, mentalities, and practices – and a sort of literature, a kind of mythography** (as I argued in *Does Literature Think?*) in which a human faculty exclusively attentive to sound will encounter the realm of writing.

1. **Anthropology and science**

This section will be built around Gary Tomlinson’s seminal book *A Million Years of Music*, which formulates an extraordinary proposition on how the human animal developed a sense of what he calls “musicking” even before Homo Sapiens. The most significant element in this regard is bird song – Tomlinson initially argues that “understanding” bird sounds as a means of communication enabled the human animal in its earliest phases of evolution to develop a production of sound that will eventually be called language. **Key for me in this complex argument is that listening is already as primary a faculty for survival as smell or appetite, which are after all basic neurological drives.** This section will draw on the extensive meditation on the human animal that I conducted in *Nothing Sacred*.

1. **Philosophical traditions of acoustics**

Starting with classic meditations by Pythagoras and Plutarch, but including some Enlightenment texts (such as Diderot’s “Letter on the Deaf-Mute” or La Mettrie’s “Man Machine”), I am interested here in **exploring how theories of acoustics are linked to cognition**. Peter Pestic’s *Music and the Making of Modern Science* might be an interesting text to look into for this section. Also, Peter Szendy’s influential book *Listen: A History of our Ears* and Dennis Smalley’s widely referenced essay “Space Form and the Acousmatic Image” are departure points for this inquiry. But most crucial attention will be given to the work of Fred Moten, in relation to **the vast Black musical tradition, especially as an extension of a certain corporeal acoustics that characterize the use of voice** among deracinated African slaves throughout the American continent.

1. **Listening practices in modernity**

The classic essays by Adorno and Barthes on **how music listening is cultivated as a practice in modernity** are essential here. References to certain texts in modernist literature where listening emerges as a key motif (Proust is a famous example) will be specifically addressed. I imagine that much of the writing in this section will return to themes I examined in *Does Literature Think?* as well as subsequent essays I’ve written on modernist poetry and *poiēsis*.This section will introduce the problem of creating “listening publics” to which I will return extensively in section #6

But also what happens to music after Wagner – the huge heterogeneity that emerges: particularly with jazz and its essential shift in modes of plural and spontaneous composition, rock music and interminable permutations, experimental music and the breakdown of genres going into the electronic sphere, and of course the planetary expansion of musics across geographies, cultures, and traditions and how all these are now informing each other all at once and resonating all at once in a way that “listening public” has achieved an entirely new significance.

1. **Music/Noise/Silence**

This is a **very broad area**. My intention is to consider **the relation between music and noise and the question as to what extent noise can be musical.** Pierre Schaeffer’s theories and practices of *musique concrète* andBrian Kane’s groundbreaking elaboration on it is the main reference. Also, Salomé Voegelin’s *Listening to Noise and Silence* is essential. This section will rely heavily on **what is called “the aesthetics of noise” in music**, starting with Edgard Varèse and the early electronic music of Stockhausen, Pierre Henry, or Delia Derbyshire, all the way through classic free jazz improvisation (Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor) to post-1960s experimentation (AMM, Henry Cow, Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza) and the inimitable sound poetics of Frank Zappa.

1. **Technologies of listening**

This section will survey **the significance of technology in the reproduction of sound and the cultivation of listening practices since the early 20th century – radio, phonograph, and portable media to today’s highly compressed lo-fi streaming media**. Again, Adorno and Benjamin would be essential but also more recent work, such as Alex Weheliye’s *Phonographies* and Damon Krukowski’s *Ways of Hearing*. This section will spend a great deal of attention to the ubiquitous earbud phenomenon of our present time, wondering in what sense this might interfere with our alertness to the world around us.

1. **Democracy as a state of listening**

I have always argued that **the freedom of listening is more important to democracy even than the freedom of speech,** even though they are irreducibly linked. I have addressed this, even if in passing, in my discussion of how 1st-century Athenians responded to the Apostle Paul (*Perils of the One*). To frame this question, I will return to ancient texts (Plutarch), but also draw on Foucault’s discussion of listening in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, in order to consider in what way the cultivation of listening practices might be built into a democratic education. Key notion in this section is what has been **termed “listening publics” and the question of how these are formed, especially in a world with such ubiquitous technologies of capital** in the so-called entertainment industry, which includes politics and news reporting as spectacle.

So, to return to where I interrupted in order to share with you a vision of the project: listening may be a domain of human sense that might exceed the conceptual, that has no need for logos per se, that tends to the corporeal in the cerebral, if I may put it this way.

Now, I will read a written-out part which pays specific attention to a lecture by Foucault on listening, which stages up front the problem of philosophy in relation to this matter – which is just a small part of the project overall, but especially relevant here.

Indulge me in a more formal presentation of a few pages and I will return to the notion of the singular at the end.

***Listen to the Universe***

The sense we have is that in the vast expanses of space between celestial bodies there is a void. Hence, total silence. The Greek word for space is *διάστημα*, which means literally in-between. It is not surprising that the word was used initially to determine the space between sounds, since the understanding of sound (and of course, music) was essential in the ancient Greek contemplation of the universe. What Pierre Schaeffer, the founder of *musique concrète*, would come to call “the acousmatic experience”, the ancient Greeks considered to be fundamental to physics. One *listens* to the universe, before anything else.

Legend has it that young pupils of Pythagoras had to spend five years in silence listening to the philosopher’s words behind a curtain—what later came to be known as the Pythagorean veil—so that in fact the words and their meaning would resonate without interference from the image of the person speaking. Here, both masking (the veil) and silence work together to induce a condition of utmost listening. A kind of embodied understanding requires some sort of de-identification, or perhaps even depersonalization (without the pathological meaning it came to have in psychiatry), of both speaker and listener. The visual (re)presentation of authority occupies the terrain of speech and curiously disembodies it by attaching to it a face, a persona. The very Latin etymology of the word contains this essence: the object through which sound passes altogether literally (*per-sona*). It is quite strange indeed. For, the face—the persona—is already an image discorporated from the sensuous network that retains signification as a fully embodied experience. This is yet another reason why masks were essential in every mode of archaic theater in a number of societies. While remaining a visual medium, they subverted the privileged relation of the visual to identity.

The story of the Pythagorean veil is legend—a mythical structure whose historical authenticity is irrelevant because myth itself establishes an indisputable reality across time. The history of the Pythagoreans is replete with legendary elements. It’s not an accident. Their mystical relation to knowledge presupposes and facilitates this mythical structure. So, in this respect, the veil is just as much a metaphor for the extensively mediated structure of achieving knowledge. Knowledge is indirect and participatory. No one is a mere reception point, a vessel to be filled—capitalist techno-consumerism notwithstanding

Both masking and listening form a certain language for this indirectness, an articulation that interrupts the need to put a face to a name or a word to a thing. Likewise, silence too is a mask. For it enables a more profound acousmatic exchange, the kind of listening that disrupts one’s reliance on mere response to external stimuli. Despite the hegemonic power of information models in contemporary thought, the human animal resists the categorization of machine. It learns—to live—by creating the knowledge situation, not by obeying it or merely responding to it. In fact, “the astonishing thing in the human being is not that it learns but that it doesn’t” (Castoriadis).

***Listening Skills***

This basic notion among the Greeks of listening as learning-to-be persisted for centuries, even while the Greek world changed significantly in terms of its social and political organization. Foucault is explicitly attentive to it in his research on the practices of the care of the self, which was the key element in the Stoic way of life. A remarkable lecture in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-82) that has not received due attention is explicitly focused on the significance of listening in the practices of the Stoics. Drawing on Plutarch’s essential essay on listening—*Peri tou akouein*—as well as on Epictetus and Seneca, roughly his contemporaries (therefore within the Hellenistic late-antiquity world of grand heterogeneity), Foucault exhorts listening as a neglected domain in the process of learning, which for him is an insurmountable element of subjectivation.

Given his interests at that point in his life, his focus was on how listening pertains to truth-telling which, I remind us here, has nothing to do with adherence to some concept of truth that one must serve, but rather to *parrhēsia*: the practice of giving voice to oneself unencumbered and unconcealed, a decidedly bodily action of being as such, devoid of ends and instrumentalities. While I will not elaborate here on the complex and different politics of *parrhēsia* in various historical moments of ancient Greek life, I will note that discussions of this notion inevitably center on the function of speech and almost never on listening—this includes Foucault, aside from this unusual moment. And yet, what would be the political meaning of *parrhēsia* without the sort of polity of listening that fields it, judges it, and is permeated by it?

Foucault here is reading texts of philosophy while meditating on the significance of bodily practices that would undo the mentality of docile bodies. His purpose is political as much as existential, but because he is reading philosophers, he focuses on listening to *logos*. Hence his attention to how we listen to words and all that this immediately conjures and opens up: who speaks the words? what do these words mean? what do I do with the meaning of these words? how do I judge? Yet, he conducts this inquiry by focusing relentlessly on the body: how one sits, whether one moves, how one desires, how one is dressed, where does one go (from here), etc. And he does so following the terms in which these ancient texts themselves describe the acquisition of listening as a skill, yet a skill that is defined as experience (*empeiria*) not *techne*, an experience that must then be performed/demonstrated [*deiknye seauton empeiron tou akouein*] in order to realize the process of transformation that creates a subject, the process of (in his words) subjectivation. [I underline here that listening is not techne but experience and that it cannot just be assumed to have been learned but must be performed—demonstrated.]

This experience is hardly passive—we’re speaking of the exercise of learning, after all. Whether in the context of the mystical Pythagorean myth of the veil or the Stoic de-eroticized confrontation of self and other through teaching/learning, the process is explicitly active, even when it engages—as it must—in the exercise of silence. I remind us again that Foucault makes justly clear that the notion of *askēsis*, which was essential to the vocabulary of the Stoics, has nothing ascetic about it as the term has come to be understood in its Christian and subsequently *Christianized* parameters. *Askēsis* involves no renunciation, no withdrawal, not even a certain kind of sublimation (particularly if by the latter we allow ourselves tacitly to signify a process of repression or retreat from the body). On the contrary, the *askēsis* of the listening experience, which must always involve silence in some fashion, is an active corporeal engagement with the other on the way toward transforming—I would say, *othering*—oneself. I quote Foucault’s description of the Stoic “ethic of listening”:

When you have heard someone say something important, do not start quibbling straightaway but try to collect yourself and spend some moments in silence, the better to imprint [*graver*] what you heard, and undertake a quick self-examination when leaving the lesson you have listened to, or the conversation you have had, take a quick look at yourself in order to see where you are, whether you have heard or learned something new relative to the equipment (the *parakeuē*) at your disposal, and thus see to what extent and how far you have been able to perfect yourself. (trans. modified, 350)

And he goes on to conclude:

In sum, good philosophical listening involves a necessary work of attention, of a double and forked attention. On the one hand looking toward the *pragma*, toward a specifically philosophical signification in which assertion is equivalent to prescription. And then, on the other, a looking at ourselves where we see that memorizing what we have heard has embedded itself [*s’incruster*] and gradually become subject in the soul that listens. The soul that listens must keep watch [*surveiller*] on itself. (trans. modified, 351)

Of course, I repeat, Foucault is interested in the philosophical encounter and the practice of truth-telling, therefore his ruminations on listening are specifically attuned to *logos*. Which is to say inevitably to a certain semantic register, to language as a specific system of meaning that attaches words to things. My own concern is considerably different, as I care especially for the meaning of wordless sound—which might include words, spoken or sung, screamed, whispered or vocalized, to the extent that we can bracket their primary relation to things and return to them their simple resonance. I only made a stop here because I find Foucault’s account of listening to words whose things (*pragmata*) are of utmost importance to be singular for its attention to the concrete-physical rather than abstract-conceptual sphere, to the body rather than the cognitive mind.

Indeed, if we could comport ourselves for a minute and recover from the seductive obsession that “the Greeks” means “philosophy” we might recognize that *logos* was hardly the most important word in the Greek vocabulary. Instead, one can argue that their evident attention to language was primarily constituted and driven by their express attention to sound. After all, their singular linguistic innovation was creating signs for vowels to attach to the alphabetic notation they inherited from the Phoenicians. The literature on this matter is huge and contentious, but there is no doubt that the phonetic nuances of their language were so complex and essential to meaning that the whole gravity of communication was enabled by a musical sensibility. To quote Flora R. Levin from her magisterial treatise *Greek Reflections on the Nature of Music*: “the ancient Greek language was itself a form of melodious expression” since “to distort the pitch-accent was tantamount to committing an egregious grammatical error” (xiii-xiv). In as much as the disseminated and celebrated imaginarium of the Greeks is a modern European invention under the semantic compulsion of philosophical/theological privilege, the simple fact that Greek texts were “written” for the ear first and not for the abstract mind has been denied. Hence, the complex parameters of the practices these texts stirred and substantiated have also been in this respect displaced at a core level, since the adoring Moderns played the Greeks for ideas, not sensations, further honing their own constitutive mind/body split. And I am referring to the entire range of the Greek world: from the cosmological invocation of harmony-in-violence (and vice versa) as the basic framework of the universe and the astronomical understanding that celestial bodies are connected to vibrations that permeate earthly bodies to the raucous intoxication and existential corporeality of the theater and the very essence of politics itself, which in its democratic phase reached a contrapuntal apex.

To return then, in this light, to the Pythagorean acousmatic experience I would focus not so much on the obvious de-privileging of the hegemony of the visual but on something more elemental: the separation of the senses. Because then we would see how a paradoxical condition emerges: **the separation of the senses works in an opposite way to produce in turn a sort of synaesthesia, with listening at the helm organizing the entire sensual/aesthetic experience.** Indeed, what Pierre Schaeffer saw in the Pythagorean occasion was a model for how sound can be disengaged from its source, whether visual or sonic, so that a new way of encountering sound can emerge, so that the experience of listening can transform the very sense of hearing.

We can imagine the Pythagorean veil as a kind of phonograph *avant la lettre*, a device of separating the sound from its source that is just as technological as any of those devices that modernity claims as exclusively its own. The wager of *musique concrète* is how the ear will suspend its impression that sound comes from a person who creates it musically through an instrument that physically makes it happen, so that sound itself can be synthesized as a self-constituted auditory event. Here, the silences in the musical space—*διάστημα*—are essential elements of this synthesis.

I would like to conclude by arguing that the synaesthetic experience I am describing may be an expression of being singular. I realize it sounds counter-intuitive.

Perhaps we can seek the singular in this Greek prefix of *syn* – what brings disparate things together without effacing their differences or particularities. But also underlining how **this tends toward synthesis and away from analysis—the analytical being a preciously exclusive domain of logic.**

By this, I do not mean to privilege the notion of symphony—again as it has come to be understood by the Moderns using the language of the Ancients—where some sort of harmonious resolution balances the many different sonic elements, but perhaps the paradoxical notion of *synaphony*, which would tend toward an undoing of the privilege of harmony in favor of a juxtaposition of sounds that would strain any automatic assumption of the self-sufficiency of voice as tantamount to person, to individuality or identity.

Following this strange and perhaps paradoxical idea, we would want to account for how **the category of listening might strain the capacity of philosophy**. I’m thinking of J-L Nancy’s explicit wondering whether “listening is something that philosophy is capable of”. Obviously, whatever is the response to the question, it cannot be conducted in the domain of logos. Can there be philosophy without logos? Good question.

In any case, this all hinges on how we adjudicate the double meaning of the word “sense” – sense as meaning, and sense as sense. Or, more clearly, **the difference between what is sensed and what is sensible?**

**Listening demands that the sensible be sensed before it is thought, or perhaps that what is thought is ultimately what is sensed, before language as such, as embodied creativity in relation to the other.**

For there is a peculiarity – a singularity? – to sound itself as a medium that bars even a nominal distinction between subject and object, or inside/outside etc. It is impossible to speak without hearing oneself speak—barring any sort of somatic or technologically induced infirmity (but even then, as in silent reading or praying). This resonance is prior to having a sense of what one is speaking about, before *sense* as meaning that arises from logos.

“Prior” here is an inadequate term, for it all happens in simultaneity. But at the level of sound as such—of **resonance**, of how what one says/speaks always **re-sounds** at the very moment that it sounds—this simultaneity of how one listens and understands all at once registers as separation. This is what I mean by **synaesthesis** here. It is how listening enables us to bring our senses **together as separate**, not as collapsed into one, that I want to underline.

Is this a way to think of singularity in the terms that you guys are laying before us? I don’t know, but my wager is that it may be—without the tyranny of logos behind it.