

## From universal to singular listening

— pali meursault

Published in “Grounds for Possible Music”, Errant Bodies, Berlin, 2018

### *From Musique Concrète to Shadok music*

Produced in France in the late 1960s by the research department of ORTF (the French Office for Radio and Television), the animated series ‘*Les Shadoks*’ has remained famous for introducing Musique Concrète to a large audience. The show’s soundtrack, a not-yet-heard-on-television combination of sounds and instrument effects, was orchestrated by Robert Cohen-Solal – a former student of Pierre Schæffer. At one point in the series, the Shadoks, a bunch of stupid and cowardly, bird-like creatures sheltered on the moon, make an attack on Earth using musical weapons. As described in the voice-over, Shadok music consists “for the most part, in making noise using anything at all. Because (...) for the well-trained ear, there is no sound that cannot be heard as music<sup>1</sup>”. Even if the show’s authors took evident delight in mocking such a ridiculous noise music, they nonetheless make it the audible essence of the entire story. For his part, in undertaking his methodical establishment of a new musical culture, Pierre Schæffer, was resisting, on each page of his ‘*Treaty of musical objects*’, the temptation of haphazard experiments. Only in one short segment, between two dashes, does he account for the “amazing faculty of the musical ear to adapt to anything<sup>2</sup>”. For Schæffer, this faculty is not good news, but rather something that might allow insufficiently rigorous and intelligible works to nonetheless achieve posterity. Many of the influences and innovations that can be accounted to Musique Concrète rest upon this understated tension: between the rigorous labor of invention and the contribution to making music with anything at all.

Regardless, the Shadoks’ valuable stupidity indicates that every time we talk about sounds, we are really talking about listening. Not listening as an aesthetic stance or a philosophical concept (as Cage or others put forward in their time) but a material construction of the aural subjectivity.

### *Musica Universalis*

All of the equipment that conveys audio signals in electronic or digital form – microphones, amplifiers, speakers, etc. – have been conceived for a listener who hears frequencies from 20 to 20,000 Hertz and amplitudes with an instant dynamic of 80 decibels. We have been taught to regard these parameters, and many others, as being representative of a median hearing ability. And yet, age-related deficiencies, the social reality of exposure to noise or hearing disabilities do not seem to temper this median. In fact, machines are not made to address a *median* listener but an *ideal* one, a universal listener whose hearing would be (humanly) ‘perfect’. The notion of sound ‘fidelity’ rests on the shoulders of that ideal listener. It is his hearing that must be faithfully reproduced. Many sound artists prefer to leave these arguments to theoreticians and to engineers, regarding microphones and equipment as musical instruments instead. This is even more so the case in electroacoustic or field-recording practices, which make a central and creative use of such apparatuses. In opposition to the technical paradigm of sound re-production, the production of music confers a greater importance to subjectivity. Author and listener move from being mere parameters inside a universal model, to independent subjects in relation.

1 RICHEZ, R. and ROUXEL, J., *Les Shadoks*, second series, ORTF, 1969 [My translation], see: <https://youtu.be/KJpA3c8-Y5g>

2 SCHÆFFER, P., *Traité des objets musicaux*, Seuil, 1966, p. 21 [My translation].

But music has modelled its own ideal of a universal ear since well before the advent of electrical recording. In the Occident, the tonal system has long imposed the absolute of its own universal 'logic', one which has been reinforced by classical musicology's penchant to analyse only the formal and rhetorical aspects of musical 'truth'. As with other art forms, the universal subject against whom all perception is measured, is a product of Enlightenment philosophy. Around Da Vinci's Vitruvian man, the perceptible world radiates in converging lines of perspective. Deeply rooted in our Western cultures, we can still feel his presence today. Was it not he who whispered to Pierre Schæffer that sound experiments should be subjected to reason and intelligibility?

Musique Concrète only went part-way in seizing the opportunities of giving new meanings to sounds. While it gave sounds the possibility to turn back into 'things' - hammers, nails, images, and weights, and thus: tangible powers, new signs and singularities – it nonetheless located this possibility within the framework of music. Musique Concrète also had to go with the discipline, and therefore the profusion of things had to be "reduced" in the listening, and listening preserved in relation to Music. The forms of Musique Concrète were unquestionably new, but they still rested upon the universal of reason, and were still sheltered in the institutionalisation of practices. Legitimate authors were still addressing themselves to idealised listeners of a legitimate culture.

### *The Other of listening*

Universalism is a way for hegemonic culture to established itself as an absolute, and thus to avoid the examination of its significations, social functions, and production within subjectivity. It survives within occidental cultures every time we define the other against the model of the universal subject: the woman as not-a-man; the black as a non-white; the deaf as non-hearing. The social and anthropological reality of the 'other' is thus defined by its divergence from the norm embodied by the universal subject, while the universal subject escapes observation because he blends in the point of view.

In his book *Silent Poetry*, Nicholas Mirzoeff produces a reflexive portrait of listening. Focusing on the visual culture of deaf people in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France, Mirzoeff brings some of the constitutive elements of the universal model of 'normal' hearing to light. The book details the ways in which, against the "oralist" universal of Enlightenment, deaf painters and sculptors invested themselves in visual arts as a way to reclaim a legitimate place that would not be restricted by their disability.

The Kantian conception of anthropology, for which access to Enlightenment was only possible through language, became the theoretical basis for oralist partisans in the 19th century. They tried to banish sign language and coerce deaf people into a learning based on speech, without which, it was assumed, they would be excluded "not only from reason, but from the family of man"<sup>3</sup>. Through his analysis, Mirzoeff invites his readers to consider how the normative determinisms that organise perceptions are produced and incorporated, how a 'normal' hearing gets to define itself by its non-belonging to the deaf minority. In so doing, he also brings forward an alternative side of Enlightenment, of which the invention of sign language by Abbé de l'Épée is one manifestation. According to that other conception of anthropology, subjectivity is not modelled from a universal ideal, but produced through the relation with the other: "there are no universal subjects, for everyone is an other for someone else. Perception is only a given of the human individual in a dialogue with others"<sup>4</sup>.

Such a formulation might provide a clue to how listening might be approached and reinvested as a production of singularities, and as an opportunity for working at deconstructing the universal

3 MIRZOEFF, N., *Silent poetry. Deafness, sign and visual culture in modern France*, Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 10.

4 *Idem*, p. 9.

subject. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have nourished a comparable ambition for the philosophical work, reminding us that “all creation is singular, and [that] the concept as a specifically philosophical creation is always a singularity. The first principle of philosophy is that the Universals are not explaining anything, they have to be themselves explained<sup>5</sup>”.

### *Sounds are not mute*

Such explanatory, interpretative, and analytical work is what critical musicology has brought to the forefront of its activities. Breaking from the abstract formalism that had raised Italian and German musics into universals and absolutes, a new generation of musicologists have taken it upon themselves to interrogate musical sounds through their meanings, through the systems of signs that would express or reproduce social and cultural indicators within the music itself. On this front, Susan McClary's work during the 1980s and 1990s sought to introduce gender and sexuality (as well as colonialism, race, social class, and cultural hierarchies) as useful categories for musical analysis.

For a long time, ethnomusicology had paved the way for the analysis of the expression of community values through music. McClary remarks that when “the musical images produced by people foreign to us are usually somewhat opaque, discouraging us from thinking that we can hear straight through to universal meanings, we tend to be aware that there are many levels of social mediation involved in the production of other musics<sup>6</sup>.” But as feminist and critical musicology attempted to unveil the social and historical construction of our own musical culture, it tackled a new and challenging task, for “it is one thing to recognise the social basis of the activities of remote societies, and it is quite another to begin examining the relativity of our own cherished habits of thought<sup>7</sup>”.

Almost three decades later, the idea that cultural habits and social indicators are present in music (in instrumentation and not only in characters or lyrical content) may feel obvious. Yet McClary's work invites musicologists and musicians to maintain the critical effort and to keep on questioning the works. This is as valid for experimental music as for any other, as even when it claims not to fit to any genre, music might still embody deeper universalist or academic roots, or be more formatted by technical standards than one might care to admit. The sounds that we are making are not neutral, they are not mute. In addition to their acoustic materiality, they also vibrate with discursive echoes. They express the social and cultural relations that structure our uses of technologies and instruments. They enunciate the cultural conventions and norms through which we listen to them<sup>8</sup>.

### *Opening the window*

A memory: October 2011 in Brussels, during the ‘Field-Fest’ curated by Q-O2. In the middle of his set, Michael Pisaro opens the window. The sounds from the outside are invited to mix with the subtle urban hums and sustained, minimal guitar chords he plays according to precise parameters. But on this night, the outside cannot control itself. Children are banging balls and rocks against the wall, and covering the street with insults. Our attention is shaken by the ordinary and yet unexpected violence that bursts fifteen meters below the window. The musician sticks to his protocol but the performance is almost consumed. Our attentive gathering, focused on the politeness of its silence, suddenly appears to me in all of its social uniformity, sheltered at the third floor of its exercise in culture. After the performance, once the window is closed again, I hear some people

5 DELEUZE, G. et GUATTARI, F., *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Minuit, 1991, p. 12 [My translation].

6 McCLARY, S., *Feminine Endings: music, gender and sexuality*, University of Minnesota Press, 2002 (1991), p. 26.

7 *Idem*.

8 On that idea, François J. Bonnet has developed a compelling critique of Schæffer's ‘reduced listening’, showing that looking for the sound *itself* also means the production of an order of discourse. See BONNET, F. J., *The order of sounds: a sonorous archipelago*, Urbanomic, 2016.

amongst the audience trying to resolve the awkwardness in commentaries. They say that it was interesting but it's a shame the children couldn't eventually stop, and keep quiet. To indulge in belittling the contribution of the children (however fortuitous), they have been granted the status of associated artists! But no: even if the demonstration went away from what was intended, it was eloquent. Our aesthetics are not automatically porous to reality, it is not enough to decide to listen to the world for it to comply and start singing for us.

Would the weight of the social and political aspects of the audible be more prominent for field-recording practices outside of the 'protected' space of the studio (so often devoid of windows)? In reality, despite the exposure that these practices imply, their contribution to the critique of technical mediations and listening aesthetics is relatively new. For the founding figures of the genre, the microphonic confrontation with the world was primarily an opportunity for extracting a system of universal significations. One might rightly suspect that ethnographic sound recordings of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century enact a colonial universalism, but more current examples can be just as striking. In this regard, Raymond Murray Schafer's *The Soundscape*<sup>9</sup> provides an interesting example. For the Canadian composer, the soundscape is not a cultural construction that should be historicised, but an anthropological reality that needs to be described. In order to do so, he mobilises technical objectivity (for example, measuring the perception of the environment with a signal-to-noise reference) and invokes the universals of the occidental literary tradition (which leads him to anchor his conception of the soundscape inside a pastoral representation of paradise lost). Such a critical examination can also apply to the anthropocentrism that infuses in the writings of Bernie Krause, whose idea of a *Great Animal Orchestra*<sup>10</sup> perfectly expresses the idea of a world there just to sing for us, according to universal criteria of cultural appreciation.

### *One's music in questions*

As a musician, I have inherited much from musical aesthetics, theories, and practices, but my ears have also been shaped by the universals of hegemonic culture. Even when I am trying to work against it, I have to admit that I benefit from the cultural norm by being white, male, occidental, cisgender. From such a position, the ability to appreciate the impact of a cultural heritage and the social consistency of a work might have to come from outside of the purely musical issues of form and expression. Critical anthropology, cultural studies, or sociology of medias might help in formulating questions to ask ourselves, to address to the community of sound artists, and to carry on with the creative process.

*On social and cultural determinisms:* if we have reason to hope we will sooner or later pass beyond the fact that experimental music and sound art are predominantly white, male, Western, urban, gender normative and so on, the question remains: exactly what kind of homogeneity or diversity are we producing and promoting in our works and as a social group? How can we evaluate the progressive breaking of barriers and the effect it has on the music?

*On relation to medias and technology:* our desires for autonomy, our attempts in appropriating the technical conditions of expression, are always relative to our dependancy on tools, formats, means of production and diffusion. Are we the craftsmen/women of our material autonomy, or only users subordinated to the logic of industry? We can safely assert that absolute freedom from technology is not achievable, but how do we appreciate how it conditions our productions and the way we listen?

*On relation to ecology:* environment-related sound works (in particular but not exclusively) might never be completely free from exotic representations. The traveling sound recordist can sometimes look like a tourist or an explorer, even against his/her will. Generally speaking, ecological

9 MURAY-SCHAFFER, R., *The soundscape*, Destiny books, 1994.

10 KRAUSE, B., *The great animal orchestra*, Profile books Ltd, 2012.

contradictions might also show when our environmentalist statements conflict with our uses of technology, when our imaginary worlds conflict with our actual use of airplanes<sup>11</sup>. To what extent do these relations determine our habits in the world and how we are representing it?

On *attention economy*: even when arts claim to be radically outside or against the mainstream of audio and visual cultures, they cannot persist without the principles of visibility, acknowledgement, and promotion that condition their emergence. From within the permanent flow of information that solicits our own attention as spectators, to what extent do we actually decide the conditions of access and attention required for what we do? Are the cultural niches in which we evolve favourable for changing perceptions, or do they only reproduce the elective and competitive conditions of attention capture at a smaller scale, specific to a “type”<sup>12</sup>?

One might be inclined to regard such issues, interesting as they might be, as better left to political activism and sociology. But to imagine that such issues are not to be heard in sound and music, would be to validate the idealism of a listener absolved of any extra-musical or extra-sonic influences, abstracted from any social, technological, ecological, or attentional context. Rather sadly, in fact, it would be to consider sound as being just sound.

### *Politics of access to the audible*

Exploring the potential of an instrument or using a microphone to abstract sound bits from the world will never uncover sound *itself*, as an absolute truth or universal beauty. Pierre Schæffer himself remembered that the ear can adapt to “anything at all”, and we knew already that one person's music is another one's noise. In the end, the only ability we really have as listeners is to be affected when discourses become audible, when signs (emotion or knowledge, identity or strangeness) emerge in the listening. In that sense, there might not be much to discover in sounds apart from the path that led us to them. Reflecting upon the systems and dispositions which contributed to paving that way is a geographer's task. It is about drawing the map of the *accesses to the audible*, a political map that would show the complex result of social arrangements, productions of knowledge, temporal and geographical determinations, relations to the other and to the world, all of which combine to make sound audible to *our* particular ears. But as much as maps range from official instruments of power to singular topographies, sound art can contribute to draw something designed for exploring the sidetracks of perception and attention, the deconstruction and reconstruction of subjectivity, the invention of singular forms of listening.

Ultimately, the critique of what remains from universal preconceptions is only a first step to resisting the current of expanding cognitive/attentional capitalism, by which the value (and even the existence) of things and beings is no longer a matter of essence or significations, but depends only on the amount of attention that we give them. Assessing the effects of that “economy of attention”, Yves Citton affirms the urgency of resistance. He calls for creating an “ecology of attention”, of which the aesthetic experience would become “altogether the scale model and life-size trial, the opportunity for practical exercise and critical thinking” that would help “reorienting the attention that drives (our) becoming(s)”<sup>13</sup>.

Confronted with that new order of the tangible, which confers the highest (if not the only) importance to the surface and appearance of things, it might not be enough to make do with a small

11 Proving that the ecological question was not reserved for field-recordists, guitarist Stephen O'Malley has recently commented, in a long blog post, on his own carbon footprint as a musician on tour: [http://www.ideologic.org/news/view/the\\_partial\\_environmental\\_impact\\_of\\_one\\_man\\_s\\_year\\_of\\_making\\_music](http://www.ideologic.org/news/view/the_partial_environmental_impact_of_one_man_s_year_of_making_music)

12 In the early 2000s, a collective of filmmakers had given a very direct answer to that question in the manifesto “*Experimental? It's not my 'type'!*”: <http://www.cineastes.net/manifesto.html>

13 CITTON, Y., *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, Seuil, 2014, p. 41 [My translation].

share of digital rights and user's preferences for each. More than ever, it is urgent to create countercurrents: new qualities, new forms, and new temporalities of perception.