

# Schizophony. A Journey Around the Contemporary Politics of Listening

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## Abstract

[Schizophony, mass noun, is a neologism which stems from a complex, hypothetical mental condition, found in the world population during the second half of the 20th century, albeit emphasised in the 21st century, characterised by a particular type of incoherence and bewilderment produced within the human ear and brain, as it collapses with the outside world, given their permanent vulnerability and submissiveness to seductive sonic stimuli.]

Not seldom, and impertinently, we feel within ourselves the internal, meddlesome and unexpected presence of a small, albeit annoying, sonic event —an audio-worm, if you will—, that, against our will, detracts us from the open relationship with the world of sounds and demands attention, perhaps even worshipping, when we hum it. By listening to that (un)wanted sonic presence, it is thus important to foresee the aural-aesthetic path tread by us, considering, on the one hand, the observation and the understanding of the politics of listening poured on us by the merciless mass culture machine, and, on the other hand, the conception of a time-space of survival —which we name silence—, imagining in it an action of a conscious and active listening, just as a change promoting agent before the aural intervention.

If it's true that the politics of listening emerge, more shamelessly than ever in a world excessively exposed to the exchange value, to aural titbits and to the entertainment-numbness, thus reducing our sonic experience to a destroying childishness, then it's precisely this ascertainment that, paradoxically, unlocks in us the possibility of understanding the instrumental rationalisation that listening has been submitted to, against which we can react.

In this way, we are left to withdraw in silence, skilfully and slyly, into a vacant sonic territory where we may sonically decolonise ourselves so as to propose an in-transit-listening, alone or collectively, nomad in its core, that can strengthen us, make us resilient and immune to gentrification and to the aural titbit. Beyond the sound that occupies consumerism's total space, we now announce a different sonic practise, exposed, from sound art to experimental music, through the valuable evidences of oral tradition's ritualistic music inscribed in the world, where the yet not known and the yet not heard may amplify, in us, the wish to listen to, and to think about, music freed from constraints. This is our desire.

**Keywords.** Schizophony, Sonic Gentrification, Politics of Listening, Audio-Worm, Silence.

## [1] The politics of listening

Let's be clear.

What brings us here is the will to renounce the naturalised idea in us that we are men and women of an essentialist type—a view which stems from those who cleverly manage mass culture [simple people, average tastes]— and, simultaneously, the opposing to a sound culture and an art world, now and then, commanded by the capture of emotions, by the uniformization of aesthetic criteria and by ethic conformity.

We begin by this last aspect, following the politics of listening. Crossed by the contemporary, we are confronted with a world in which the private sound has become public, where the secret-sound, the opaque-sound and free listening are annihilated by an obligation to expose ourselves to the vehicle sound, to the sonic word's exposure, endowed with an assumed and deceiving transparency, and where the power to administrate is overly felt in our hearing and visual lives.

Today, we are left with seeing sounds. Listening, wounded in its inaugural urge of openness to the world, has been inserted within the factory-sound's deafening machine, making almost everyone not pay attention to what they hear, by fatigue and by loss of sensitivity.

In this regime, the music we hear, and our sense of hearing, are consigned to an objectification, to a materialisation that—often— subjects them to a process of annihilation and asphyxia, from which it becomes easy to dismiss them from any symbolic and dialoguing dimension.

In our understanding, the gymnast contemporaneity of scrolling and zapping is adverse to the real experience, which, rather than accessing sonic events, positions us before an evidence of facts and abstractions, in a continuum, that annuls the very perception of the experiences that could stem from us.

We thus understand that it is crucial to inscribe ourselves in a questioning on that abrasive reality so as to activate a re-possibilitation of ourselves, in an ethical impetus, and in a somewhat mature resistance before such seductive politics of sonic dataism.

This reflection does not intend to constitute itself as a homogenous text. It is made of the particular circumstance of exposing itself from a schizophrenic delirium which, opposed to the sonic-neurotic fantasy, has been systematically installed in us. That means that, on account of becoming aware of such bug, it is urgent to depart towards a new place, a vacant one, where we may disobey and break what has been wickedly imposed on us.

So, the reflection appears as a fragmented manifestation on what has inspired it: the potentiality of a free action about music and about culture, putting everyone in an open confrontation with these politics that map everything around themselves and that can be submitted to a weakening, to a forgetting, due to our action.

This means we have to leave so as to return. It means to leave in silence, without anyone's acknowledgement.

But precisely for not being able to assess the strength of this action, we express our concern, now in paper, with such sonic machining that suffocates human spirit. That bothers us, doesn't leave us happy,

and takes us to an agonism that intends to mainly resist the humiliation and the reification of the senses. The substantial number of audio-worms that persist in inhabiting our sonic memory is the perfect example of it, which we can't get rid of, not even in silence. It's quite a bizarre scenario, not rarely witnessed, that we may characterise as sonic gentrification.

What happens when we're gentrified? We have to move someplace else due to the excessive prominence of certain sounds —mass-sound—, that almost turns us into hostages, be it by hyper valorisation, be it by status.

What can we do when that happens? What can we do when an audio-worm is meddling in our entrails? As an example for our possible reaction to it, let's consider the author of *The Book of Tea*, Okakura Kakuzō, who tells us that when men elevate themselves, i.e., when they become grander by sensing the use they may offer to the useless, they thus enter the realm of the arts, by acknowledging the pleasure they obtain upon picking a flower for their loved ones.

So, we have a stimulus at our disposal: to elevate ourselves and to salute the useless gesture of the arts, blocking the useful sound already pinned to the worm's body.

In this way, art and culture are *sine qua non* conditions to make things more beautiful, as they expand human sensibility and curiosity from the capacity of performing useless acts, radiant of agonistic dialogues. This alone would suffice so as to one not lose more time with the useful-sound's futility. Just as the child is born with the potentiality to begin the new, music —as a sonic artistic object— may present itself to the world without knowing, without asking if it's wanted or not by society, despite moving towards it.

Another example comes from Ionesco who, beside Hannah Arendt, invites us to a reflection on the possibility of a work of art performing a social function, even though the work of art, itself, is not one. We emphasise Ionesco's voice, refreshing it when it displayed the idea that art has the power, if it serves any purpose, to tell people there are things which are useless, and that happens because it's its very own nature and self-sufficiency.

If we're not aware of this peculiar aspect of art, music and sounds, it will be quite difficult to arrange a thought about it and its way of incorporating itself in the world that is not conditioned by a functional action. Let's say the ontological condition's existence of such artistic manifestation may constitute the ideal obstacle which can force back sonic excess and stop the domain perpetrated by those aural parasites.

It's not easy, but we can cool down their impetus by enriching our aural archive with so many, among others, real sonic experiences, that it becomes impossible for such audio-worms to survive. Or, at least, if they survive, may they be restrained and asphyxiated in their own agendas and their own indecent quests for sonic pleasure impositions, where they're immersed in.

It is also in this condition of the sonic experience's enriching in us, that we stand beside António Guerreiro when he warns us that every "cultural politics" always exposed itself as an action, which often transformed culture as an instrument and music in a utility, thus becoming easily manipulable objects, fronting the support of the actual political power's maintaining.

It's precisely here where we feel mass culture's mustering, taking away from sound and music that which in them is essential as enablers of reflection, speculation and problematising on human nature. It is thus

fundamental to keep ourselves eternally vigilant, where it's not enough to simply repress these useful sounds. We need to impose cordons sanitaires around them, from the understanding we gain from the sounds that cross our body.

What have we been feeling?

We feel that culture, a fair share of institutionalised art, music and sounds live the dramatic experience of being gentrified and transformed in some sort of techné of sound's political administration. Well, they can be mortally wounded.

Today, we know that the massified and stupidified culture, and the industry that has associated itself with it, has evolved from the particular to the general in its expressions and travels, be it traditional, artisanal, independent or industrialised, currently experiencing the tragic circumstance of their own commercialisation.

It is thus necessary to measure the impact it is submitted to—and here we claim the opening of sameness—, taking mass culture as an example and observing the accelerated use of neoliberal principles in the productive fragmentation of culture, the economies of scale for every part of our lives, and the maximisation of audiences.

In the commercial commotion of culture—culture, here regarded as an acquisition and not a particular manner for us to develop a relationship with the absent (the sonic pathology, schizoid shaped)—, we find its respective industry only concerned with the idea of catalogue and expanded repertoire, in order to avoid “failures” and to permanently use that idea of creating a particular type of memory, just as a strategic inventory available to simply exacerbate the offer. Spotify is a clear example. There, we have no other choice but to be exposed to the reification of sounds.

So, what to do? Discuss the State's resources? Search for the artists who will save the world? Alienate ourselves? Nothing more misleading...

The problem is located upstream of all this—the minuscule social function from where culture, art and music have been withdrawn—which does not allow to contemplate them beyond such endemic existential marginality. This is what makes our body, now more fragile, infected by so many audio worms that colonise us and prevent us from contacting sonic otherness, that which will help us in understanding who we are. That's the main reason for schizophony's presence among us, particularly expressed in the aural décor imposed on us.

The biggest issue in culture, art and music, is their lack of relevance in the current social setting. That's the axiom hidden within the politics of listening that, by watching us fragile and fragmented, constantly overloads us with audio-worms, from the smartphone notification to the solemn and operatic opening of the evening news. The show will begin, better yet, it has already begun and we don't even need to whet our ear because there's always a “holy spirit of the ear” that will comfort us and whet it for us.

In contemporaneity, a pair of shoes, a gourmet flavour that challenges our palate, some reality show, a world music festival, or any other normative contest of behaviours, is worth more than any other expression that may claim a sonic otherness.

All this in an intoxicating climate—party sounds—, all this exposed as if the politics of listening were not more than a circus of “positive” experiences to amplify in us resentment and guilt for an unfulfilled duty

of efficiency. That's what leaves us out of the circuit when, without any update, we're unable to identify who's more heard in the world, even if momentarily.

On top of it all, artists, particularly musicians, have accommodated to it, performing a salvific action that, sooner or later, imprisons them.

## [2] Schizophony

What now? Aware that the politics of listening represent a quite effective biopolitical mode in the control of our affects, what can we do? How can we free ourselves of this schizophony? If listening is a desire that comes from within and moves towards the outside, how can we avoid such politics that, reversely, instigate in us unwanted yearnings? What risks can we take for not wanting to be part of such tempting and deceitful menu?

Returning to where we've started, albeit now much more concerned by the perception of such unwanted presence in us, we understand it is useful to assert that, well beyond the sound that marches on the universe of consumerism, we can announce a different aural practise, now decolonising, that may open other panoramas where the not yet heard may leave us free of constraints.

This decolonising practise is quite a hard task as it forces us to suspend colonial sound's symbolic violence and, simultaneously, to build a new sensitivity capable of resisting the hegemony and the domestication of such authoritarian regime.

That decolonising practise gets us close to a sonic-psychotic delirium at first contact, as we end up without the accustomed sonic landscape, but by abandoning the world of sounds which has imposed on us, we become competent to find a different one capable of affirming the infinitude of its nature. This other possibility imposes on us relational ethics with the sounds, way beyond aesthetic matters, hence the hardness, that doesn't leave us satisfied with the mere interpretation of the world. It's not enough, it implies an internal restructuring of the world of sounds that lies ahead of us, and that will be its strength, through our own capacity to create sonic micro-utopias.

It's in this precise moment that we can be guilty of disruptiveness, which must not bother us, as we know the disruption of the sonic anti-colonialism is that which can feed a critical thought that may free us, that may disconnect us from the sonic reifications that we've been subjected to.

We're content upon using the older expression —that of the anti-colonialism— as it clarifies our positioning. What do we need to move away from schizophony?

Our bodies acknowledge that the art of sounds expands us, representing a not immediately identifiable attempt of civic action and thinking; we must only take a nomad step away from that noisy factory-sound, in order to rip the cloak of ignorance that is constantly offered to us by the "merciful" action of neoliberalism's mass culture.

Ignoring such possibility is allowing the misery of sounds to never leave us. It's because of this that the sounds' positive world touches our body each and every second. It's that proliferation of the banal sound that lowers our guard and attaches us to various ideas which intend to turn sound into a populist key to push away the recognition of the world's issues.

Institutions such as the Collège de France —1530, reign of Francis I— remind us that study is the acquisition of knowledge without any bond of utility. In this way, we're told that we must grow autonomously. Is that possible, is it really possible to identify the sounds which invade us, when we're numbed by the narcotic effect of this sonic schizopony that, for now, keeps occupying our ears?

On November 10, 1848, in the French National Assembly, Victor Hugo said: "(...) what's the biggest danger of today's situation? Ignorance." Where is our ignorance before the world of sounds, after all the years that have passed after Victor Hugo's statement? What about it, in a globalised world where we have more space, when we have less time to mature what enters us?

The current politics of listening are aware of that and don't allow us the necessary autonomy to decide. They decide for us, completely forsaking one's individual autonomy, offering us the permanent hypothesis of falling into ignorance's abyss.

In a word, in a verb, in an action: we need to illuminate each and every one's aural labyrinth, renouncing such sonic essentialism and creating a resistance that refuses a single vision for the world of sounds. It is thus important to keep in mind the conditioning which we've been subjected to in order to critique who we are and how we are.

This idea of counter current and of resistance may be the last opportunity to historically analyse the limits imposed on sounds, from there performing a genealogy of the sound types that are forced on us, so as to reflect on the possibility of living beyond them.

Before moving on, George Bataille, who always warned rulers about the fact that those who just have the sense of utility will end up in ruins, allows us to take on the navigation: any process which supports the creation of a particular universe of sounds, following what has been previously said, must contribute to the strong construction of an aural singularity, and it must not determine nor pre organise any sense of existence, as this shall prove to be lethal to it.

This step, albeit potentially inconclusive, is also essential because it will stop governance to translate the untranslatable, enabling a space for the arts, culture, and music —let's say democratic—, to, unequivocally, find and explore their own singularities, autonomies, excesses, irreverence and insubordination. Are we available for that?

### [3] Silence

We presume that any thought on the art of sounds, on the 21st century, is open. Such openness favours the authorial work's singularity, that each of us can activate from a duty of constituting memory and from inhabiting the epistemological fields when we discuss sound, highlighting the made possible dialogue.

We thus search for a silence —in this particular case, silence is by us regarded as a time-space where we find the possibilities to clash with thoughts that stem from the attention we pay the world— that makes us enter an-other place, where we may witness aural memory's unwinding, but mostly stressing that what has been left behind us, forgotten and occult, must not be ignored, preventing the sonic genocide perpetrated by the hegemonic and massified culture.

Now, to eliminate that forgetfulness is our task and, through silence, it constitutes itself as resistance and as an expansion of the aural experience, driving out the positivist extractivism of factory sound's sonic utility and suggesting a future that is urgent to our aural labyrinth.

It's in it where we must place the passion of the sonic creators' work, who often find themselves, inevitably, composing objects for a community who has yet to exist.

As we believe that art is, mostly, thought and that culture is what comes from it, we see it expose itself to contemporaneity in an openness towards aspects connected to the cultural, social, economic, technological and artistic changes in a country, in the world.

We must therefore be able to create scenarios that allow us to investigate and to create sonic objects willing to problematise our contemporaneity. Free listening, that which is uprooted from politics that refrain it from being what it always wanted to be—a true wake-up call to human survival—is the gateway to the work of each of us, when we're available for critiquing who we are, observing the limits imposed on all and then conceiving and experiment on how can we move past those limits, beyond that horizon.

It seems clear to us that considering listening, through silence, can only be a true exercise of inclusive thought if, in one breath, it is able to strengthen our capacity to be singular, artistically and culturally speaking.

In the particular case of the world's music, not to be mistaken for "world music", making it happen intends to problematise the multiplicity in each creator, interpreter, or listener, in their social, artistic and cultural aspects.

We are moved by the force of listening, in a quiet atmosphere, that may offer us a critical understanding of the subjects that inhabit the space of sonic decolonisation, in order to search for an attentive (de) construction of contemporary culture's discourses, in a decolonising action, directed at the sonic substance that we all build.

From the literacy and the repertoire that keep feeding the musical-aesthetic discourse, this decolonising vision of the sounds must resort to processes of immersion within the universe of sounds, ethnographically and accidentally, deepening the questioning between sound and the world.

If we put world's music in a dual space between sound and culture, we can associate it with cultural studies' flowing thought which, note Stuart Hall, can importantly contribute for a disruptive reading of the established genealogies on the histories of sounds, on the diluting of the borders of different knowledges, and on the constraints provoked by the colonial sound.

A decolonising action involves a double effort: abandoning the secure and cultural place where we live, and, through infinite listening, resisting the closure of sounds executed by ear and by an ethnocentric brain. This very action performs its job in a time-space where, and this is a necessary condition, an open learning is summoned, one labouring in autonomy and singular thoughts. It's precisely there that the precept of sound "de-governmentalisation" will be claimed, resorting to working guidelines with their own sensitivity so as to enable the creation of sonic projects of emancipatory character.

Before these actions, musical culture may inscribe itself in the agenda of critiques that allow for decolonised music to demonstrate paths that may provide forgotten, or subordinated, voices with space.

In this mode of thinking, its desideratum is centred in the possibility of regarding and thinking about decolonised sound as an-other possibility of making sense(s) of the world.

This will enable new dialectical relations between sound, music and community, opening space for proposals that embody the unquietness that we now have before the decolonial sound's potentiality and the necessary restlessness this same sound contains within itself, so as to appeal for the creation of an epistemology that resists getting entangled by closures or by unnecessary sedentarinesses.

Let's remember here that when sound embraces music, in profound agonism, our ear hosts the appeal of culture integrated in life and in the freshness of actions, regarding the music which is open to the world, the world's music, in a plural activity.

We understand the culture that may stem from world's music, deeply respecting each and every one's cultural voices, as an almost immediate response, despite being thought of for a while now, to some of these concerns which have been set out (schizophony, audio-worm, ...). We regard them in the transit between today and tomorrow, in a strong relationship between action and investigation, where the producing of sound, i.e., making music, materialises the unique richness of that world's music to be revealed. Perhaps we may thus become more silent, but far less schizophrenic.