Jean-Luc Nancy and the listening subject

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Readers of Roland Barthes will recall that his essay, "The Grain of the Voice,"

begins with a critique of "the poorest linguistic category: the adjective" (Barthes,

1985, p. 267). Discussions of music, when doomed to the adjective, are trapped

between the horns of a dilemma, "the predicable or the ineffable?" (268) Barthes'

strategy for outwitting this dilemma is to "change the musical object itself," "to shift

the fringe of contact between music and language" rather than, "change directly the

language used about music" (269). What he proposes is a noun, *the grain*, a site

where "a tongue encounters a voice," and the "articulation of body and discourse" is

located (255). According to Barthes, the grain of the voice marks an "interspace"

where "listening's back-and-forth movement might be made" (255).

As English language speakers, we can translate Barthes' noun from his

tongue into ours, and similarly shift the contact between music and language. But,

not all parts of speech can be so easily translated, for the French language possesses

a distinct advantage as it turns from the adjective to the noun to the verb. Unlike

English, where we contrast the passive form, *to hear*, with the active or intensive, *to

listen*, the French language can exploit a larger vocabulary for describing a variety of

"modes of listening" through the use of verbs. In fact, a good way to enter into

contemporary French debates about listening is to pay close attention to the use of

verbs. Because of the increased number of verbs about listening in French, there is more room for conceptual and philosophical disagreement about the meaning of each term. There are also different etymological roots in the French verbs than in the English, which complicates their translation. In what follows, I pay attention to the use of verbs to develop a contrast between two thinkers who have paid great attention to issues of listening: Pierre Schaeffer, the inventor of *musique concrète*, and the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy.

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In his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966) Pierre Schaeffer employed four different verbs to describe listening : *écouter, entendre, comprendre,* and *oüir*.

Each of Schaeffer's verbs employs the ear in a distinct manner. *Oüir* is the least developed, describing a type of inattentive audition, where sounds pass through the listener unnoticed—the kind of listening one employs in a noisy café while trying to read a book or an article. *Comprendre* refers specifically to the reception of languages. Tied to the faculty of understanding, *comprendre* implies a type of listening aimed at extracting the message from an utterance or proposition. *Comprendre* extends from linguistic to quasi-linguistic grammars as well, like those of tonal theory. Much of what we teach in elementary harmony classes institutes this kind of listening, showing students how to identify, evaluate and understand a well-formed tonal sentence or period, one that demonstrates the requisite musical

grammar.

Écouter designates a mode of listening that is securely bound to "the natural

attitude," where sounds are heard immediately as indices of objects and events in

the world. The natural attitude, which receives its canonical treatment in Husserl's

Ideas I, captures our everyday involvement with the world, where corporeal things

are "simply there for me, 'on-hand' in the literal or figural sense, whether or not I am

particularly heedful of them and busied with them…" (Husserl 1982, §27). In this

sense, *écouter* is involved with situating sounds in the surrounding sonorous milieu,

with grasping their distance and spatial location, or with indentifying objects on the

basis of their distinguishing sonic characteristics (Schaeffer 1966, p. 106). *Écouter* is

selective, positional and indexical. It is also, for the most part, unreflective. When we

are in the natural attitude objects presented perceptually are posited as really

existing. There is neither reflection on the constitution of the object heard, nor on its

manner of presentation to the listener, nor the variety of its modes of givenness.

When listening in the mode *écouter* Schaeffer claims that, "[I am] directed towards

the event, I hold onto my perception, I use it without knowing it…To listen [*Écouter*]

here is to intend [*viser*], across the instant of the sound itself, something other than

it" (Schaeffer 1966, p. 107).[1]

The final mode, *entendre*, must be contrasted with *écouter*. "*Entendre*" shares

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[1] «Dirigé vers l'événement, j'adhérais à ma perception, je l'utilisais à mon
insu….Écouter est ici encore viser, à travers le son instantané lui-même, une autre
chose que lui…»

the Latin root *intendere* with the central phenomenological concept of

intentionality.[2] Schaeffer is absolutely clear about this connection; he writes, "For

entendre, we retain the etymological sense, 'to have an intention'. What I hear

[*j'entends*], what is manifested to me, is a function of this intention [*intention*]"

(Schaeffer, 1966, p. 104). Note that this connection is lost in the translation of

entendre as "hearing" and thus obscures the close association between this mode of

listening and Schaeffer's phenomenological preoccupations. From within the natural

standpoint we can shift our attention from *écouter* to *entendre* by bracketing the

causality of sounds, performing a reduction (or *epoché*) that changes the focus of

our auditory acts. For Schaeffer, *entendre* is the mode that actively selects particular

attributes of sounds without reference to the source's spatial location and identity.

No longer do we aim at something other than the sound itself. In the mode of

entendre, we direct ourselves toward sounds as such, not to the significations or

indices that are associated with sounds. "Reduced listening" (*écouter réduite*) is

Schaeffer's name for this act of audition, where the listening subject bars the

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[2] As an aside, I want to note an interesting feature of this term. There is no good English equivalent for *entendre*, one that captures the close association of listening and intentionality contained in the French. According to Larousse, "*Entendre* literally means to direct one's mind towards something, to pay attention to, to listen" [«*Entendre* signifie donc proprement tendre l'esprit vers, faire attention à, écouter »] and, thus, preserves connotations that stem from its Latin origin: *intendere*, literally, to point at or be directed towards something. Of course, the use of the verb *écouter* in the Larousse's definition of *entendre* masks their differences; however, most of the contemporary French discourses on listening are more careful than Larousse, by carefully invoking the etymological sense of *entendre* when the term is employed. As we will see, both Schaeffer and Nancy associate *entendre* with intentionality, in particular, with a notion of intentionality presented in Husserlian phenomenology.

appropriation of sounds as indicative or communicative signs (i.e. *écouter* and

comprendre).[3] When sounds are auditioned under the mode *entendre*, "I no longer

try…to inform myself about some other thing (an interlocutor or his thoughts). It is

the sound itself that I intend [*je vise*], that I identify" (Schaeffer, 1966, p. 268).

Entendre bars the appropriation of sounds as signs for environmentally situated

events by keeping attention focused on the sound itself. When the sound itself is

intended, disclosed by the reduction of the mode *écouter* and the invocation of the

mode *entendre*, we are in the presence of Schaeffer's "sound object" (*l'objet sonore*).

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Schaeffer's privileging of the mode *entendre* is not uncontested. On the very

first page of his slim volume, *Listening* [*À l'écoute*], Jean-Luc Nancy thematizes the

difference between *écouter* and *entendre* as a philosophical problem.

> …la philosophie n'a-t-elle pas d'avance et forcément superposé ou bien
> substitué à l'écoute quelque chose qui serait plutôt de l'ordre de l'*entente*?
> (Nancy, 2002, p. 13)

> hasn't philosophy, forcibly and in advance, superimposed or substituted
> upon listening something that might be more on the order of
> *understanding*? [translation modified] (Nancy, 2007, p. 1)

The English translation loses the terseness of the French. One might read the word

"understanding" as a translation derived from *comprendre* rather than *l'entente*.

Entente comes from the Old French noun meaning "intent," which is itself derived

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[3] So, confusingly, Schaeffer considers "reduced listening" (*écouter réduite*) to be an
act of *entendre*, not *écouter*.

from the verb *entendre*, "to direct one's attention," which echoes the Latin,

intendere—"to stretch out, to lean toward, to strain." If one were to mistake

comprendre for *entendre* in this passage, as the translation is wont to encourage, we

miss the phenomenological context that is being evoked in Nancy's opening

gesture—and lose the tension between *écouter* and *entendre* that supports Nancy's

argument. After all, *tendre* means to stretch or tighten.

This tension promotes a philosophical question, or at least a question about the

philosopher:

> Le philosophe ne serait-il pas celui qui entend toujours…mais qui ne peut
> écouter…qui neutralise en lui l'écoute, et pour pouvoir
> philosopher? (Nancy, 2002, p. 13)

> Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears…but who cannot
> listen…[who] neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can
> philosophize? (Nancy, 2007, p. 1)

The philosopher finds him- or herself in a situation of a tension, of balance or

oscillation, between:

> …entre un sens (qu'on écouter) et une vérité (qu'on entend)… (Nancy,
> 2002, p. 14)

> a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands). (Nancy,
> 2007, p. 2)

As the French makes explicit, the struggle between sense and truth is a struggle

between *écouter* and *entendre*. The ear is the common thread upon which the

tension travels, an ear that oscillates between sense organ and sense maker.

Perhaps the English translation is doomed to sever the thread that ties the listening

ear to the hearing ear, *écouter* to *entendre*, by unloosing sensation from

understanding and encouraging the reader to falsely cast the difference in terms of

faculty psychology—Sensibility versus the Understanding—rather than an oscillation of difference within the same.

But the explicitness of the French does not yet bring conceptual clarity. For, the situation is complicated by the different valuations that Nancy and Schaeffer give to the terms *écouter* and *entendre*. If the philosopher is one who always hears or understands, *qui entend toujours*, but can't listen, *ne peut écouter*, then we might think of Nancy as privileging *écouter* over *entendre* as a corrective to philosophy's traditional (and metaphysical) mode of listening. (After all, the book is titled, *À l'écoute*, not *À l'entendre*.) In contrast to Schaeffer, Nancy appears to shift the emphasis away from the act of understanding, of grasping and affixing the world through intentional acts, towards the receptivity of the ear, and its acts tense and coiled acts of uncertain openness through listening.

At the same time, one might argue that Nancy and Schaeffer resemble each other because of their shared allegiance to non-indexical and non-significational modes of listening. For example, Nancy appears to reject indexical listening by claiming that music,

> fait sonner et faire sens non plus en tant que bruits de quelque chose, mais dans leur propre résonance. (Nancy, 2002, p. 61)

> makes sound and makes sense no longer as the sounds of some things, but in their own resonance. (Nancy, 2007, p. 32)

Just as musical listening is irreducible to an environmentally situated listening concerned with the size, speed, source and location of sounds, Nancy also rejects a listening aimed at signification when he writes:

> Si l'*écoute* se distingue de l'*entendre*…cela signifie forcément que l'écoute

est à l'écoute d'autre chose que du sens en son sens signifiant. (Nancy, 2002, p. 61-2)

If *listening* is distinguished from *hearing*…that necessarily signifies that listening is listening to something other than sense in its signifying sense. (Nancy, 2007, p. 32)

To make listening into something other than listening for signification or indices implies an emphasis on the sensory relationship between world and listener, a listening that begins not with the search for meanings but on the basis of the sensory qualities of sounds. Perhaps the morphological values that one perceives in Schaeffer's *entendre* would correspond well to this kind of listening.[4]

Despite these apparent similarities one must be attentive to the great divergence in Schaeffer's and Nancy's approach to the question of signification. The language used—in particular, the selection of verbs—marks the divergence. Nancy selects *écouter* as the axis for his interrogation of listening because of his sensitivity to the etymology and implications of the verb, *entendre*. Listening, as *entendre* or as intention, preserves and prolongs the structure of a Cartesian epistemology: a subject, possessing the capacity for attention, who wills its direction; and an intentional object towards which this attention is directed, and from which it attains its meaning. *Ego, cogito,* and *cogitatum*.

Nancy is critical of this epistemology. In his essay, "The Forgetting of

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[4] Barthes' notion of *signifying* also veers away from indices and significations. If *indexical* listening alerts the listener to the presence territorial activity, while *deciphering* listening tries to intercept signs, *signifying* listening is marked out in that it "does not intend (*ne vise pas*)" signs or indices. At the same time, Barthes states that *signifying* listening, which is "entirely modern," does not supplant its vestigial modes (Barthes, 1985, p.246). [Note that Barthes's third term precisely involves not-intended signs, which inverts the 'intentionality' of Schaeffer's reduced listening; and Nancy's listening in the above quote as well …, again, worth spelling out.]

Philosophy," he argues that signification always involves two registers, the sensible

and the ideal, creating a relationship of perfect conjunction.[5]

> Signification…is the presentation of meaning. Signification consists in the
> establishment or assignment of the presence of a factual (or sensible) reality
> in the ideal (or intelligible) mode (which is what one calls "meaning"); or
> else, and reciprocally, it consists in the assignment of the presence of an
> intelligible determination in the sensible mode (a particular reality and/or
> the materiality of the sign itself). From Plato to Saussure, signification is,
> properly speaking, the conjunction of a sensible and an intelligible, conjoined
> in such a way that each presents the other. (Nancy, 1997, p. 22)

It doesn't matter if we start with the sensible and establish an intelligible meaning

(as in Kant's description of the cognitive processing of the manifold by the

categories and forms of intuition) or if we begin with the intelligible and trace its

manifestation in the sensible realm (as in Hegel's self-exteriorization of the Absolute

Spirit). In either case,

> *Signification is…the very model of a structure or system that is closed upon
> itself*… Before the terrifying or maddening abyss that is opened between the
> possibility that thought is empty and the correlative possibility that reality
> is chaos…signification is the assurance that closes the gaping void by
> rendering its two sides homogenous. (Nancy, 1997, p. 23)

Nancy reads the creation of signification, the adequacy of the sensible and the

intelligible, as a will-to-truth. The agent of this will-to-truth is none other than the

subject, "capable of presenting the concept and the intuition together, that is, the one

through the other" (Nancy, 1997, p. 23). The close interconnection between the

subject and signification—the subject acting as ground which establishes the

adequacy of the sensible and the intelligible—also means that critical questions

about signification inculcate the subject as well. Nancy is arguing that, in the face of

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[5] Others, like Paul de Man or Tzvetan Todorov have called this conjunction "the
symbol." See de Man 1979 and Todorov 1982.

a critique of signification, there is a recoil or decision made by the subject—one that is motivated not only by the desire to suture together the sensible and intelligible as adequate but by the desire to hold onto the subject as the ground of such adequacy. The subject willfully imposes the closed system of signification in order to reassert and reassure itself.

Although Schaeffer remains skeptical towards signification generally—for instance, he directs his investigation away from the mode *comprendre* towards *écouter* and especially *entendre*—his "sound object," finally, satisfies Nancy's criteria for signification (and its attendant will-to-truth). It is the presentation of an ideal, intentional object within a sensible mode, i.e. audition; it acts as a conjunction between the sensible and the intelligible, such that each presents the other. The subject's sense-giving acts unite the sensible signal with an ideal objectivity, transforming the signal from acoustic body into acousmatic flesh. It matters little if we conceptualize listening to some piece of *musique concrète* as the sensible manifestation *of* the sound object, or as a perceptual act of grasping the sound object within audition—the economy has been closed and a perfect adequacy is delivered.

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Schaeffer's conception of the sound object, as a noetically constituted unity of sensible signal and ideal objectivity, prolongs a phenomenology of listening—and a conception of the phenomenological subject—that is grounded in Husserl. As readers of the *Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* are aware,

Husserl often invokes a melody as the example with which to develop his theory of temporal objects and describe the intricate processes of their modes of appearance, protention, and retention (Husserl, 1991). Husserl's melody acts as a paradigm for "temporal objects" generally. The question is this: how can a series of temporally extended sensations be grasped as a unity (as a single melody) by a subject whose consciousness of that melody is also temporal? Although Husserl offers a nuanced and thoughtful account of this problem, the takeaway is that the melody is shaped into a temporal object by an act of the subject.[6] However, the melody is not "subjective" in any sense; its unity is ideal yet objective. The same could be said about Schaeffer's "sound object," which is "not the instrument that was played," "not the magnetic tape" on which it is recorded, nor a "state of mind."[7] Rather, the sound object is an ideal objectivity, something that is intersubjectively accessible (thus, objective) while being irreducible to any of its particular sensory moments (thus, ideal).

By placing the emphasis on the construction of the melody as an intentional object, constituted as a unity from within a subject's time-consciousness, Husserl (and Schaeffer too) overlooks what Nancy calls "modulation" (Nancy, 2007, p. 19). "[Husserl] does not concentrate his ear on musical resonance but rather converts it ahead of time into the object of an intention that configures it. Sound (and/or sense) is what is not at first intended. It is not first 'intentioned': on the contrary, sound it

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[6] I should note that Husserl's solution is also not unequivocal. For instance, in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida offers a close reading of Husserl on time-consciousness as a way of deconstructing Husserl's views concerning the auto-afffective subject; thus, within Husserl's own thought are the seeds of its critique.

[7] Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*, 95-99.

what places its subject, which has not preceded it with an intention [*qui ne l'aurait pas précédé d'un visée*], in tension, or under tension" (Nancy, 2007, p. 20).

The thrust of Nancy's objection to Husserl is clear: who or what exactly is doing this *intentioning*? As the correlate of the sonorous object, one would *expect* to find a sonorous subject (*le sujet sonore* to go with *l'objet sonore*). However, nothing is less sonorous, more unmoved, than this transcendental ego, a punctual ideality, a vaporous lord constituting its immanent objectivities. Well, perhaps the phenomenological subject gets what it deserves: a static, foundational subject disclosing a world of static, constituted objects. In contrast, Nancy calls *his* subject "a resonant subject" because both the object and subject of listening, in his account, resonate. And they resonate because the object and subject of listening both share a similar "form, structure or movement" (Nancy, 2007, p. 9), that of the *renvoi*—a word whose translation as "reference" obscures its double meaning as both a sending-away (a dismissal) and a return.

To see how this term is deployed in Nancy's text compare two passages on meaning and sound:

> Meaning: "Meaning [*le sens*] consists in a reference [*renvoi*]. In fact it is made of a totality of referrals: from a sign to a thing, from a state of things to a quality, from a subject to another subject or to itself, all simultaneously." (Nancy, 2007, p. 7)

> Sound: "Sound is also made of referrals...it resounds, that is, it re-emits itself while still actually 'sounding,' which is already 're-sounding' since that's nothing else but referring back to itself." (Nancy, 2007, p. 7-8)

Meaning and sound, as Nancy describes them, both share the same "form, structure or movement." They are comprised of a series of infinite referrals, a sending-away which returns, only to be sent away again, ever anew. The return penetrates the

sending, "all simultaneously," producing a dispersal of bounds and rebounds without end. This applies, for Nancy, equally to the actual physics of sonorous reverberation as well as to the infinite circulation of *renvoi* upon *renvoi*. Meaning and sound share the "form, structure, or movement" of resonance. In the perpetual movement of this meaning, Nancy avoids the adequation and static presentation that characterize signification, for there is no closure in the economy of resonance and *renvoi*. If the phenomenological subject got what it deserved—a static sonorous object—then *mutatis mutandis*, the same follows for the resonant subject. Nancy conceives the subject, not as a proper self (an I), not as the self of the other, but as a "form, structure, and movement of an infinite referral [*renvoi*], since it refers to something (itself) that is nothing outside of the referral" (Nancy, 2007, p. 9). The self is always an "approach to the self" (Nancy, 2007, p. 9) in that any representation of the self (a specular *imago* or proper "I", the other, whether present or absent, rival or gap) cannot capture the productivity of the self as an ongoing temporal or rhythmic flux. The unrepresentable self produces an oddly quasi-circular logic, a spiral logic. This involuted curl, this misalignment of presentation and representation grounds Nancy's claims that the self "identifies itself by resonating from self to self," and is, "hence outside itself, at once the same as and other than itself," or echoing Lacoue-Labarthe, "one in the echo of the other" (Nancy, 2007, p. 9). So, sound is not "intentioned" by the subject, rather it is contemporaneous with the subject because meaning, sound and self all share the same "form, structure or movement," namely, *renvoi*, resonance.

Where does this leave our modes of listening, our various French verbs?

Naturally, one can comprehend Nancy's various themes without demanding the English speaker's attention to a cluster of French verbs. (The issue is less the proper word to categorize a mode of listening than how the mode of listening attaches a subject to an object or the nature of the linkage. For the meaning comes not with the term itself—which acts as a guide, offering etymological constraints and evoking historical connotations—but with the definition and characterization of the listening mode.) One need not explicitly note the linguistic differences between *écouter*, *entendre* and *comprendre* to recognize Nancy's key issues: the homology of sound and self as a structure of referral, the various open and closed economies of signification, and an interrogation of the philosophy of the subject. Moreover, *renvoi* is not tied to any particular mode of listening but is manifest in the limits and contiguity of modes of listening. When the philosopher finds him- or herself "entre un sens (qu'on écouter) et une vérité (qu'on entend)," fidelity to *renvoi* would mean that no reduction or decision between *écouter* and *entendre* be made.

However, attention to the etymology, connotation and context of these French verbs draws the reader's attention towards Nancy's theme: how can the question of the subject be posed again? Nancy's attention to the difference between *entendre* and *écouter* is ultimately a way of reformulating the question of the subject by encouraging a shift from the *phenomenological subject*—the subject of representation who constitutes the objectivity of things by its inherent yet unrepresentable power of representation—to a subject that is listening to the infinite *renvoi* of meaning, sound, and self. Nancy's ontology of sound and self, which posits both as sharing a homologous structure of perpetual referral, is designed to

offer a way of considering the subject that contrasts with the identification of the subject as the punctual I or imago—the figure who conditions the classical triad *ego-cogito-cogitatum*. With this in mind, I would suggest that Nancy's *Listening* is really a small intervention aimed at thematizing ways in which the question of the subject can be posed anew, outside of the horizon of the phenomenological subject. To pose that challenging question one needs all the linguistic resources at one's disposal.

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