

THE ORDER OF SOUNDS
A Sonorous Archipelago

FRANÇOIS J. BONNET

Translated by
ROBIN MACKAY



URBANOMIC

**PREFACE:
THE OTOGRAPHER**

PETER SZENDY

In the *Cahiers* of 1936–7, Paul Valéry jotted down a potential subject for a short story:

Tale—for children or others—

Keen-ear; True-ear—One can hear the grass grow. The other recognizes in a sound an infinity of *interrelations*—

Music tears him apart, for in the most perfect performance, in sounds that others find the purest, he perceives a dreadful number that are not.

The same tale is possible for sight. The pilot; the expert in shades of colour; the foreteller spotting, like a fencer, the slightest sign on the opponent's face.

Or for touch, or taste.

It involves taking the different types of acuteness of any one sense, and the results, to the level of the fantastic.ⁱ

For the heightened sense of sight, Valéry indicates professions or activities that specifically call for visual hyperaesthesia: the pilot, the fencer.... Whereas for Keen-ear and True-ear he gives no such examples, but only speaks in general of a hyperbolic auditory sensibility capable of detecting even the sound of grass growing.

Yet there are many professions that require an acute ear. For example the personnel known in French military jargon as '*oreilles d'or* [golden ears]', charged with listening out for and identifying the sounds of submarines for strategic purposes. Or doctors, whose auscultation of patients involves an attention to detail which may be appreciated by reading some remarkable pages in which Laënnec, inventor of the technique of mediate

i. P. Valéry, *Cahiers/Notebooks* 2, tr. P. Gifford, S. Miles, R. Pickering and B. Stimpson (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 436.

auscultation by means of the stethoscope, describes what the instrument is capable of picking up. Or spies, as innumerable novels and films have given us to imagine.

In establishing himself as an otographer,ⁱⁱ François J. Bonnet does not privilege any particular one of these ‘sonorous professions’. When he writes on the ear—and one sometimes has the impression that he is writing from the eardrum itself—when he thinks hearing, neither does he insist on any ontological figure in particular. What he follows, what he tracks, is the latent Fine-ear behind all the various forms and guises he may take on; Fine-ear *before* he adopts any particular visage.

In short, it is a logic of listening—or perhaps we should say a graphism of listening—that Bonnet seeks in sound. Not in the ear, but within the very structure of sound itself.

Certainly, in the following pages we also meet numerous characters who listen, each more remarkable than the last. Of course we have the ‘Magician of Menlo Park’, Thomas Alva Edison, in his guise as a character in Villiers de L’Isle Adam’s *The Future Eve*. And Nikola Tesla, the Serbian inventor who, in his writings on radio, claims to make the earth itself into a cosmic transceiver for interplanetary communications. We encounter practitioners of auditory espionage and surveillance who decipher the sound of fingertips on keyboards. And finally those anonymous ears, those masses of ordinary ears damaged by the military use of sound—in particular the acoustic cannons that bring noise onto the battlefield, instrumentalizing it for the purposes of warfare.

ii. In *Sur écoute. Esthétique de l’espionnage* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), I proposed the term ‘otography’ for the writing of listening, from one ear to another. In so doing I was inspired by a literary character—not Fine-ear but Earwicker, whom Joyce, in *Finnegans Wake*, characterizes as a ‘paradigmatic ear.’

In short, whether it concerns the sonic weapons envisaged by William Burroughs in *Electronic Revolution*, or the voices of the dead captured by Konstantin Raudive, each of Bonnet's otographies, each of his cartographies of the territories of listening, invites us to plunge into remarkable and unrecognized territories.

But I would say that what the 'sonorous archipelago' entitled *The Order of Sounds* aims to outline is a true thinking of listening, a thinking announced already in what we might call the graphical structure of sound—that is, its trace-being. This is what all the chronicles, all the regional explorations of the indefatigable otographer, on the road with his journals and logbooks, work toward.

From those who lent an ear to the voices of the dead, for example, Bonnet unhesitatingly draws the idea that hallucination—which he therefore takes very seriously, and avoids reducing 'to the manifestation of pathologies, whether hysterical or schizophrenic'—is no more or less 'a *mode of hearing* that functions on the basis of traces' than any other. The same fundamental intuition returns later on when he speaks of *fiction-listening*. Or again when he describes and analyzes *fetishism in hearing*, reinterrogating a notion which, since Adorno, has fairly dwindled into cliché: but here it is a matter of a fetishism that is anything but pathological (he states this as clearly as can be: 'this cannot be a question of assimilating the act of listening to a fetishistic pathology'); that is to say, what Bonnet indicates is a fetishism that is in fact *constitutive of listening* in so far as listening perhaps *essentially* involves an overvaluation of the sonorous. Here we find some admirable pages which ought to prompt a renewed reflection on *value*, the value of listening and value in listening.

There is no doubt that what lies at the heart of Bonnet's archipelago is the distinction between the audible and the sonorous, a distinction which itself rests upon a thinking of the trace. This is stated from the very outset, immediately following the Introduction: 'Even before materializing or becoming a signal, the sonorous—sound—in order to be, must *leave a trace*.' From this primary distinction there unfolds a ramified or reticulated series of motifs which radiate across the archipelago. For 'to leave a trace', as the otographer tells us, to be a trace, is already for a sound to be 'somewhat more than a sound'.