

音 - BIOGRAPHY: REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF (A) SOUND

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On the tenth day of my relocation to the desert it rained, and it rained, gently but steadily, off and on for almost a week. Mid-summer rain in this part of the world is unusual, and it seemed that every living thing here – the people, the animals, the plants – noticed. I certainly noticed, especially on those lucky occasions when I happened to be outside, relishing the *dolce far niente* of ‘voluntary redundancy,’ at the very moment an incident of rain began, and I was able to identify the initial drops that hit the corrugated metal roof that shelters the veranda of my new home. At those moments it occurred to me that at first I was listening to a number of isolated sounds and then, as the drizzle built up, to just a single sound. It also occurred to me, although only in retrospect, that when for one reason or another I went inside the sound(s) of the rain for all intents and purposes ceased to exist; probably the rain was still audible from within the dugout, but I cannot say for sure, because my thoughts at these times were invariably focused on using the toilet, or making another cup of coffee, or checking my email. In any case, I remember that when I finished my business and returned to the comfort of my outdoor sofa, I once again heard, and once again paid attention to, the rain. The experience put me in mind of Alvin Lucier’s *Music on a Long Thin Wire*, an ‘installation piece’ conceived in 1977 but first realised in 1979; once set up and turned on, Lucier’s tuned and amplified wire vibrates freely until eventually the apparatus is dismantled, but its ‘music’—or so I think—plays only when someone listens.[1]

Most nights in Coober Pedy are very, very quiet. Across the valley from my hillside dugout I can see a kilometre’s worth of lights that indicate residences, yet of the residents’ nocturnal activities I hear almost nothing. What I hear, a few times a week, is the simultaneous sounds of their dogs, and this triggers thoughts. It is easy enough to determine the direction, more or less, from which a particular dog sound comes, and it is likewise easy enough to describe a particular dog sound as a quick spatter of high-pitched yips, or as an irregular series of loud and low-pitched woofs, or as a sustained howling that covers a wide range. What is impossible to know is the motivation for these sounds. Does the dog who launches the chorus vocalise because it is somehow alarmed? Does the second dog bark out of sympathy, or out of curiosity, or because it is irritated at a disturbance of its peace? Do the others join in simply because that is the doggish thing to do? Why, I wonder, does all this barking suddenly begin? And why, I wonder, does it so suddenly stop? Condensing ideas first formulated by Pierre

Schaeffer, the French sound theorist Michel Chion labeled three basic ‘modes of listening’ as *l’écoute causale*, *l’écoute sémantique*, and *l’écoute réduite*. Vis-à-vis the dog sounds, I have no problems with the first and third of these (the sounds are ‘caused,’ obviously, by dogs of various sizes; the sounds can be taken out of context and ‘reduced’ to so many abstract sonic phenomena categorisable according to their durations, their levels of pitch and volume, their timbres, etc.). But the second mode leaves me stumped; I suppose that I will never know if the canine dialogue actually *means* anything.[2]

I did bring with me from Sydney to Coober Pedy all of my battery-operated clocks, but I have to set them up and re-activate what my students at the University of Michigan, where I sometimes taught a class having to do with the musical avant garde, dubbed my ‘clock piece.’ The ‘clock piece’ did not begin as a creative effort, or as a musical composition; it started simply because I wanted to be able to sit in my Ann Arbor living room and know the time without having to look at my wrist watch, and it developed when I decided that I did not care much for the design of the cheap thing I had just found at a yard sale; so I bought another clock, and then a third and a fourth, and one day I noticed these clocks’ combined tickings. Because the clocks were of low quality, and because the energy levels of their single AA batteries were inconsistent, the ticking pattern was *always* changing, sometimes briefly forming a transcribable rhythm with accents and subdivisions, more often forming just little dribbles of minuscule percussions. To my surprise, I discovered that even when the room was otherwise silent I seemed to have control over whether or not I actually *heard* the tiny ticking that in fact was ever present. Both in Ann Arbor and in several apartments in Sydney, where I not only re-installed the ‘clock piece’ but expanded it, visitors sometimes informed me that they thought the clocks were absolutely maddening, and typically I had trouble in understanding why my guests, like me, could not simply disengage with sound of the ticking; alas, what occasionally seems like ‘music’ to my ears has often proven to be just so much noise to others, especially when they are trying to sleep.[3]

The three anecdotes are about me and my interactions with, or reactions to, certain sounds. Thus they are both autobiographical and 音-biographical, to coin a term based on the Japanese word (‘oto’) that in isolation simply means ‘sound.’[4] And to a large extent the anecdotes are also ‘otobiographical,’ to use another neologism—its prefix based on the Greek word οὖς (‘oûs,’ meaning ‘ear’)—that was invented by Jacques Derrida for the sake of a lecture delivered at the University of Virginia in 1977 and then repeated, more or less, two years later as part of a symposium at the University of Montreal.

One is hard-pressed to find a definition of ‘otobiography,’ let alone an explanation of Derrida’s never-formulated, and presumably nonexistent, ‘theory’ of otobiography. When one types the word “otobiography” into the Google search engine, the device in less than a second offers a list of almost 61,000 internet pages that for better or worse make reference to Derrida. But the Google response that likely would have most delighted Derrida is the very first one. At the top of the page and in embarrassingly bright red letters the search engine asks: “Did you mean ...” – then, in bold-face blue – “*autobiography*”?

Had Derrida spoken his made-up word during either of his lectures, surely the audience would have heard it as ‘autobiography.’ It is curious that, except in plural form in the title, the word otobiography appears nowhere at all in the official English translation of the Montreal lecture.[5] According to this published text, during a lecture ostensibly about Nietzsche right at the start Derrida said that along with “academic freedom” his topics for the day were “the ear” and “autobiography,”[6] and according to this published text Derrida mentioned autobiography quite a lot. One has to wonder, though, if what actually came out of Derrida’s mouth was somehow misheard, and thus mis-transcribed. One wishes that one could have been there, close enough to see just what sort of twinkle appeared in Derrida’s eye, when Christie McDonald, one of the conveners of the Montreal symposium and one of the editors of the ensuing English-language book, called attention to the homophonic words and their “implicit slippage.”[7]

Verbal ‘slippage,’ of course, was Derrida’s stock-in-trade. In this Derrida was holding to a Gallic tradition that dates back at least to the days of Baudelaire and whose practitioners include not just poets and novelists but also politicians and television talk-show hosts. But Derrida was uncommonly good at it, to the extent that some in his field felt that the superficial brilliance of his wordplay eclipsed what they, perhaps jealously, argued was an utter lack of content. In May 1992, when Cambridge University was considering awarding Derrida an honorary doctorate, Barry Smith and seventeen other certified philosophers from around the world wrote a protesting letter to *The Times* of London in which they argued that Derrida was a *poseur* whose published work amounted to “little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship,” a wordsmith whose work “consist[s] in no small part of elaborate jokes and puns,” a charlatan who made a career of “translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists.”[8] Eight years earlier, the American philosopher Richard Rorty decried the lot of Derrida-inspired thinking that by that time had come to be known as ‘Deconstructionism,’ and he lamented that “our culture has [lately] been carried upward by a bubbling fountain of puns and metaphors.”[9] More recently, the French cultural historian François Cusset suggested that this ‘bubbling fountain,’ spewed not just by Derrida but by numerous of his countrymen, helped trigger “a creative misunderstanding between French texts and American readers,” and he hinted that this ‘creative misunderstanding’ was perhaps what Deconstructionism was really all about.[10]

Derrida’s puns are plentiful, but rarely of the vulgar type that characterise the James Bond films of the 1960s and are so deliciously mocked in Mike Myers’s “Austin Powers” movies.[11] A possible exception to that generalisation can be found near the start of Derrida’s own essay on wordplay, in which he writes:

When I started preparing for this symposium, I realised I had misread the suggested title. Probably because of a lack of attention I had read, instead of “The States of ‘Theory’” (with states in the plural and “theory” in quotation marks), “The State of Theory” (with state in the singular and theory without quotation marks).

And I thought that the answer to this question—What is the state of theory today?—was then self-evident, it is obvious, *hic et nunc*. The state of theory, now and from now on, isn’t it California? And even Southern California?[12]

But even this, published just two years after Derrida’s appointment as distinguished professor of French, philosophy, and comparative literature in conjunction with the University of California-Irvine’s newly created Critical Theory Institute,[13] hardly counts as a ‘groaner.’ It is indeed a play on the word ‘state,’ but it is, as Derrida explains, “more than *mere* play”:[14] it is a simultaneous presentation of two very different concepts that happen to be conveyed by the same combination

of letters, and with the instant juxtaposition of the meanings of those two concepts comes the possibility of still more meanings whose number is limited only by the extent of the reader's imagination.

Derrida's play on 'state' is addressed to the reader. But most puns that we encounter in daily life are addressed not to readers but to listeners; they are aural—or oral—and are based on multiple meanings of a verbal 'object' not seen but heard. The spoken pun may well be accidental, although there is good reason to doubt the veracity of anyone who says, during his/her speech, "no pun intended." The truly unintended pun may have psychological underpinnings, in which case it perhaps qualifies as what is popularly known as 'a Freudian slip,' and the intended pun may be more or less clever. Whatever the case, the reception of the spoken pun depends crucially not just on its being heard but on its being understood. And once comprehended, with the mind as well as with the ear, the spoken pun cannot be easily dismissed. "A pun is a phoneme or series of phonemes which *has* no simple meaning," writes Frederick Ahl in an essay on wordplay of all sorts.[15] Or as the Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco put it, "the pun constitutes a *forced* contiguity between two or more words."[16]

With a single sound the spoken pun provokes multiple hearings that in turn convey multiple meanings, which is why to describe this phenomenon the apparently old-fashioned French term *double entendre* remains so apt.[17] But the sound that is both heard and understood in different ways need not be verbal. Makers of suspense films have long appreciated the special resonance that comes from an off-screen noise that is taken, by the film's audience as well as by the momentarily featured character, to be something other than it is not. The device is nowadays perhaps a cliché, but it was quite unprecedented when in 1935 Alfred Hitchcock, in *The 39 Steps*, depicted the charwoman of a London hotel discovering a dead body and then, during a close-up on her face, substituted for the expected scream the shrill noise of a steam whistle that was shown, but only after a tension-filled second or two, to belong to a train on which the film's protagonist is escaping to Scotland.[18] And the non-verbal *double entendre* occurs not just in the movies but also in real life. Most of us, probably, have not had to deal with a houseguest who claims that the ticks of our clocks make her feel, physically, as though she is being beset by gnawing insects. But many of us, I am sure, have heard the brief toot of a distant car horn and mistaken it for a 'message alert' from our nearby laptop computer, or heard one of those proverbial things that go bump in the night and interpreted it as an ominous knock on the door.

"Uncanny is the ear," Derrida apparently said in his 1977 lecture at the University of Virginia. The ear can "make" things happen, or it can simply "let" things happen. "The ear is the most obliging, the most open organ," and, "as Freud points out, the only one the infant cannot close."[19]

The ear is uncanny, and perhaps canny as well. But sometimes—as we know if we are honest in our autobiographies, and in our personal otobiographies, and in our 音-biographies—the ear plays tricks on us.

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Endnotes

1. For details on the the piece, see, for example, Lucier's liner notes for the 1992 CD recording (Lovely Music; CD 1011) (available at <http://www.lovely.com/albumnotes/notes1011.html>), his comments in *Music 109: Notes on Experimental Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012: 146-48), and his interview with Douglas Simon in *Chambers: Scores by Alvin Lucier* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012:159-68). My 'live' encounter with *Music on a Long Thin Wire* took place during the summer of 1980, when the piece was installed in the Landmark Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, as part of the second annual New Music America festival. I recall that I, along with other festival attendees, listened with interest and awe as we first entered the atrium of the vintage post office building that since 1978 has hosted on its ground level a number of boutiques and cafes; I recall, too, that the members of my group pretty much stopped listening after we ordered our lunch and started eating.
2. Acknowledging that the ideas originated with *musique concrète* pioneer Pierre Schaffer, with whom he studied composition in the 1970s, Chion first laid out his scheme of listening 'modes' in 1990 in *L'Audio-Vision* (Paris: Éditions Nathan) and then revised them in the book's second edition (Paris: Armand Colin, 2017). In the second edition, Chion changes the term *l'écoute sémantique* to *l'écoute codale*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman, the original version of Chion's book (1994) appears in English as *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press); Gorbman's translation of the second edition, which indeed features the term 'codal' (as opposed to 'semantic') listening, was brought out by the same publisher in 2019. Schaeffer's theories about modes of listening were first published in 1966 in his *Traité des objets musicaux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil); translated by Christine North and John Dack, Schaeffer's book was published as *Treatise on Musical Objects* in 2017 (Oakland: University of California Press).
3. One guest was so irritated with the sounds of the clocks in the bedroom that she abandoned me and headed for the couch in the lounge room; to her surprise, she discovered that there, too, I had set up an array of always-ticking clocks.
4. In combination with other ideograms, and with other pronunciations, the symbol 音 refers to specific types of sound. The combination 雑音 ('zatsuon'), for example, means 'harsh sound,' or 'noise; in contrast, the combination 音楽 ('ongaku'), means 'pleasant sound,' or 'music.'
5. This is "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," trans. Avital Ronell, in *The Ear of the Other: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985: 1-38). Orig. *L'oreille de l'autre*, ed. Claude Lévesque and Christie McDonald (Montreal: V1b Éditeur, 1982).
6. Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies": 4. Derrida's scattered comments on 'academic freedom,' which sometimes have the intensity of a tirade, doubtless had something to do with the fact that in 1975 he helped launch GREPH (*Le Group des Recherches Sur l'Enseignement Philosophique*), a still-existing organisation whose stated mission was to safeguard the teaching of philosophy, not just in French universities but also in French high schools, against what was perceived by the original GREPH members to be increasingly restrictive government policies. For details on GREPH, see, for example, Joan Wallach Scott (2005), "Against Eclecticism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 16(5): 114-37; and Mary Caputi, Vincent J. Del Casino, Jr., and Keith Woodward (2013), "Derrida, Deconstruction, and the University," in *Derrida and the Future of the Liberal Arts*, eds. Mary Caputi and Vincent J. Del Casino, Jr. (London: Bloomsbury: 13-36).
7. Christie McDonald (1985: 47), "From One Genre to the Other," in *The Ear of the Other*.
8. Barry Smith, "Open Letter against Derrida Receiving an Honorary Doctorate from Cambridge University," *The Times*, 9 May 1992: 9. Available at: <http://ontology.buffalo.edu/smith/varia/Derrida Letter.htm>. At the time of the letter, Smith was affiliated with the International Academy of Philosophy in Lichtenstein and served as newly

appointed editor of *The Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*. For recent commentary on the controversy, see Julian Baggini, "Think Jacques Derrida Was a Charlatan? Look Again," *Prospect*, 4 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/jacques-derrida-philosopher-not-overrated>

9. Richard Rorty (1984), "Deconstruction and Circumvention," *Critical Inquiry* 11(1): 18.
10. François Cusset (2008: 5), *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
11. In *Goldfinger* (1964), for example, the Bond character knocks his opponent into a water-filled bathtub and then, after tossing into the tub a plugged-in electric fan, says to himself: "Shocking. Positively shocking"; in *Thunderball* (1965), Bond shoots a villain with a spear gun and then says nonchalantly, to his bikini-clad companion: "I think he got the point." Myers, in his 1997 *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* and subsequent Bond parodies, makes such puns a crucial part of the Austin Powers character, and he emphasises their crudeness by having the character self-consciously act as though he thinks the puns are funny.
12. Jacques Derrida (1989: 63), "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," trans. Anne Tomiche, in *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Columbia University Press).
13. An outgrowth of a reading group that began in the early 1980s, the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California-Irvine (in Orange County, south of Los Angeles) was formally established as one of the university's research units in 1987. For brief histories of the Institute, which for a long while claimed to be the *only* institute of its kind, see, for example, "History of Critical Theory at UCI" (at <https://cta.lib.uci.edu/critical-theory-uc-irvine/history-critical-theory-uci>) and "Critical Theory: History" (at <https://www.humanities.uci.edu/critical/history>).
14. Derrida (1989: 64), "Some Statements". Emphasis added.
15. Frederick Ahl (2005: 25), "Ars Est Caelare Artem (Art in Puns and Anagrams Engraved)," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (New York: Basil Blackwell, Inc.). Emphasis in the original.
16. Umberto Eco (1979: 72), *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). Emphasis added.
17. According to the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term was almost obsolete even in French when it was first introduced to English parlance—as a synonym for a verbal construct with a usually salacious double meaning—in the 1670s by John Dryden and others. Modern French dictionaries tend to treat *double entendre* as an English term that is translated along the lines of "mot à double entente," i.e., a "word with a double meaning." For etymological details, see the Wikipedia entry at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_entendre.
18. Hitchcock used a similar effect in his 1937 *Young and Innocent*, when early in the film he substituted the loud squawks of seagulls for the expected scream of an on-screen murder victim. Both effects are discussed at length by Elisabeth Weis (1982) in her *The Silent Scream: Alfred Hitchcock's Sound Track* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press).
19. Jacques Derrida (1982), "All Ears: Nietzsche's Otobiography," trans. Avital Ronell, *Yale French Studies* 63: 246. Derrida may or may not have *said* exactly the same thing in the course of his 1979 lecture at the University of Montreal, but for the latter Ronell (1982: 33) offers a slightly different translation. "The ear is uncanny," she writes, for it is not just "the most open organ" but also "the most tendered". Derrida, "Otobiographies," 33.

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