" I Hear You ! "

: Comments on the Sound Practice of Listening

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Abstract: Typically, hearing is contrasted to listening, and such comparisons almost always favor listening. This dichotomy substitutes for the more complex understanding that there is no single type of listening, but rather, to employ a technique derived from general semantics, we can say that there are multiple varieties of *listenings*. These differences can be studied via the media ecology approach, based on the understanding that hearing and listening are both ways that individuals *mediate* between each other and with their environments, and therefore can be considered types of *media*. Media ecology emphasizes the question of how we do things, including the significance of the different ways that different sensory organs function, which

includes the particular characteristics of the sense of hearing. Even when listening is used at a metaphor, the basis of that metaphor is the sensory organ of the human ear, and hearing has also served as a metaphor for listening. Understanding the specific characteristics of the sense of hearing, which are holistic, nonlinear, unbounded, ecological, harmonizing, subjective, relational, communal, and spiritual, helps to clarify the significance of listening as a practice and an area of study.

Hearing and listening are typically listed as synonyms, but it is also quite the commonplace to insist that they are not equivalent phenomena, that hearing does not guarantee listening, that listening requires something more than the simple reception of a message, that it implies paying close attention to what the other person is saying. This idea finds expression, appropriately enough, in the Simon and Garfunkel song, "The Sound of Silence," as Paul Simon's lyrics include the line, "people hearing without listening," following a line about people who are "talking without speaking," and followed by one where they are "writing songs that voices never share". The suggestion that silence is not simply one-sided, but is rather the product of a relationship, one that involves individuals unwilling to listen as well as those unwilling to speak, is powerful and insightful. The mournful expression of lost opportunities to make a connection, and to engage in dialogue, is also present, but the specific formula of *hearing without listening* represents a restatement of the old saying, "in one ear and out the other."

Many Varieties of Listenings

The contrast between hearing and listening has become something of a cliché for good reason, because it expresses the idea that listening itself is not a monolithic phenomenon, but that there are different kinds of listening, differing in the manner in which messages are attended to, processed, related to, and understood, as well as the contexts in which listening takes place. Within this polar opposition, the term *hearing* represents a less desirable form of listening, one that might be characterized as *bad* in some respects if moral judgment comes into play, or otherwise as *poor*, *weak*, *half-hearted*, *inattentive*, *careless*, and the like. The *hearing vs. listening* dichotomy substitutes, however, for the more complicated notion that there are not just two, but many different types of listening, some better or more effective than others. Consequently, the binary opposition stands as a vast over-simplification, one that ultimately misleads people about the relationship between hearing and listening, as I hope to make clear in this essay.I do not mean to deny that the contrast between hearing and listening can be used as a heuristic device to introduce the idea that listening is a more complex phenomenon that it might first appear to be. But we need to be wary of reifying the *hearing vs. listening* formula, and to that end it would be useful to follow Wendell Johnson's (1946) suggestion derived from general semantics, and exchange the singular term, *listening*, for a plural form, *listenings*, to make us mindful that there are a number of different varieties of this activity.

Not only are there different ways of listening, but there are differences in whom or what we listen to: to one other person, to several people in a group setting, to a speaker giving a public address or a lecture, to a poet performing, an actor in a play, a singer singing a song, etc. There are differences between listening to other people speaking in our own language, listening to foreign languages being spoken, listening to the nonverbal paralanguage of infants and

adults (e.g., crying, yelling, coughing, moaning, etc.), listening to animal vocalizations, listening to song and music, listening to the sounds of nature (e.g., wind, water, etc.), listening to machines, listening to the sounds of the body (e.g., via stethoscope to heart and lungs), listening to ourselves speak or to our inner voices, listening to imaginary voices, listening to some form of the divine or supernatural, etc. There are differences between listening in a home, an office, a classroom, a courtroom, a bar, a church, etc. There are differences between listening in an informal setting, listening to a formal presentation or performance, and listening to recordings, transmissions and broadcasts, computer-synthesized speech and sounds, etc.

A Media Ecology Approach to Hearing and Listening

These all are "differences that make a difference," to use Gregory Bateson's (1972) happy phrase. And they are differences that can be studied via the media ecology approach (Strate, 2006, 2011, 2014, 2017). Defined as the study of media as environments, media ecology is concerned with the way that we do things, and the differences among the means, methods, and modes that we employ, the situations, contexts, and relationships that we act

within, the forms, substances, codes, technologies, and techniques that we utilize, etc. All of these are aspects of the concept of *medium* and the process of *mediating* as the terms are used within the field of media ecology. Hearing and listening both are types of *mediation*, and therefore can be categorized as types of *media*; both refer to ways that individuals mediate between each other and with their environments. Indeed, the body itself can be understood as a type of medium, as can the individual sensory organs and the nervous system (Strate, 2017).

I should acknowledge that scholars in my own field of communication and its related disciplines often do not seem to be aware of the distinctions between different sensory modes, or do not concern themselves with those differences. Their tendency is to group them together under the heading of *reception* and *decoding*, relegating the senses to a set of more or less interchangeable *channels* of communication. References to *perception* and *perceiving* are often used without acknowledging the different ways in which information can be *perceived*, only noting that perception may be *selective*. Those utilizing phenomenological approaches study the process of experiencing the world without considering *how* we experience the world. By way of contrast, in the field of media ecology, the question of how we do things is paramount, and the fact that different sensory organs function in entirely different ways becomes quite significant, especially in the work of scholars such as Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964; McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, 2011, Edmund Carpenter (1973; Carpenter & Heyman, 1970; Carpenter & McLuhan, 1956, 1960), and Walter Ong (1967, 1977, 1982, 2002).

Metaphoric Usage

An emphasis on the significance of sense perception and sensory organs opens up a different way of thinking about the relationship between hearing and listening. Rather than considering hearing to be an inferior kind of listening, we can understand that hearing is the basis and foundation of listening, and that all or most of the key characteristics that we associate with listening are made possible by the sense of hearing. Even when *listening* is used metaphorically, it is essential to understand the basis of that metaphor, which is the sensory organ of the human ear. Linguistics researchers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980, 1999) explain that metaphors are rooted in the human body and in bodily, biological experience, which provides concrete bases against which to compare and experience abstract concepts (see also Gozzi, 1999). Not surprisingly, then, while *hearing* and *listening* are considered synonyms, it is also true that *hearing* can serve as a metaphor for *listening*.

Listening, which implies some form of mental activity, is more abstract than *hearing*, which is a scientifically observable and quantifiable neurological phenomenon. A wellknown example of the metaphor at work can be heard in the famous Shakespeare quote from *Julius Caesar*: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” The loan requested by Marc Antony is not of the literal sort associated with Vincent Van Gogh. Rather, a contemporary expression that could substitute for *lend me your ears* would be, *listen up!* Another contemporary utterance, *I hear you*, has become an idiomatic expression in the English language; as such, it does not simply refer to someone speaking with sufficient volume or clarity, but rather goes beyond the openness typically implied by listening, to indicate

comprehension and understanding. *I hear you* is a statement not only about my ability to decode your message, but rather indicates an intimate recognition of you as a person, a form of confirmation, albeit not necessarily one accompanied by agreement or approval. This may well be related to the more traditional secondary meaning of *hearing*, which refers to the ability or opportunity to be heard, to express your opinion, tell your story, or state your case, as in *receiving a fair hearing*. In this instance, the sense of hearing again serves as a metaphor for listening, one that is deeply embedded in the language we speak, and therefore used for the most part unconsciously.

Orality and Hearing

In noting the metaphorical relationship between hearing and listening, I want to stress that there is not a simple hierarchy between hearing as a lower form of physical activity and listening as a higher cognitive function. Rather, my point is that the two are intimately intertwined, and that, as previously noted, in order to understand listening, we also need to understand hearing as a form of sense perception. This essential idea concerning listening has long been made clear in regard to language, that all languages are oral in their origin and essence, that all languages are *tongues*, existing first and foremost as forms of speech. It follows that hearing, and therefore listening, are intimately connected to our capacity for linguistic communication, the characteristic that most clearly distinguishes our species from other forms of life. Language is the basis of our higher mental functions as individuals, and our ability to engage in time-binding, to accumulate and pass on knowledge over generations, as

societies and cultures. The process of language acquisition begins in infancy, and appears to be hardwired into the human brain, while vocalization begins with the first breath drawn after birth, typically when the newborn begins to cry. But hearing takes place prenatally, as the fluid medium of the womb is an excellent conveyer of sound, especially the sound of the mother's voice and heartbeat. Hearing comes before speaking, and also before seeing, because the womb is an environment without light.

The contrast between the eye and the ear has been of particular interest to media ecology scholars, in large part because both are associated with language. In contrast to the organic connection between speech and hearing, however, the association between vision and language is an artificial one, derived from the invention of writing systems, technologies that translate the spoken word into visual markings. Learning how to read is in essence an eye exercise, training the organs to focus on a fixed point of view and follow along a linear path. Consequently, literates place greater stress on vision than non literates, and literate cultures come to value vision above all of the other senses. McLuhan (1962, 1964) characterized this extension of the eye as disrupting the delicate balance between the senses, resulting in the dominance of the eye associated with western alphabetic and typographic cultures, otherwise known as *visualism*. While the written word and literacy made vision increasingly more central to human psyches and societies, the eye has always been an especially important sensory organ for our species. As we have evolved from walking on all fours to walking erect, the process resulted in our head and eyes being elevated, making our visual sense more effective; this also resulted in the atrophy of our sense of smell, as it brought out nose away from close proximity

to the ground, a much better medium for scent than the air. Evolutionary change also saw our eyes coming closer together, enabling binocular vision. For these and other reasons, vision paired with hearing as our primary distance receptors. This much they have in common. But consider the differences, which extend beyond these developments, to the structure of the sensory organs.

Eye vs. Ear

One obvious distinction is that we can close our eyes, but not our ears. Our sense of hearing is always on, a constant monitoring of our environments. Seeing is also directional, as we must choose where to look, where to direct our field of vision, which is always a small subset of what we can potentially shift our gaze toward. The choice of what to look at is also a choice of what not to look at, as we can avert our eyes. True, we can cover our ears, but that typically does not completely block out sound. And more importantly, hearing is omnidirectional. No decision is required; our ears pick up sound from all directions. This helps to explain the evolutionary advantage of speech, and why no human society ever encountered has used sign language instead. A hand signal requires visual contact, while a warning cry can be heard from any position.

Vision does have the advantage of precision, specifically our ability to direct our attention and focus, which initially served us well as hunter-gatherers, and was later adapted for the process of reading. Related to this is the ability to close one eye and keep the other open, which appears to be a learned ability associated with literacy (Carpenter, 1973). There is

no exact equivalent for directional focus when it comes to the sense of hearing; we can try to concentrate on what is being said, or pick out a particular voice among many, but this is more a mental operation than a particular way of using our ears, apart from turning your head in the act of *cocking your ear*. What this means is that hearing is more of a holistic operation, while seeing is more atomistic; put another way, sight is more favorable to an analytical frame of mind, while sound is more conducive to synthesis. As Ong(1982) put it, "sight isolates, sound incorporates" (p. 71).

Acoustic Space

Edward T. Hall (1966) established that there are different senses of space generated by different sensory organs, and McLuhan, Carpenter, and others have noted the differences between acoustic and visual space. Acoustic space is the experience of space generated by the sense of hearing. Because hearing is omni directional, acoustic space is all around us—in this respect, all sound is surround sound. This sense of space is one that is curved rather than straight, Einsteinian rather than Euclidean; it is circular or oval, spiral, spherical, or dome-like. Just as sound ripples out in all directions, it is potentially without end. Our position in acoustic space is at the center of it all, surrounded by what we hear. This centering is not so much egocentric as it is ecological, as it places us inside the world, a part of our environment, integrated into our surroundings, requiring us to live in harmony (an acoustic metaphor) with the world. When we are situated at the center of it all, we are in a *subjective* position, which is also *subjectifying*, by which I mean that we treat everything that surrounds us as subjects, alive and conscious. This may be denigrated as anthropomorphism, but it is also consistent with an

ecological understanding, not to mention the Gaia hypothesis. To use Martin Buber's (1970) terminology, in acoustic space we enter into I-You relationships with the world. The experience of space generated by the sense of vision, on the other hand, is unidirectional, dividing the world into bits and pieces, fragmenting the environment. Whereas acoustic space has no necessary limits, visual space is intrinsically one of boundaries—you might even say it is one that is drawn and quartered. Especially as intensified by the invention of writing, visual space favors the linear, and the quadrilinear. Denise Schmandt-Besserat(1996) has shown how the introduction of writing in ancient Mespotamia and Egypt altered pictorial art and decoration, as images began to be lined up in rows, following the example of written characters. A similar change can be seen in architecture, as the typical structure of oral cultures is rounded or nonlinear, e.g., the hut, the teepee, the igloo, while following the introduction of writing and the advent of literacy, straight lines and right angles increasingly come to dominate on all levels, from furniture and rooms to buildings and streets (Carpenter, 1973; Hall, 1966). Significantly, in visual space, the portion of the world we are attending to is laid out in front of us, and especially as our gaze employs a fixed point of view, we find ourselves distanced and detached from the world, on the outside looking in, alienated from our environment, in the position of being spectators, voyeurs, peeping toms. In this sense, we are outside of the world, not a part of it. This situates us in an *objective* position, giving us the illusion of being completely separate from our environment, uninvolved, and not participants. To be objective is

to objectify the world and all that it contains, to treat everything in our environment as objects, things, in Buber's (1970) terms, to enter into an I-It relationship with the world.

It follows that the shift from orality to literacy is accompanied by a shift in emphasis from acoustic to visual space, and this results in a changing view of the world. Whereas in oral cultures, people believed themselves to be part of the world, and endeavored to live in harmony with it, in literate cultures, people came to see themselves as separate and apart from nature, which they came to view as an object to try to own, manipulate, and control. This is particularly characteristic of western culture, defined as it has been by alphabetic literacy. Our many visual and linear metaphors for thought and knowledge originate in ancient Greece, e.g., point of *view*, *perspective*, *regarding*, *clearly*, *line* of inquiry, *train* of thought, *see* what I mean, my *point*, self-*image*, *where Istand*, the way I *see* it, *idea* (same root as *video*), in the first/second/third *place*, *topic* (the root meaning is *place*), to list just a few examples (Lee, 1959; Ong, 1982). Visual is me specially comes to the fore with the printing revolution in early modern Europe, which was a necessary prerequisite for modern science, and modernity in general. It becomes commonplace to say *seeing is believing*, whereas in the past it was hearing that was believing (Ong, 1982). The legendary Greek singer of tales Homer was said to be blind because that signified his ability to hear the true story of the Trojan War, as relayed to him by the Muses. The Roman goddess of justice, Justitia, was portrayed as blind or blindfolded, a common sight on courthouse statuary, not because being sightless signifies objectivity, but because it symbolized *hearing* the truth, which to this day is given greatest value in the form of testimony,

not written statements. Our concepts of truth and justice have changed along with the shift from the acoustic to the visual, just as the saying, *I believe it when I see it in black and white*, a reference to print media, is no longer current, and today a sense of legitimacy is secured through the electronic media, especially television.

In the 20th century, however, according to McLuhan, Carpenter, Ong, and others, the electronic media restore to some extent the experience of acoustic space, accounting for the rise of ecological consciousness and the environmental movement in the mid-20th century. The phenomenon that Ong(1982) refers to as *secondary orality* originates in the latter half of the 19th century with the almost simultaneous invention of the telephone and sound recording, while wireless transmission of voice and music was introduced in the first decade of the twentieth century, with commercial broadcasting beginning in 1920. This brought with it not only the new notion of *mass communication*, but also the concept of the *mass audience*, the root meaning of *audience* being *audio*. This term, *audience*, would also be applied to other forms of mass communication, to moviegoers and television viewers, and even the readership of mass circulation newspapers and magazines. The long tradition in rhetoric and related studies of communication emphasized the study of messages and sources, which is to say texts and their authors or composers; the new research tradition of mass communication gradually motivated new studies of the reception of messages, otherwise known as audience analysis.

Listening and the Electronic Media Environment

I would suggest that it is therefore no accident that listening emerges as a distinct area of interest and subject of investigation over the past half century. Rather, it is a natural

response to the secondary orality that characterizes our media environment. In an odd way, while opportunities to listen and choices as to what to listen to have increased over the past century, speech has waned in significant ways. The activity of public speaking has come to be feared more than death, interest in and respect for poetry has gone into steep decline, and the ability to engage in conversation is seen by some, notably Sherry Turkle (2011, 2015), as the equivalent of an endangered species. Listening has moved from the background to the foreground, and we do need to improve our ability to listen to the mediated voices that clamor for our attention, the journalists, opinionists, and propagandists in particular. But there is also cause for concern when it comes to our ability to listen to others in face-to-face situations, in dialogue, in group settings, in audiences at lectures and addresses. While bringing listening to the fore, secondary orality also creates unprecedented challenges to our ability to listen, as we grow habituated to the slick, edited, altered, and amplified electronic voices that lead us to expect a level of stimulation and amusement that cannot be matched in physical situations. Put another way, there is so much noise being generated that as much as we are listening, and forced to listen, it becomes increasingly more difficult to pick out what we really need to listen to, to listen in a deliberate, critical, and conscientious manner. You might say that now people are *listening without hearing*.

Recognizing the auditory nature of listening helps us to understand its significance. Consider what might be the equivalent of listening based on the visual sense. Is *watching* the same experience as *listening*? Is *observing* the same? Is *regarding*? If I say, "I *see* you," is it the same as "I *hear* you"? Or consider one of the most pervasive metaphors in the humanities,

originating from modern languages and literary studies: that of *reading*. Carrying a connotation of *interpretation*, scholars produce *readings* of films, television programs, songs and musical compositions. In this usage, *reading* is applied to objects, not subjects. Reading other peoples' nonverbal communication, their so-called body language, is not listening to what they are trying to say or listening to what their mean, but rather trying to detect the unconscious signal they are giving off, signals that they themselves may not be aware of. This is what is meant by *reading someone like a book*; it is an objectifying act. Admittedly, there is another usage that comes to us from wireless voice transmission, as in, *I read you*, *I read you loud and clear*, and *I read you five by five*. This particular formulation originates as a reference to the technical quality of the transmission, the signal strength and clarity, which is measured by reading display

indicators and given a numerical score (hence *five by five*). As a metaphor, it has come to also mean, *I understand what you are saying*, sometimes also indicating agreement as well. I do think it important to note, however, that this is an electronic metaphor for a human activity, using technical terms to express a cognitive connection. Not surprising, its usage outside of technical operations is mainly found in the military, and used in reference to following orders. As Lewis Mumford (1967) explains, the idea of the machine precedes actual mechanical devices, and originates with organized human labor, including ancient military organization. To the extent that this sense of reading is related to a command and control structure, it is a limited and limiting usage, one that remains distinct from the acoustic nature of listening.

Conclusion

On a more personal level, an important insight was delivered by Helen Keller, when she was asked if she would rather be blind or deaf. Her response, to the surprise of many, was that she would rather be blind, because people were kinder to you that way. The sense of sight connects us to the world of objects, and we value it greatly for its utilitarian functions. But the sense of hearing connects us not only to an aspect of our surroundings, but to other people, and while there are ways to compensate, nothing quite substitutes for the intimacy of sound. Hearing is communal, bringing people together as a group. When everyone is hearing the same thing at the same time, there is a sense of unity, whereas if everyone is asked to read the exact same written work at the same time, even then we read as isolated individuals. No wonder that the word *audience* is singular, as opposed to *readers*. This communal quality also contributes to the association between sound and the sense of the sacred and the spiritual (Ong, 1967, 1977, 1982, 2002).

To summarize, the sense of hearing can be characterized as holistic, nonlinear, unbounded, ecological, harmonizing, subjective, relational, communal, and spiritual. Insofar as hearing constitutes the basis of listening, these characteristics also extend to listening, and help to clarify the significance of listening as a practice and an area of study.

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