

I HAVE NEVER SEEN A SOUND

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Now I wish to speak of sounds.

The world is full of sounds.

I cannot speak of them all.

I shall speak of sounds that matter.

To speak of sounds, I make sounds.

I create - an original act which I performed the moment I emerged on this earth.

Creation is blind. Creation is soundful.

“In the beginning God created the heaven and earth” – with his mouth.

God named the universe, thinking aloud.

The Egyptian gods came into being when Atum, the creator, named them.

Mithra came into being out of vowels and consonants.

The terrible gods came into being out of thunder.

The fruitful gods came into being out of water.

The magic gods came into being out of laughter.

The mystic gods came into being out of distant echoes.

All creation is original. Every sound is new.

No sound can be repeated exactly. Not even your own name. Every time it is pronounced it will be different. And a sound heard once is not the same as a sound heard twice, nor is a sound heard before the same as a sound heard after.

Every sound commits suicide and never returns. Musicians know this. No musical phrase can be repeated exactly the same way twice.

Sounds cannot be known the way sights can be known, seeing is analytical and reflective. It places things side by side and compares them (scenes, slides, diagrams, figures...). This is why Aristotle preferred sight as ‘the principal source of knowledge.’

Sights are knowable. Sights are nouns.

Sounding is active and generative. Sounds are verbs. Like all creation, sound is incomparable. Thus there can be no science of sound, only sensations...intuitions...mysteries....

In the Western world, and for some time, the eye has been the referent for all sensory experience. Visual metaphors and scaling systems have dominated. Interesting fictions have been invented for weighing or measuring sounds: alphabets, music scripts, sonograms. But everybody knows you can't weigh a whisper or count the voices in a choir or measure a child's laughter.

It is probably going too far to say that in aural culture, science, especially physics and mathematics and their dependants (statistics, physiology, empirical psychology, drafting, demography, banking, etc. – the list is long) would disappear. It is probably enough to say that in purely aural cultures they don't appear.

Have I got off the track?

I was saying that everything in the world was created by sound and analysed by vision. God spoke first and saw that it was good second.

What happens if it isn't good? Then God destroys with sound. Noise kills. War. The Flood. The Apocalypse.

Noise cancels. It turns language into a polyglot; the case at Babel. When the noise of the world became so great that it disturbed “even the inner parts of the gods,” they released the Flood (Epic of Gilgamesh).

Some say the noise of the apocalypse will be of ear-splitting intensity (Mohammed in the Qur'an or John of Patmos in Revelation). Others maintain “the world will not end with a bang but a whimper.” In any case, it will sound, because all traumatic events maintain sound as their expressive medium: war, violence, love, madness. Disease alone is silent and yields to analysis.

Come with me now and sit in the grandstand of life. The seats are free and the entertainment is continuous.

The world orchestra is always playing; we hear it inside and outside, from near and far.

We have no earlids.

We are condemned to listen.

I hear with my little ear...

Most of the sounds I hear are attached to things. I use sounds as clues to identify these things. When they are hidden, sounds will reveal them. I hear through the forest, around the corner, over the hill.

Sound gets to places where sight cannot.

Sound plunges below the surface.

Sound penetrates to the heart of things.

When I disregard the things to which sounds are attached, the phenomenal world disappears. I become blind. I am swept away sensuously by the vast music of the universe.

Everything in this world has its sound – even silent objects. We get to know silent objects by striking them. The ice is thin, the box is empty, the wall is hollow.

Here is a paradox: two things touch but only one sound is produced. A ball hits a wall, a drumstick strikes a drum, a bow scrapes a string. Two objects - one sound.

Another case of 1 plus 1 equals 1.

Nor is it possible to join sounds without them changing character. Zeno's paradox: "If a bushel of corn turned out upon the floor makes a noise, each grain and each part of each grain must make a noise likewise, but, in fact, it is not so."

In acoustics, sums equal differences.

Sounds tell me about spaces, whether small or large, narrow or broad, indoor or outdoor. Echoes and reverberation inform me about surfaces and obstructions. With practice I can begin to hear "acoustic shadows," just like the blind.

Auditory space is very different from visual space. We are always at the edge of visual space, looking in with the eye. But we are always at the centre of auditory space, listening out with the ear.

Thus, visual awareness is not the same as aural awareness. Visual awareness faces forward. Aural awareness is centred.

I am always at the heart of the sounding universe.

With its many tongues it speaks to me.

With the tongues of gods it speaks to me.

You cannot control or shape the acoustic universe. Rather the reverse. This is why aural societies are considered unprogres-

sive; they don't see straight ahead.

If I wish to order the world I must become "visionary." Then I close my ears and create fences, property lines, straight roads, walls. All the major themes of science and mathematics as developed in the Western world are silent (the space-time continuum of relativity, the atomic structure of matter, the wave-corpuscular theory of light) and the instruments developed for their study, the telescope and the microscope, the equation the graph and above all, number, are silent likewise.

Statistics deals with a world of quantities that is presumed to be silent.

Philosophy deals with a phenomenal world that is presumed to be silent.

Economics deals with a material world that is assumed to be silent.

Even religion deals with a God who has become silent.

Western music is also conceived out of silence. For two thousand years it has been maturing behind walls.

Walls drove a wedge between music and the soundscape. The two fell apart and became independent.

Music within; pandemonium (i.e. devilry) without.

But everything that is ignored returns. The vehement obscurity of the soundscape pushes back to confront us as noise pollution.

As an articulated problem, noise belongs exclusively to Western societies. It is the discord between visual and acoustic space. Acoustic space remains askew because it can't be owned. It becomes disenfranchised – a sonic sewer. Today we view the world without listening to it, from behind glassed-in buildings.

In an aural society all sounds matter, even when they are only casually overheard.

In Ontario, the signal to stop tapping the maple trees is when the spring frogs are heard; then the ice has melted, the sap is darker, the syrup inferior.

Another example: a man walks across the snow. You know the temperature from the sound of his footsteps. This is a different way of perceiving the environment; one in which the sensorium is undivided; one which recognizes that all information tracks are interconnected.

Some sounds are so unique that once heard they will never be forgotten: a wolf's howl a loon's call, a steam locomotive,

a machine gun.

In an aural society sounds like this can be brought forward and mimicked in song and speech as easily as a visual society can draw a picture or a map.

The visual society is always amazed at the aural retentiveness of people who have not yet passed through the visual phase. The Qur'an the Kalevala and the Iliad were once memorized.

Remember that.

Visual man has instruments to help him retain visual memories (paintings, books, photographs). What is the device for retaining aural memories?

Repetition.

Repetition is the memory medium for sound.

Repetition is the means by which sounds are retained and explained.

Repetition is the means by which the history of the world is affirmed.

Repetition never analyses; it merely insists.

Repetition makes the listener participate in the statement not by comprehending it but by knowing it.

"It is written, but I say unto you...." And I will say it again and again and again, because Hearing is Believing.

As the grip of the visual-analytical world weakens and is replaced by intuition and sensation, we will begin to discover again the true tuning of the world and the exquisite harmony of all its voices.

We will find the centre.

Then the whole body will become an ear and all sounds will come to you, the known and the unknown, the sweet, the sad and the urgent.

When my body lies white and blue in bed at night, then all sounds come to me of their own accord, unhurried, strangely blended, the light-toned and the slow grinding of mountains. Then hearing is most alert...and there is singing before me... as I pass beyond "to the land that loveth silence."

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