Hearing touches

:toward a philosophy of sound.

by Ben Rumble and Matt Lee

Ben:

In the beginning was sound: 'the big bang', the creak of matter and the call of the word. Physiologically speaking, what gives us direct access to sound is the ear. I say direct access because where the eyes see 'indirectly'- the light with which we see being always a reflection of the thing seen - things themselves 'make' the sounds that resonate deep into the ear. Whereas it takes someone like Mattisse to show us and so let us see the illuminating light with which we see, we always hear the sounds with which we hear. There is an intimacy and passivity to hearing which is probably why sounds can sometimes drive you mad.

What then is it that we hear? As Heidegger pointed out, it would take an especially convoluted and abstract ear to hear 'a sound'. If, physiologically speaking, things make the sounds with which we hear, what we hear are the sounds 'of' things. This isn't simply a tautology. If what we hear is the 'bark' of a dog or the 'chime' of a clock, if what we hear 'is' the dog or the clock, something recognisable, familiar, this 'sense' of hearing requires a shift away from a materialistic to an ontological account of hearing. Things make sounds and sounds, as the sounds of things, i.e. dogs and clocks, make sense. Would it even be possible to hear the bark of the dog if this wasn't something that made sense, something we could recognise as this or that and all the associations that come with this familiarity? And I don't just mean any old dog or clock etc. By ontological rather than physiological, I mean to say that what we hear is a 'world' of sound, a world which we inhabit and which forms the background hum to our everyday lives.

Our sense of hearing emerges from out of this world of sound as, on the one hand, we begin to penetrate and differentiate the hum of things as being just that, of things, and above all, perhaps, respond to that strangest of sounds, the others voice which connects the ear to the throat as the child struggles to imitate and articulate the words which will allow the aforementioned things to be named.

The correspondence between our sense of hearing and the sound world that corresponds to it is a strange one characterised by immersion and separation. It is an Immersion because of the very directness of the sound of things and the passivity of the ear that hears them. It is a Separation because the others voice calls us away from sound of things towards the words with which we can name them as things. And this separation which lies on the side of language rather than simply sound is further compounded when we realise that names are not themselves the things named; 'a pipe', as Magritte shows us, is not a pipe. And worse than this these words, which are not things, do not themselves have anything like a direct relation to the things they name.

We hear the bark of the dog, but the terms 'bark' and 'dog' are, as Saussure pointed out, entirely arbitrary, gaining significance only from their difference from other terms within any given verbal chain. To have a 'sense' of hearing, this sense being in a sense contingent on a language of some sort, is both to be immersed in and separated from sound. What then would it be to be separated from this separation? Deafness implies both a physiological and an ontological disabling. While the physiological separation from the world of sound is a matter to be addressed by medical science, to be separated ontologically from the world of sound, to be without a 'sense' of hearing, without a world that is allowed to function or make sense, implies an ethical responsibility.

Matt:

My disagreements or thoughts would be something like the following:

1) I'm not sure deafness is defined in terms of sound, first of all, since the phenomenological separateness is not one based on absence of any sound - the experience of music can still be had by many deaf people, for example, through vibration of bass/treble etc. The 'disability' comes only when faced with spoken communication or in 'sound-critical' situations (where danger might be heard etc). There is quite possibly a whole world of deaf sounds and deaf sound. I think the ontological separation you suggest is likely to be more phenomenological.

2) 'Ontologically' the deaf person suffers from a disablement by society and this is something that I think is fundamental to the experience of most 'disability'. I would essentially have a strongly social constructionist account of the disability in opposition to the one you put forward, and would want to separate out the 'negative' connotations of such a social constructivist account (the denial of there being any such thing as disability etc)

3) Entitlement to state benefit also relies upon a social-political philosophy rather than an ontological account thought the latter might well serve to bolster the former. It presupposes a sort of social contract even if that is in the form of the 'principle of justice' put forward by John Rawls, for example. He wants to have a sort of 'clean sheet' of opportunity and so advocates a welfare state type situation that pushes forward equalisation of opportunity as a prime goal. Of course 'equality' can be of opportunity or circumstance, this circumstance being something I would define along Marxist lines as a relation to the means of production (and reproduction) of life and that inequalities within such circumstance will, therefore, provide limits to the possible equality of opportunity. It also implies considering the relation of the deaf individual and community to the means of production (i.e.: to how they might 'earn a living'). Disability Living Allowance provides a net or baseline from which to work, not a solution to any problems, enabling a slight decrease in the inequality of opportunity so that a breathing space for further work to happen can open that will enable deaf people to become more fully autonomous.

I suppose it's just a difference in emphasis in many ways, since I would attack the question from a political-philosophical angle. I think there's a lot of interest in the idea of sound, though I'm not sure this necessarily relates directly to deafness, which as I said above is not a simple 'removal' of sound.

Ben:

Of course you're right that deaf people can 'listen to' and enjoy music etc using the body as a whole as a kind of tympanic membrane. I think there is a famous female percussionist who does just that - you might call it listening with an other, deterritorialised, ear. But I wonder if this particular materialisation of sound, with its emphasis on the sound wave/vibration, isn't strangely closer to a kind of touch, or maybe you could simply refer to a sounding in general (in the sense of sounding something out - sentience as exploration etc - and if this were the case, then we could say that what people with ears call sounds would simply be the phenomenal differenciation of this more general sounding out of sound).