

The sound beyond hylomorphism: sonic philosophy towards aural specificity

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Abstract

This paper addresses the possibility of an epistemological shift in the praxis of sonic philosophy through the transposition of the concept of sound from the speculative regime of panaurality to that of aural specificity. The discussion gravitates around a critique of theoretical assumptions automatically imported by sonic philosophies when gravitating around the notion of ‘sound itself’, either to affirm and to deny it. The discussion explores this hypothesis through the description of a conceptual and problematic framework operating in contemporary philosophies centred on issues of particularity, becoming, processes and individuation. The main point here is that the binary theoretical distribution around the notion of ‘sound itself’ is detrimental to sonic philosophy, in the extent that it submits speculation to generalist terms, which in turn prevents the analytical agency on sound to engage more deeply and accurately with issues of locality and specificity.

Keywords

listening, aurality, modelization, non-cochlear, aural turn, specificity, sonic philosophy

Introduction: towards specificity

There is a very particular trigger for equivocation among authors writing about sound from a philosophical standpoint: the use of the term ‘itself’ to qualify either ontologically or epistemologically the idea of ‘sound’. Among these discourses, some use this term to define sound as being a sort of a raw vibrational matter prior to the agency of a psychological consciousness; some others, in turn, use the same expression to refer to the very opposite, that is, to a substance formed in the consciousness of a subject.¹ In the discursive spectrum of sonic philosophies, there is a number of theoretical propositions standing as counter-narratives to both phenomenological and physicalist accounts on sound based on the idea of a ‘sound itself’ and its correlated grounding of the listening activity on the subjective sensibility as an interiorized center of being and feeling.² This paper aims to extract consequences from the fact that both those who assume and those who reject the use of the term ‘itself’ as an adequate linguistic strategy to philosophically approach sound, may constitute two sides of the same ontological coin.

The mere existence of equivocation is not the problem here. In the context of open discursive communities, equivocation works a dynamic component that forces theories to move beyond former paradigms and unquestioned assumptions.³ What I want to address here is this specific equivocation as a symptom. My hypothesis is that the equivocation around the uses of the sound ‘itself’ is symptomatic of a vicious circle in which a number of philosophical works on sound seem to be enclosed, which consists ultimately in the habit of approaching sound in general, universal and totalising terms. In its turn, the action of simply countering the ‘essentialist’ with a negative ‘non-essentialist’ stance is not enough to exit this circle.⁴ The idea here is that in order to practice an effective epistemological difference it is necessary to perform another logic, one more oriented to specificity.

In other words, there is no significant epistemological shift or criticism in sonic philosophy when it keeps using terms highly linked to the pretension of delimiting the essential attributes of a ‘thing’ in general terms. Avoiding the vicious circle of epistemological truths proper to the ontological economy of the generalist and binary-oriented discourse would ultimately require the adoption of another strategy of reasoning, one more attentive to filtering and dislocating terms that commit us to totalizing and universalist epistemological purposes.⁵ The dual alternative of defining sound as either a physical raw material or a substance formed in the perception and consciousness of a subject seem to be the major epistemological trap imprisoning philosophical thought about sound in a specific binary-based ontological economy.

Before the essentialist ontological economy, we might set the following questions: what about the process? How can a theory approach processes of transformation and consolidation without lowering them to a degraded ontological level with respect to a supposedly stable and immutable essence of being? The fixation on essentialized binary terminology and the use of ‘sound itself’ can be read as a symptom of the remnants of metaphysics of presence in philosophical discourses on sound.⁶ A step in the direction of moving from generalist discourse toward the philosophical assessment of specificity consists in the critique of the ontological model, which is technically called in philosophy by the name of “hylomorphism”⁷ in favour of an effective ontological concept of individuation.⁸

‘Hylomorphism’ has been criticized in significant philosophical works in the last five decades, among which stand out writings by Gilbert Simondon (2005), Gilles Deleuze (1968), and Félix Guattari (1980). The anthropologist Tim Ingold takes up this criticism to develop his proposal of an “ontology of making” (Ingold, 2011, pp. 210-219), highlighting the epistemological need to put the hylomorphic model in question, since, from its initial formulation on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*⁹, it “became ever more deeply embedded” in Western thought (ibid., p. 210) as an onto-epistemological matrix. The basic traits of the hylomorphic model consists in describing existing things in terms of a conformative relationship between a passive and inert matter (“hyle”) and a set of formal causes (“morphe”) acting over this matter as molds (ibid.) The problem of assuming the axioms of hylomorphism is that they prevent contemporary discussions of art and technology from theoretically engaging with existing things in terms of processes of consolidation and becoming. It configures therefore an epistemology that is incapable of assuming a “genetic perspective” (Deleuze, 1968, pp. 169-217; Lapoujade, 2015, p. 110) in which form emerges from the dynamics of an active material conceived as “matter-flow” (Ingold, 2011., p. 213). According to Ingold – following Deleuze and Guattari –, matter-flow is precisely what remains unthought in the hylomorphic model, which while assuming only the general aspect of a raw matter to be shaped by pre-existing forms, is incapable of dealing with an active “matter in movement, in flux, in variation” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, p. 509).

Due to the prejudices that hylomorphism causes to the possibility of advancing on a process-oriented ontology – that is, a “nomad science” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980) –, Ingold proposes his “ontology of making” as being based on the need to “overthrow the hylomorphic] model itself, and to replace it with an ontology that assigns primacy to the processes of formation rather than to their final products, and to the flows and transformations of materials rather than to the stasis of matter” (Ingold, 2011, p. 210). Following this critique, we argue that such a theoretical proposal formulated specifically in

terms of “ontology” may inject a renewed speculative voltage into sonic philosophy, insofar as it refuses both terms of the logical alternative that philosophical works on sound use to assume, in favour of focusing on the “fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated” (*ibid.*, p. 211).

Beyond the hylomorphic postulates, we might consider the existence of sound within concrete and specific processes of ‘individuation’.¹⁰ From this standpoint, the existing things are not simply conceived as shaped by transcendent models, but instead as “modulated” by these models within specific relations (Simondon, 2005, p. 47). Thus, the idea of “agency” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980) becomes crucial to a sonic philosophy, specifically in what it contributes to think sound and listening as living “things” implied in contextual, contingent, and specific “meshworks” (Ingold, 2011, p. 210-219) in which subjective and social experience are immediately intertwined. Ultimately, this paper aims to imagine a transposition of sonic philosophy, from the scope of hylomorphism to that of individuation. This transposition promotes the idea of thinking the existence of sound and listening according to the specificities of the assemblages [agencements] (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, pp. 626-641) in which the sound is inserted, applied and lived. It goes therefore against a general concept of ‘sound’. This transposition of sonic philosophy from the regime of speculation about matter in general to an empiricist-based epistemology oriented to the survey of particularities may imply a step forward in the sense of setting sonic philosophy in tune with the epistemological demands placed into play in the context of an “aural reflexive turn” (Samuels et al., 2010, p. 300), especially when it involves issues of class, ethnicity, gender, and colonialism. This step forward would mean, therefore, remembering that politics comes along with ‘being’, and with politics comes locality and specificity.

The following discussion focuses, however, less in social data than in the critique of philosophical assumptions. The purpose of discussing this specific body of philosophical texts is to argue that the exercise of approaching sound in terms of an “expanded situation” (Kim-Cohen, 2009, p. 262) should not be reduced to addressing mental models and symbolic grids, but it should also encompass specific material assemblages and individuation processes. In order to support this idea, the expository route of the article consists of three basic steps: firstly, I present briefly some of the epistemological demands put into play in the context of an “aural turn”. Secondly, I review two texts standing explicitly against the notion of “sound itself” (Kim-Cohen, 2009; Bonnet, 2016). Finally, I approach the installation work *PLIGHT* by Joseph Beuys through the cross-reading between Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “transcendental empiricism” and François Bonnet’s comment on Beuys’ work. As we shall see, the work *PLIGHT* can be read as a concrete operation performing what Deleuze calls a “transcendental empiricism” as a particular way of operating with art. *PLIGHT* is taken here as a case study to affirm the insufficiency of approaching sound exclusively as a raw material or as mental models and symbolic grids. Thus, through the discussion about this work, we will unveil the necessity for a sonic philosophy that gets to the level of concrete processes of individuation in which both matter and models intertwine as both material and logical forces in intermodulation.

The epistemological shift from hylomorphism to individuation is a possible way to set sonic philosophy in tune with an aural reflexive turn, as well as to the process-oriented ontology of making. The following text aims to contribute towards a more politically engaged sonic philosophy based on the analysis of particular ways through which power, violence and resistance operates with regard to issues involving pragmatic context of sound and listening

performances.

1. Context: “aural turn” and politics of aurality”

In a paper arguing for a “sounded anthropology”, a collective of authors operating in the interface between anthropology, music and sound call for an “aural reflexive turn” in their disciplines, while emphasizing the critical endeavour that such an epistemological “turn” ultimately requires (Samuels et al, 2010, p. 330). Ana Maria Ochoa (2014), one of the authors of the aforementioned paper, returns to this point at the epilogue of her book *Aurality: listening and knowledge in the nineteenth century Colombia*, where she describes the consolidation of the field of sound studies in the context of “an ‘aural turn’ that acknowledges the increased presence of sound as field of theorization” (Ochoa Gautier, 2014, p. 207). As it can be seen in a number of works published in the last decade, such an epistemological orientation operates in a wide range of academic disciplines (see Sterne, 2012). However, an ‘aural turn’ must be appreciated not only as a mere increased attention to sound, but also as a means for a critical attention to the processes and forces traversing the ear as the matrix of markedly situated experiences of sound. Such an epistemological ‘turn’ would therefore imply, besides the emergence of a new object of interest (sound), a consistent change in relation to the implicit presuppositions that guide an idea of knowledge.

In this sense, the so-called ‘aural turn’ concerns a critical disposition towards the analysis and praxis of situated “politics of aurality” (Samuels et al., 2010, p. 339) in specific contexts, in order to theoretically engage the ear as being a politically and disciplined body organ working while mediated by local and specific conditions of possibility. An ‘aural turn’ is therefore where aurality becomes an epistemological issue located at the intersection between knowledge and power, and therefore not reduced to the logical economy of a totalizing and socially disengaged ‘panaurality’ in which the world itself is identified as being sonorous and potentially musical.¹¹ In this sense, it is noteworthy that a number of significant theoretical works addressing listening as being a historically and politically constituted performance have been published in the last two decades. Consider, for example, Peter Szendy’s description of the “modern regime of listening” in *Listen: a history of our ears* (2001)¹², and Jonathan Sterne’s notion of “*audible techniques, or techniques of listening*” (2003, p. 90) as a conceptual tool for approaching different modalities of listening training based on specific interpretative paradigms directly linked to a social sphere of political interests, including market strategies and colonialism (Sterne, 2003, p. 93-95).¹³ An effective aural turn would imply, then, the epistemology of specific aurality against panaurality. That is, the epistemological option for a historical materialism engaged with the analysis of contextual practices of power, discipline and control “modulating” (Deleuze, 1992) the ear within particular processes of individuation.¹⁴

2. Discussion

2.1 Seth Kim-Cohen: the expanded sonic field of sound-as-text

In the book *In the blink of an ear: toward a non-cochlear sound art* (2009), Seth Kim-Cohen declares himself in search of identifying “a space of praxis for a non-cochlear sound art” (Kim-Cohen, 2009, p. 157). Here, “non-cochlear” goes for a set of discursive and artistic practices concerning sound and listening, but which are not made of sound or through sound, but “about” sound (Ibid., p. 107). From this perspective, the author

manages to interpret a set of selected artworks and theoretical assertions as operating within what he calls an “expanded situation of sound” (*Ibid.*, p. 42-49; 58-60; 78). This idea of an expanded situation is based on the thesis that the experience of sound is necessarily mediated by meaning (*Ibid.*, 2009, p. 81), and therefore never made through an immediate relation with sound as an object ‘in-itself’. His approach is based on the assumption that the often-replicated notion of ‘sound-in-itself’ is unthinkable:

“There is a sense among practitioners and theorists alike that sound knows what it is: sound is sound. I will try to reduce this resistance by returning attention to works and ideas stubbornly received in the untenable space of the blinking ear. The aim is to rehear them, rethink them, reexperience them starting from a nonessentialist perspective in which the thought of sound-in-itself is literally unthinkable. Against sound’s self-confidence – the confidence in the constitution of the sonic self – I propose a rethinking of definitions, a reinscription of boundaries, a reimagination of ontology: a conceptual turn toward a non-cochlear sonic art.” (Kim-Cohen, 2009, introduction, p. xx)

One of the major points of Kim-Cohen’s theory is this marked mistrust regarding the identification of sound as a natural sphere ‘in itself’. His mistrust is present from the introduction to the conclusion of the book, distributed in moments where the author contextualises his option for approaching conceptual art as a methodological strategy:

“A non-cochlear sonic art maintains a healthy skepticism toward the notion of sound-in-itself. When it – whatever it is – is identified without question and without remainder, we have landed on a metaphysics, a belief system, a blind (and deaf) faith. The greatest defense against such complacency is the act of questioning. Conceptual art (...) is the aesthetic mode of such questioning. In questioning how and why the sonic arts might constitute themselves, I hope to lead the ear away from the solipsism of the internal voice and into a conversation with the crosstalk of the world. Everything is a conversation.” (*Ibid.*, p. xxiii)

At the conclusion of the book, Kim-Cohen explicitly sets his approach against the idea that the experience of sound “requires no signs, no representation” (*Ibid.*, p. 259), and therefore against a lineage of authors who frame discursively the sound and the listener in continuity with phenomenological discourses formulated in the mid-twentieth century by authors like Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage. In this context, Kim-Cohen frames his theoretical option for a ‘non-cochlear’ approach in markedly philosophical terms, while vehemently refusing the idea that there can be ‘sound’ without the interference of the spheres of meaning and value, which are, in turn, his ultimate criterion for declining the idea of sound substantialized ‘in itself’:

“What I have argued for here is a rehearing and a rethinking of the recent history of the sonic arts, in which certain episodes, certain works, certain ideas, might be reconsidered as evidence of movement outward rather than inward. Such an argument rejects essentialism. Value is not inherent, but rather a process that overflows the boundaries of the thing-itself. Meaning is always contingent and temporary, dependent on the constantly shifting overlap of symbolic grids. It is never simply it.” (*Ibid.*, p. 261)

The entire book is dedicated to deploy the thesis that sound is inexorably traversed and mediated by meaning. According to the author, this perspective refuses to accept unquestionably the status of the artwork as a supposed “natural sign” (*Ibid.*, p. 79-87), in

favour of approaching art as a construct situated within the pragmatic field of both material and semiotic commerce, through a constant and differential exchange of signs and materials. In this book, Kim-Cohen is overtly less concerned with sound as a physical phenomenon than with a trace of sound. Countering the sound philosophies that “accepts sound as a kind of god, a unifying and unified sign” (*Ibid.*, p. 259), the author characterizes under the aegis of a “non-cochlear sonic art” a set of heterogeneous practices that can present themselves “in any medium: photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, sculpture, as well as performance, speech, choreography, social practice, and so on” (*Ibid.*, p. 157).

As long as his approach is marked by a decided refusal of conceiving sound as a natural given, Kim-Cohen’s claim for “the expanded situation of sound-as-text” (*Ibid.*, p. 262) refers to the necessarily impure and non-essentialised status of sound (*Ibid.*, p. 79), which, paradoxically, requires ‘rehearing’ – “rehearing and a rethinking of the recent history of the sonic arts” (*Ibid.*, p. 262). The theoretical assertion towards a non-cochlear approach to sound ends up formulated in terms of a qualitative transformation concerning aurality. In his very last paragraph, the book concludes by stating that “in order to hear everything sound has to offer, we will have to adjust the volume of the ear” (*Ibid.*). *In the blink of an ear* puts into play, in its own terms, the idea that the ear goes far beyond the cochlea, and that a wider sense of the ear may include networks of signs, symbolic grids, practices of bodily training, discipline and control. The ear as a political organ: less manifestation of being, more mediation of meaning.

2.2. François J. Bonnet: modelizations of sound and listening

In *The Order of Sounds: a Sonorous Archipelago*, originally published in French in 2012, François Bonnet (2016) deals with a similar subject when he conceptualize the idea of “modelizations of sound” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 226-242). By ‘modelization’ Bonnet refers to different modes of codification and indexation of sound in the context of audio culture, through the continuous generation of parametric mappings, taxonomies, digital audio formats and all sorts of technologies for measuring and simulating sound. According this author, the domains of science and art features a range of different kinds of modelization of sound.

Throughout his discussion on modes of modalization between art and science, Bonnet approaches a set of different objects, among which the three following are of specific interest: 1) the project called *SemanticHiFi*, based at IRCAM in collaboration with a number of universities and music technology corporations¹⁵; 2) Christian Marclay’s poetic thought regarding phonographic media as objects for plastic intervention; and 3) the installation work *PLIGHT* by Joseph Beuys.

According to this author, although each one of these cases implies different practical, institutional and material contexts, they share the characteristic of addressing mental models concerning both sound and listening. In this sense, concerning the computational modelization of sound developed in the context of the *SemanticHiFi* project, Bonnet highlights the twofold character of modelization, in the extent that the correlated taxonomic enterprise implies what he understands as being a “paradox” which “resides in the fact that it seeks to open up a freedom of listening, but it acts upon listening in a way that channels, atomizes, and reifies the audible into sensible objects” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 229). Thus, since some modelization enterprises end up adding “another brick in the wall of total codification of the sensible” (*Ibid.*), Bonnet suggests that this subject must be approached critically.

In turn, regarding modelization in art, Bonnet addresses Christian Marclay's works on phonographic media, focusing on the idea of "plasticity of sound" in both the literal and conceptual sense (Malabou, 2000, p. 80; Bonnet, 2016, p. 233), arguing that in this work "the notion of plasticity implies a new relation to sound", a "new relation" described in terms of an intervention on the very model of sound:

"Marclay's work is articulated around the symbolic presence of sound, around its potentialities, (...) – in any case, not around the perception of sound itself. (...). The materiality of sound invoked through the concept of plasticity is in fact more like a virtuality (...). In this sense, one cannot manipulate sound as one would manipulate clay; it is the *model* of sound that is manipulated, interrogated, reconfigured."

(Bonnet, 2016, p. 234)

Here, the model of sound becomes the very subject-matter of 'plasticity' and 'plastic' agency [16]. Bonnet states that the experience of sound "is no longer a question of sound, but of a *model* of sound" (Bonnet, 2012, p. 229). By emphasizing shift on perceptual agency, the author describes the experience of sound as a perceptive performance made from a basic ability of "placing-into-sign of the sonorous" (*Ibid.*, p. 232). Then, he concludes that modelization of sound implies necessarily modelization of listening: "any systematization of the object of listening is part and parcel of the process of listening itself" (*Ibid.*, p. 230). In this sense, the modelization of sound implies a qualitative and critical change on the concept of listening, in the extent that 'to listen' equals to articulate models of sound. In other words, *to listen* equals to articulate oneself within "*coordinates* that belong to a normalized referential system" (*Ibid.*, p. 239). The auditory activity has to do therefore with referential systems, normalization, belonging and coordinates. It is pictured as being driven rather than supposedly pure and immediate.

Then, the third point discussed by this author on the subject of modelization features a significant shift in focus. At this point, Bonnet criticizes sound art criticism focusing exclusively on the dimension of sound and listening models. Aiming to conceive more comprehensive possibilities for criticism, he argues for a balance between the emphasis on the dispersion of sound in taxonomies and modelization and the emphasis on the activity of listening in a concrete physical situation, even if it is a silent one. In order to make this argument more concrete, the author references Joseph Beuys' *PLIGHT*, an installation with no sound, although engaging listening as a synthetic operation. *PLIGHT* is a material assemblage characterized by its own author as a strategy for activating "an extreme position, the really transcendental position of production in general" (Beuys *apud* Bosseur, 1992, p. 80).

Since the very author describes this work in terms of 'transcendental' and 'production in general', we might approach it through the perspective of a transcendental philosophy. Before addressing directly the installation work, the following section describes the key points of the conceptual elaboration made by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on the notion of "transcendental empiricism". Deleuzian philosophy might be of particular interest here, for it describes a particular kind of aesthetic experience that seems to be into play in Beuys's installation.

2.3. Gilles Deleuze: Transcendental Empiricism

In his 1968 book *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze formulates his theory of the “transcendental empiricism” through a particular textual strategy, where he performs a kind of parody of the 1781 classical philosophical text *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant (1998), insofar as the book features a philosophical theory on sensibility, subjectivity and reason using the three-part division of the Kantian text. Deleuze uses the very form and vocabulary of Kantian discourse, but significantly displacing its content in a way that three major parts of the book – the ‘Aesthetics’ (theory of sensibility), the ‘Analytic’ (theory of the object) and the ‘Dialectic’ (theory of the Idea) – are mobilized in order to think what the Kantian text did not: the direct link between the sensible and the ‘Ideal’, without being mediated by and grounded on the forms of subject and object (Deleuze, 1968, pp. 130-131; Lapoujade, 2015, p. 101).

This displacement is due to the fact that Deleuze’s “philosophical collage” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 4) is based on an explicit assumption with respect to his conception of what must form a transcendental philosophy: it is necessary to replace the point of view of conditioning by that of genesis – that is, a transcendental philosophy must shift the focus from *a priori forms* (as in Kant) to the genesis of the individual (as in Simondon). Here, a transcendental philosophy is supposed to think the concrete genetic conditions for a lived experience in specific situations rather than general conditions formulated exclusively through general and abstract terms. In this context, a fundamental shift is made with regard to the concept of ‘thought’. Differently from the phenomenological emphasis on thought as the product of intention and conscious intentionality, Deleuze conceives thought as the product of a set of *passive synthesis* (Deleuze, 1968) in which both the unconscious psyche and random “fundamental encounters” play a significant role, as we can read in the following passage:

“Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself. Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 182)

Thus, one of the basic assumptions of the transcendental empiricism is that thought is rather involuntary than the product of subjective decisions and intentions. The core of the Deleuzian concept of thought as it is formulated in the third chapter of *Difference and Repetition* consists in establishing the constitutive role played by a “fundamental encounter” within a transcendental philosophy. From the principle that thought is something *forced* rather than naturally given, another constitutive element of the classical transcendental philosophy is shifted: the way that faculties relate with each other. It is known that in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* the basic form of the relationship between faculties is that of the organic collaboration according to the common purpose of building a coherent phenomenon. What Deleuze does is to implode this circuit to give way to a relationship in which each faculty is set to work while confronting its own limit, in a situation where they communicate with each other, not common content, but one made under the impact of “a violence which brings it [a faculty] face to face with its own element” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 184). The main point of the Deleuzian “collage” is shifting the focus from the exercise of organic collaboration to the “transcendent exercise” of each

faculty:

“The transcendental form of a faculty is indistinguishable from its disjointed, superior or transcendent exercise. Transcendent in no way means that the faculty addresses itself to objects outside the world but, on the contrary, that it grasps that in the world which concerns it exclusively and brings it into the world.” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 186)

Then, the philosopher unfolds his basic principle that thought is generated by and within a “fundamental encounter” through a description of the *genesis of each faculty* as a concrete experimentation of the “extreme point of its dissolution”:

“The transcendent exercise must not be traced from the empirical exercise precisely because it apprehends that which cannot be grasped from the point of view of common sense, that which measures the empirical operation of all the faculties according to that which pertains to each, given the form of their collaboration. That is why the transcendental is answerable to a superior empiricism, which alone is capable of exploring its domain and its regions (...). Each faculty must be borne to the extreme point of its dissolution, at which it falls prey to triple violence: the violence of that which forces it to be exercised, of that which it is forced to grasp and which it alone is able to grasp, yet also that of the ungraspable (from the point of view of its empirical exercise). Each faculty discovers at this point its own unique passion (...). We ask, for example: What forces sensibility to sense? What is it that can only be sensed, yet is imperceptible at the same time?” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 186)

In this context, the theme of the “limit” of each faculty begins to appear. In what concerns, for example, the faculty of sensibility, this genetic perspective (Deleuze, 1968, pp. 169-217) points to a performance of sensibility dealing with “what concerns it exclusively” rather than with objects unified in perception. The questions for “what forces sensibility to sense?” and “what is it that can only be sensed?” are the fundamental aesthetic questions posed by this book, in the extent that they make clear that, from Deleuzian intervention on transcendental philosophy, aesthetics does not consist of determining the *a priori forms* of sensibility, but rather of determining the intensive matter in relation to which the complex of sensibility-thought-experience come to life. This intensive matter is though as “what can only be sensed”. Deleuze calls it as being also the “*insensible*” that is, what is impossible to be perceived from the point of view of a common exercise of sensibility, but which is, at the same time, what can only be accessed through a “superior” or “transcendent exercise” (Ibid., pp. 182-184; p. 196; pp. 213-214) of this faculty. From the perspective of transcendental empiricism, aesthetics consists in a relationship in which sensibility is concretely forced by an encounter while dealing with its own limits of operation:

“The sensible is referred to an object which may not only be experienced other than by sense, but may itself be attained by other faculties. It therefore presupposes the exercise of the senses and the exercise of the other faculties in a common sense. The object of encounter, on the other hand, really gives rise to sensibility with regard to a given sense (...). It is not a quality but a sign. It is not a sensible being but the being of the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given. It is therefore in a certain sense the imperceptible [insensible].” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 186)

The specificity of the aesthetic experience correspondent to this “transcendent exercise” of the sensibility resides in the fact that, while other faculties can experiment “sensible beings” in the form of qualities – as, for example, a sensible quality remembered by the Memory or

imagined by the Imagination –, only the sensibility can experiment the “being of the sensible” as a concrete individuation within a situated event. With the insertion of the concept of individuation into its transcendental scheme, Deleuze makes clear how crucial the notions of encounter and becoming are in his philosophy. According to this philosopher, there is no real experience without a process of individuation. On the contrary, it is the process triggered by a concrete encounter that is conceived as the very matrix of the real. That is the reason why in Deleuzian philosophy the transcendental analysis is a matter of approaching the genetic conditions of an experience.

Considering the particular concept of thought and aesthetic experience resulting from this philosophical “collage”, it is worth asking: what role do works of art play in this theory? Here, artworks are thought as components of individuation *forcing* the aesthetic dimension to the point of experiencing its own limit: “(...) the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 94). Such experimentation concerns the specific operation of making difference sensed, releasing the difference from the form of representation, breaking the identity of a thing with its own image represented in a concept (Ibid., p. 79). Considered as experimentation, the artwork leaves the domain of the things ‘in themselves’ to be thought as performing “transcendental empiricism”:

“Each point of view must itself be the object, or the object must belong to the point of view (...). Every object, every thing, must see its own identity swallowed up in difference, each being no more than a difference between differences. Difference must be shown differing. We know that modern art tends to realise these conditions: in this sense it becomes a veritable theatre of metamorphoses and permutations. (...). The work of art leaves the domain of representation in order to become ‘experience’, transcendental empiricism or science of the sensible.” (Deleuze, 1968, p. 79)

With this conceptualization on the relationship between sensibility and works of art in mind, the next section considers possible resonances between the use of the word “transcendental” by Beuys and Deleuze.

2.4. Joseph Beuys: the “transcendental position of production”

PLIGHT is an installation work made of 248 rolls of felt lined up at double height forming two rooms in L shape (dimensions 310 x 890 x 1813 cm), containing a piano, a black table and a thermometer. The installation was conceived in 1985 for the Anthony d’Offay Gallery in London, being presented also at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1994. According to the Centre Pompidou’s webpage dedicated to the work¹⁷, the idea for the installation is to construct a claustrophobic space in which the participant – although not being exposed to any sound – may experience a synesthetic thermal and acoustic situation. The allusion to the calorific value of the felt is underlined by the presence of a thermometer placed on the blackboard and the listening situation is confronted to a double-silence: the shut piano and the displacement of acoustical-spatial reference provoked by conflict between the wide dimensions of the physical space and the dried acoustical environment provoked by the felt’s coefficient of sound absorption

Aligned with Beuys’ assumption that “every man is an artist”¹⁸, Bonnet addresses *PLIGHT* as a concrete intervention within the circuit of the aural experience by means of a both material and spatial assemblage rather than a sonorous one. In other words: although being silent, the work engages the listening activity through an architectural

agency understood by Bonnet as performing a “*reassignment* of the material and spatial field” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 239) in which “perception itself *makes the work*” (Ibid., p. 238). Here, the topic of modelization and its correlate “plastic approach to sound” is, according to Bonnet, made in a way that it “effectively convoke sound as sensible raw material” (Ibid., p. 237).

Since the work does not offer any sound to the participant, why is it also situated within the realm of sound art? In which sense it activates “the transcendental position of production in general”? What does ‘transcendental’ means in this case? Moreover, how this “transcendental position” differs from the ones attributed to silent works like John Cage’s *4’33’’*? All these questions converge to the same point: *PLIGHT* is a particularly problematic (sound) artwork in the extent that it engages the ear not only as a productive agent, but as a *plastic* organ. It does not set the ear to operate in relation to sound as an external physical object, but it rather places it within a spatial situation involving a series of heterogeneous elements (heat, smell, claustrophobia), and activating a short circuit in the internal ear due to the inadequacy between the dimensions of the room and the acoustic impression of the space. It sets the listening activity in relation with its own modes of operation through an architectural and cross-modal aesthetics.

However, despite being silent, this work does not fall under the category of ‘non-cochlear’ either. Although it does not offer any sound to a listener, *PLIGHT* presupposes the cochlea as one of the targets of the spatial short-circuit. There is no sound, but that does not mean that the work is ‘non-cochlear’. *PLIGHT* is silent *and* cochlear. The “transcendental position of production in general” seems to be triggered here in convergence with the Deleuzian characterization of the “transcendental” experience in the extent that the work dismisses an object to focus on the plasticity of one’s own sensibility. Bonnet seems to capture this meaning as he considers *PLIGHT* as

“an authentically plastic thinking of sound – authentically plastic because it *materializes* sound, in a materiality that reveals itself not through a model that supposedly describes it, but through one’s sensible experience of it in the work.” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 239)

From this perspective, the plastic agency in operation consists in setting an environment in which the ear simultaneously produces and perceives audibility. Bonnet’s approach seems to converge with the Deleuzian description of transcendental empiricism, inasmuch as it positions *PLIGHT* as an experimentation engaging sensibility in a way that it is challenged to materialize the very perceptive performance as the responsible instance that materializes sound. Sound as “sensible raw material” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 237) rather than ‘in-itself’.

Through his reading on *PLIGHT*, Bonnet makes clear that his concept of listening is elaborated not only in terms of models and modelization, but also as a concrete event able to be worked plastically by means of architectural intervention. In this way, sound art concerns not only artistic assemblages involving energetic flows of sonic matter, but also operations directed to the experience of the ear as a synthetic organ traversed by different kinds of models of interpretation, and ultimately exposed to the experience of disturbance in its own usual mechanisms of operation. In so far it focuses on the performative capacity of perception rather than in an exterior material to be recognized, the notions of materiality and plasticity of sound are ultimately described as functions of the listening activity.

Finally, the “transcendental position” argued by Beuys seems to be related with the Deleuzian concept of “transcendental” in the extent that it actualises a direct link between the beginning and the end of the classical Kantian transcendental system: the sensible (Aesthetic) and the ideal (Dialectics) without being grounded on the forms of both the subject and the object (Analytics). By means of an immediate link between sensibility and ideality, the transcendental position referred by Beuys seems to be that of a transcendental empiricism in which the aesthetic experience confronts its very structural conditions within a concrete encounter which the resultant experience is not grounded on the forms of subjects and objects. Thus, in the condition of being a kind of “transcendental empiricism”, *PLIGHT* would have built a situation in which both listening and sound may be experienced *as difference*.

3. Conclusion

This paper has sought to critically appraise the craze that sound philosophers have to formulate their problems in terms of ‘sound itself’ through a critique of this notion as being ultimately a generalist and content-less linguistic artifice. We did this by pointing out the hylomorphic character of an idea widely assumed by a range of contemporary sound philosophers: the idea of an abstract form of musicality that would involve all existing sound – in other words: the idea that all sound bears intrinsically musical qualities. Through the logics of “panaurality”, the idea of “music” still works as a general and abstract idea that exerts a power over the epistemological and practical possibilities of sound philosophy and sound art. This power is hylomorphical, and for this reason we resorted to the idea of an “itinerant” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, p. 509-518) epistemology, whose method would be to follow materiality flows. What could such a method contribute in the sense of producing a structural transformation within both theoretical and practical imagination of sonic philosophy? The proposal to follow the traits of materiality and immateriality within a specific process of individuation requires an experimental, empirical, and ultimately itinerant or nomad thought (Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, pp. 434-527). Considered from the point of view of the mode of reasoning, it is known that an itinerant or improvisational thought is not oriented by closed algorithms, but rather by heuristic strategies.¹⁹

In this sense, the split between ‘essentialist’ and ‘nonessentialist’ stances on sound can be understood as a counterproductive mode of theoretical analysis, especially when it comes to think particularity, locality, specificity. ‘Essentialist’ and ‘nonessentialist’ are both subsectors of the hylomorphic model. The idea here is that, by refusing both of these terms, it would be possible to insert more effectively the categories of sound and listening in a dynamic of specific relationships of modulations between contextual forces. The, the content of both notions would be radically changing according to the situation, while being redistributed according to new coordinates of space and time in play within particular economic, political, ideological, colonial, and legal forces and pressures that make up specific environments. Thus, the idea of a nomad sound philosophy would imply to exit panaurality as an epistemological origin myth haunting sonic philosophy, in order to articulate sound and listening in a continuously transformative field of issues related to the local, the particular and the specific. Thus, specificity not as a new immediate ‘presence’, but as a social thing immediately linked to the local and the global.

Endnotes

1. With regard to the use of the notion of sound ‘itself’ in a physicalist sense, see Cox (2009; 2013); With regard to the use of the notion of sound ‘itself’ to refer to the phenomenon formed on a subjective consciousness, see Kane (2014, p. 134-161); with regard to the formulation of the listening activity in terms of a subjective “sonic sensibility”, see Voegelin (2014).
2. The two texts discussed in this paper – Kim-Cohen (2009) and Bonnet (2016) – are exemplary in this regard.
3. I assume here what the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro says about the discourse of his own discipline: “(...) equivocation is a properly transcendental category, constitutive dimension of the project of cultural translation proper to the discipline. Not all the simple negative facticity, it is a condition of possibility of anthropological discourse that justifies the latter’s existence” (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p. 89).
4. The following discussion in this paper is dedicated to clarify this thesis. The term “nonessentialist” is used here in reference to Kim-Cohen’s (2009, introduction, p. xx) description of his own philosophical perspective. It is noteworthy that the criticism regarding an exclusively negative use of this nonessentialist position does not apply entirely to Kim-Cohen’s work, since it is interested in issues and relating to specificity. With regard to the thesis that a simply negative stance does not constitute difference, see Gilles Deleuze (1968).
5. With regard to the ontological economy of binary-oriented discourse, see Deleuze; Guattari, 1980, pp. 30-31.
6. An explicit critique of the notion of “metaphysics of presence” can be found in the first part of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1998, pp. 1-94).
7. “Hylomorphism”: the doctrine that every existent thing is a combination between matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy presents a concise definition for the term, locating the reference text where this doctrine was first formulated: “the doctrine, first taught by Aristotle, that concrete substance consists of form in matter (*hyle*). Aristotle exposes the details of this theory in the central books his work *Metaphysics* (*Zeta*, *Eta*, and *Theta*). See Audi, 1999, p. 408.
8. “Individuation” is the key concept of the process-oriented ontology developed by the philosopher Gilbert Simondon. This theory understands every form as *an emergence from a process of pre-formal interactions between differences of potential*. Therefore, this theory postulates the concept of “individual” as being always the partial result of a process of individuation. Its formal stability is always “meta-stable”. According to this theory, there is no form in itself: every form is the partial result of a concrete agency of specific materials and forces. Therefore, for Simondon, the concept of individual needs to be referred to the *process of genesis* through which the individual is constituted. Regarding this theme, see the text “the genesis of the individual” in the following link:
<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arts/vad/critical_issues_on_art/Simondon.PDF>.
9. See the book online at <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>> and its overall description at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>>
10. Taking the concept of form as a criterion of distinction between these two ontological models, consider that in the hylomorphic model the forms exist from the beginning and they act like molds over a raw matter. In turn, the model of individuation postulates form as an emergence from a process of pre-formal interactions between differences of potential. For further information, see

- Simondon, 2005 and Deleuze; Guattari, 1980.
11. “Panaurality” refers to the assumption that sound is ubiquitous, that everything has a sounding existence, and everything sounds *all the time*. For a detailed description of the logical and ontological principles that form the notion of panaurality, as well as the problems that this ontology implies in terms of inability to think the “sociality” of sound, see Kahn, 1999, p. 158-199.
 12. In his 2001 book *Listen: a history of our ears*, Peter Szendy mapped the historical emergence of what he calls a “modern regime of listening” (Szendy, 2001, p. 24; 127; 152), highlighting the joint articulation between copyright legislation, the emergence of a musicological discourse centered on the notion of the “integrity of the work”, and the historical emergence of a “critical listener” operating according to a new paradigm of responsibilities and duties for listening. His basic assumption is that every listening practice is historically situated.
 13. In the introduction of *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction*, Sterne presents a concise definition of “audile technique” describing it as “a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentality that encouraged the coding and rationalization of what was heard” (Sterne, 2003, p. 23). With regard to the considerations concerning colonialism as a “vital element of the history of sound”, see Sterne, 2003, p. 183; 343.
 14. The verb “to modulate” is used here as a characteristic action of practices of control and governance of populations in reference to the way Gilles Deleuze understands the *logic* of contemporary forms of power: “enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but control are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or to sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (Deleuze, 1992, p.4).
 15. *SemanticHIFI* was a project carried out between 2003 and 2006 at IRCAM in partnership with companies such as Sony and Native Instruments and Universities such as Pompeu Fabra. The declared goal of the project was to “develop a new generation of HIFI systems, offering new functionality for browsing, interacting, rendering, personalizing and editing musical material”. This goal was sought through computational modelling of sound. According to the project description, “these HIFI systems will be as much open instruments as listening stations”. For detailed information, see <<http://semantichifi.ircam.fr/>>.
 16. For more information on the critical nature of Marclay’s artistic practice in relation to the normative models of musical production and appreciation in the context of the industrialized culture, see <<http://www.jca-online.com/marclay.html>> and <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/christian-marclay-talking-art>>.
 17. See <<https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cLjdb4/rgXd7e6>>.
 18. See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/ressource.action?param.id=FR_R-d7d163beb04373e0737ee97b497e59a¶m.idSource=FR_E-bfad985e633ed5390664561742daec0>.
 19. See <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heuristic>> and <<http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/heuristic>>.

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Biography

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