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**Revisiting the phenomenon of sound as
 "empty container":
 The acoustic imagination in Kurt Schwitters's
*Ursonata***

Abstract:

Dadaist artist and composer Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonata* (1922-1932) is a sound poem for solo voice based on a made-up verbal language that uses phonetics in German. Percussionist Steven Schick and composer/sound designer Shahrokh Yadegari have arranged a multimedia interpretation of *Ursonata*, (The New) UrSonata (2006) that amplifies the sounds of the voice as spatiotemporal events. Addressing the spatiotemporal voice in the (The New) UrSonata, this paper raises two goals: (1) to unfold the perception and reception of sound as acoustic imagination, and (2) to discuss acoustic imagination as "empty container" in Henri Lefebvre's terms, that generates spatiality and bodily thought.

To examine the notion of acoustic imagination, I will refer to Henri Lefebvre's metaphor of "empty container", which indicates a pure interiority to be filled in. Lefebvre qualifies the ontological status of space as empty container. I intend to use the same metaphor to formulate acoustic imagination. I will elaborate the connection between "empty container" and acoustic imagination by exemplifying the sounds of a coffee machine. Imagine the rhythmic drops of a coffee machine. Listening to the drops, we resonate with the sounds, we map a space through the physical nexus of the sounds, and we orient ourselves within the actual space by the help of the sounds. In other words, being physically and psychically extended by the sound, we draw a space. Acoustic imagination is pure interiority filled with such extension. This very extension produces spatial thought. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice

Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to spatiality as 'bodily thought'. Furthering Merleau-Ponty's idea, I will suggest that acoustic imagination constitutes bodily thought.

I will then return to Schwitters's *Ursonata* and (The New) UrSonata, and situate the spatiotemporal sounds of the voice at the heart of our listening experience. While listening to crystallized fragments of sound, how do we conceive Schick's voice? How do we hear, imagine, and build symmetries or asymmetries between his voice and our own voices?

Introduction

How do we receive sound? How do we process it? And what happens after? Looking at the reception of sound closely, this paper argues acoustic imagination as one's physical and psychic extension that generates space and bodily thought. I will first address the notion of spatiality referring to Henri Lefebvre's notion of space. Lefebvre uses the metaphor of "empty container" to describe the ontological status of space. I will use the same metaphor to suggest the physical and psychic operation of sound. The geometrical nexus of sound creates physical space. Based on embodied resonance, the perception of sound leads to a psychic space. This highlights the notion of space as "bodily thought." I will then refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of spatiality, which draws our attention to the dynamically intrinsic conjunction between spatiality and bodily thought. Pursuing Lefebvre's "empty container" metaphor, I will further Merleau-Ponty's reading on "living body" in his *Phenomenology of Perception*.

I will examine my argument by focusing on the sound poem, *Ursonata* (1922-32), written by Dadaist composer and artist Kurt

Schwitters for voice, based on a made-up verbal language that uses the phonetics in German. The made-up language of phonemes constitutes a site of struggle between sense and non-sense. However, when the performer “speaks” and “acts” through the phonemes, the listener communicates with the piece. Vocalization of phonemes – which do not necessarily resolve into a meaningful word – forces the audience’s acoustic imagination. To crystallize such acoustic imagination, I will address a recent interpretation of *Ursonata*, (The New) UrSonata (2006), composed by American percussionist Steven Schick and the sound designer Shahrokh Yadegari.

(The New) UrSonata is a combination of live vocal performance and live electronics. Schick’s live voice collaborates with Yadegari’s special sound design created with four channel spatialization and analog processes such as loop, ring modulation and feedback. The particular dialogue between live and processed voice amplifies, extends, repeats, and punctuates the phonemes as the fragments of the voice. With such interruption, the audience is encouraged to hear the fragments of Schick’s voice as spatiotemporal sound events that generate acoustic imagination. By focusing on these spatiotemporal events, I will argue spatial thought as “physical and psychic” extension, and sound as the stimulator of such extension.

Revisiting the phenomenon of sound: “empty container”

By acoustic imagination, I indicate a spatial thought. Sound physically orients certain geometry, creates density and volume. When we

hear sounds, our bodies resonate with that sound. The movement of sound constructs our conception of space. This feeling of space is an organic condition of responding to sound. How do phonemes encourage such a spatial thought? Lets imagine other sounds that are not bounded by discursive language to answer this question, coffee machine sound for instance. What kind of a spatial thought does coffee machine deliver?

A coffee machine breathes deeply and loudly. The rhythmic drops increase the tension of the water. They create a dynamic texture through which the whole room resonates with the drops. The room is breathing deeply and loudly with the coffee machine. The room is open to a new space with the coffee machine’s sound. Its inaudible noise has become audible with the coffee machine’s sound. Each time I hear its sound, each time I feel somewhere else. The coffee machine’s multiple sounds and drops each time encourage a new map for a new space.

Hearing the coffee machine’s sound, and mapping a certain space through it, indicates virtual architecture. Virtual architecture here refers to the liquid and invisible transitions between limits, between signs, between words. A virtual architecture provides an open site, a vulnerable valley for unexpected beings. How does sound suggest a virtual architecture? The physicality of sound enables sound to suggest a virtual architecture. Sound is temporal, spatial, liquid, and transient. Sound is itself an acoustic space before it becomes a mental image or a signifier. Sound itself pushes the very idea of space as an empty inside, an “empty container.”

Henri Lefebvre uses the metaphor of “empty container,” while discussing the notion

of space. Lefebvre posits the “ontological status” of space tracing the classical philosophical thought back¹: Spinoza defined space as “absolute” and “substantial”, which reflects an absolute being. Challenging the “absolute,” Leibniz reformulated space as “indiscernible.”² Leibniz’s “indiscernible” space is problematic. Lefebvre hints at this problem with his discussion about the possibilities of space: (1) available and (2) occupied. A space has to be “occupied.” A space can only become “discernible”, if it is “occupied.” A space is subject to being occupied. Then what is “indiscernible?”³ What makes a space occupied, and “discernible?” Lefebvre suggests an answer to this question: “A body.”⁴

But before his suggestion, we need to consider the act of occupying further. Occupying indicates two axes: weight and height, through which a set of movements – extending, expanding, and stretching– can be pursued. The set of movements bring the state of “filling in.” Before “filling in,” a space is only a potential, an empty inside, a capacity for movement, and a pure interiority. Is this statement assuming an “absolute” space, or a “space in itself” again? Not necessarily. An absolute space is self-sufficient. Here I do not refer to self-sufficiency. On the contrary, I refer to self-dependency: an empty container is “available” for set of actions, set of movements that would fill the emptiness not in an abstract way, but in a very concrete way of abstraction.

Lefebvre explicitly opposes the idea of positing space as a “pre-existing void” that can only be measured with its “formal properties.”⁵ Returning to his suggestion, only “a body” can

fill in a space. What Lefebvre means by “body” does not simply mark “human body,” but also marks an operating body – fragment– of a larger whole with certain gestures and directions:

A body - not bodies in general, nor corporeality, but a specific body, a body capable of indicating direction by a gesture, of defining rotation by turning around, of demarcating and orienting space.⁶

Accordingly, a body is an informative limit, a separation, a difference. It is in that sense a fragment. It is in that sense incomplete, and open to engineering. Its surface and depth are dependent and limited, but infinite with the existence and transcendence of another fragment. One fragment would extend another fragment’s height, expand its weight, stretches its substance, and fill its emptiness. Sound is a fragment, a body of this kind.

Phenomenology of sound deals with sound of being. Sound is not immanent, not self-sufficient. The incompleteness of sound verifies how contextual it is. Sounds come into existence as sounds of something, of somewhere, of somebody. They find their body with our intentionality, with our capacity of transcendence. As a physical phenomenon, it is an empty space. A hopeful spot this is: potential. Sound encourages the set of movements I mentioned above. The movements would occupy sound’s potential, whereby sound produces a certain space.

Like the movements of the water drops. The water drops of the coffee machine operate as overlapping fragments. Each fragment’s sound produces the space of each water drop. The space

of the water drop expands with the sound. The space of the coffee machine extends with the sonic texture. *Ursonata*'s phonemes interact with each other in a similar way. Each phoneme is a sonorous body, a fragment that needs another fragment.

Acoustic Imagination in (The New) UrSonata:

The phonemes of *Ursonata* are not pitch, tempo, or meter defined. The vocalization of phonemes renders oral articulation a site of struggle. In his performance, Steven Schick appropriates this struggle through the modes of repetition, punctuation, and intensification (i.e. with dynamics, such as loud and aggressive, soft and silent etc.). The frequency of phonemes like “bee,” “wee,” “tee,” becomes recognizable sections through these processes, for instance. Each section functions like a punctuated pattern, becoming “groups of sounds.” The sound design here functions to crystallize and amplify these groups of sounds. The electronic process creates the sound mirror of the live voice, not simply by explicitly creating an alter voice by live processing, but also by stimulating a bodily sensation based on sound, which is uniquely personal arriving at one's own voice. (The New) UrSonata thereby helps us revisit the operation of both physical and phenomenal sound behind verbal thought.

Julia Kristeva, in her book, *Language The Unknown*, sketches how phonemes are united with each other, and function as “groups of sounds.”⁷ Similarly, here phonemes like *dll rrrrr beeeee bö* function as a group that is vocalized with a continuous motion. Phonemes are interdependent, and cannot be separated from

each other, due to the liquid nature of sound, as discussed above. As Walter Ong posits, “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence...When I pronounce the word ‘permanence,’ by the time I get to the ‘-nence,’ the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone.”⁸ In short, the very being of sound is not an intangible presence, but a tangible absence.

Then, phonemes, as groups of sounds, cannot provide a coherent unity, either physically or conceptually. Involved in the vocalization of the word, phone is before and after the word. Instead of fixing, it opens the word. Phonemes do not hold the word together; on the contrary they make the word vulnerable, slippery, and dynamic. Sound does not allow the word to become a whole. As Ong argues, the meaning becomes multiplied through the medium of orality, as ‘empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, situational rather than abstract.’⁹ The contingent quality of orality derives from the very medium of orality: human voice as sets of sound affairs.

Through the extended and amplified phonemes, the made-up language of (The New) UrSonata is then not a completely alien language, but a potential to build a language that is involved in “here and now”, that can speak through “here and now”, that needs the “facial gestures, vocal inflections, entire human, existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs,” as Ong claims. This quality makes the piece evolve from within:

böwöröböpö böwöröböpö böwöröböpö
 böwöröböpö böwöröböpö
 böwöröböpö böwörötääböpö böwörötää
 böpöböwörötääböpö böwörötääböpö bö
 wörötääböpö böwörötääböpö böwörötää
 böpö böwörötääzääböpö böwörötääzääb

öpö böwörötääzääböpö böwörötääzääbö
 pö böwörötääzääböpö
 böwörötääzääböpö.¹

Schick's facial gestures in almost every movement of the piece encourage the audience to hear the bodily exertion of sound, and bodily sounds as situational moments of his voice. There is no given meaning, no default resolution in Schick's expression. Just like coffee machine's sound – being repeated without a certain narrative, without a certain melody – phonemes become rhythmic and multiple on the one hand, remain empty, incomplete, and *situational*, on the other. The technological means – spatialization, modulation and feedback – echoes these spatiotemporal events, and thus, brings awareness to our ears, to hearing the texture of embodied sound.

Here I would like to remind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion on "living body." In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty suggests the human body as an active interface that bridges the inside to the outside. He encourages us to ask how our bodies continually are extended to the external world, becoming a kind of "body" that Lefebvre posits on the one hand, and how this operation itself becomes specific, building a unique corporeality, and thus becoming different from the other external bodies, on the other:

I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises towards the world. Thus exteroceptivity demands that stimuli be given a shape; the consciousness of the body invades the body, the soul spreads over all its parts,

and behaviour overflows its central factor. But one might reply that this "bodily experience" is itself a 'representation', a 'psychic act', and that as such it is at the end of a chain of physical and physiological events which alone can be ascribed to the 'real body'. Is not my body, exactly as are external bodies, and object which acts on receptors and finally gives rise to the consciousness of the body? Is there not an "introceptivity" just as there is an 'exteroceptivity'?¹¹

In this passage, Merleau Ponty intertwines the "psychic" and "physical" operation of the body. The body is a receptor. It absorbs the external stimuli, and echoes back. But it also reflects the external stimuli in a particular way, due to its own "inside" that is its own – already existing – accumulation. What does this passage tell us about sound as the site of intertwined inside and outside? Though not explicitly, the process of absorbing and echoing back the outside hints the operation of sound, which I addressed above. Sound makes the transition possible between inside and outside, by physically and psychologically extending the human body. This is how its "reciprocal basis" leads to "indefinite multiplicities."¹²

The "indefinite multiplicities" of sound is embedded in tactility, in embodied resonance. The question is how sound's touching maps "a spatiality of situation."¹³ Touching indicates not "pinpointing," but "grasping" as Merleau Ponty reminds us. By situation, I intend to use the literal meaning of the word: a set of affairs. Instead of one single location, sound creates a set of affairs or/and positions. And set of affairs brings about the notion of space. Relating to a space, sound maps the spatiality of situation. Here, it is necessary to mention Merleau Ponty's

remarks on spatiality again, since Merleau Ponty differentiates body's spatiality from other external objects' spatiality. Unlike other external objects, "Bodily space can envelop its parts instead of spreading them out."¹⁴

Similar to Merleau Ponty, Jean Luc Nancy interprets bodily space as a separate envelope. Derrida, in his book, *On Touching- Jean Luc Nancy*, articulates how Nancy qualifies touching as a condition that derives from the existence of limit. Suggesting psyche as a "spatial extension," Nancy necessitates "touching" as a possibility of extending, transcending the limit, or "sharing." Derrida paraphrases Nancy's suggestion:

To touch is to touch a limit, a surface, a border, an outline. Even if one touches an inside, "inside" of anything whatsoever, one does it following the point, the line or surface, the borderline of a spatiality exposed to the outside, offered...¹⁵

Transcending the limit, or "grasping inside" does not renounce the limit then. Even though Nancy situates touching as a potential for spatial extension, he does not formulate a point beyond or after-limit. He only proposes "imagination" as a "transcendental schema" or "sensible presentation." Nancy's conception of touching and touching a limit is thereby synonymous with "imagination."¹⁶

This explanation of touching is suggestive to understand how (The New) UrSonata constructs both imaginary and physical bodies as limit, as sets of crystallized sounds. This also helps us perceive the possibility of extension between these crystallized sounds. We hear them separately and together. Schick's body is a separable envelope, but when his voice

touches us, it grasps our inside, and finds its place in our bodies, in our envelope. Voice, then, as a bodily space, can only be Lefebvre's "empty container," or a space as connection, as Merleau Ponty proposes. And being enforced to hear Schick's voice as sets of sounds through the spatialization, amplification, and modulation of phonemes, we become aware of our own embodied resonance, hearing our own bodily rhythm and texture.

Rhythm highlights the texture, "gestures" and "directions" in Lefebvre's words. Rhythmic units are spatiotemporal fragments, which would enable us to "discern" a space, and its occupying "bodies." Listening to the fragments – the phonemes – we enter the process, the depth generated with the interaction of the bodies. Listening to (The New) UrSonata then motivates a "spatial" thinking, and thinking of "spatiality." "...Spatial thought began reproducing the projection, explosion, image, and orientation of the body,"¹⁷ writes Lefebvre. Here I suggest that "spatial thought," is an "acoustic imagination" of hearing one's own body.

Conclusion

This paper can be considered a sketch that draws the vivid intersections between spatial thought, bodily space, and acoustic imagination. Why is it necessary to draw such lines? Because, we need to revisit what acoustic imagination offers us. Acoustic imagination is the way we receive sounds. It is not simply the mechanical perception of auditory stimulus. It is how we physically and psychically extend ourselves to the external world through sound.

We take sounds for granted. Sound, however, envelops our bodies like a blanket. Physically and psychically, extending our bodies, it creates a liquid interface between self and its other. This is why we need to revisit the sensory, cognitive, and phenomenal aspects of what sound does to us.

This essay attempted to address these aspects, encourage us to further the process of listening, and finding its foundation as imagination.

NOTES

¹ In his “Spatial Architectonics”, Lefebvre begins his exploration about the notion of space with Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “Having assigned ontological status by speculative diktat to the most extreme degree of formal abstraction, classical philosophical (or metaphysical) thought posits a substantial space, a space ‘in itself’. From the beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza treats this absolute space as an attribute or mode of absolute being –that is of God. Now space ‘in itself’, defined as infinite, has no shape in that it has no content. It may be assigned neither form, nor orientation, nor direction. Is it then the unknowable?” Henri Lefebvre, “Spatial Architectonics”, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 169.

² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ Lefebvre reads Leibniz as such: “In order to discern ‘something’ therein, axes and an origin must be introduced, and a right and left, i.e. the direction or orientation of those axes. This does not mean, however, that Leibniz espouses the ‘subjectivist’ thesis according to which the observer and the measure together constitute the real. To the contrary, what Leibniz means to say is that it

is necessary for space to be occupied”. Lefebvre, “Spatial Architectonics”, *The Production of Space*, 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Language-the unknown: an initiation into linguistics*, trans. Anna M. Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 20.

⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, New York: Methuen, 1982), 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45, 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹² Based on Husserl, M. Ponty asserts how “reciprocal determination” “exceeds a world” that results in “indefinite multiplicities.” Maurice-Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 71.

¹³ Merleau Ponty talks about body’s spatiality as a *spatiality of situations*. I appropriated this term for sound. Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching-Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 103.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁷ Lefebvre, “Spatial Architectonics”, *The Production of Space*, 174.