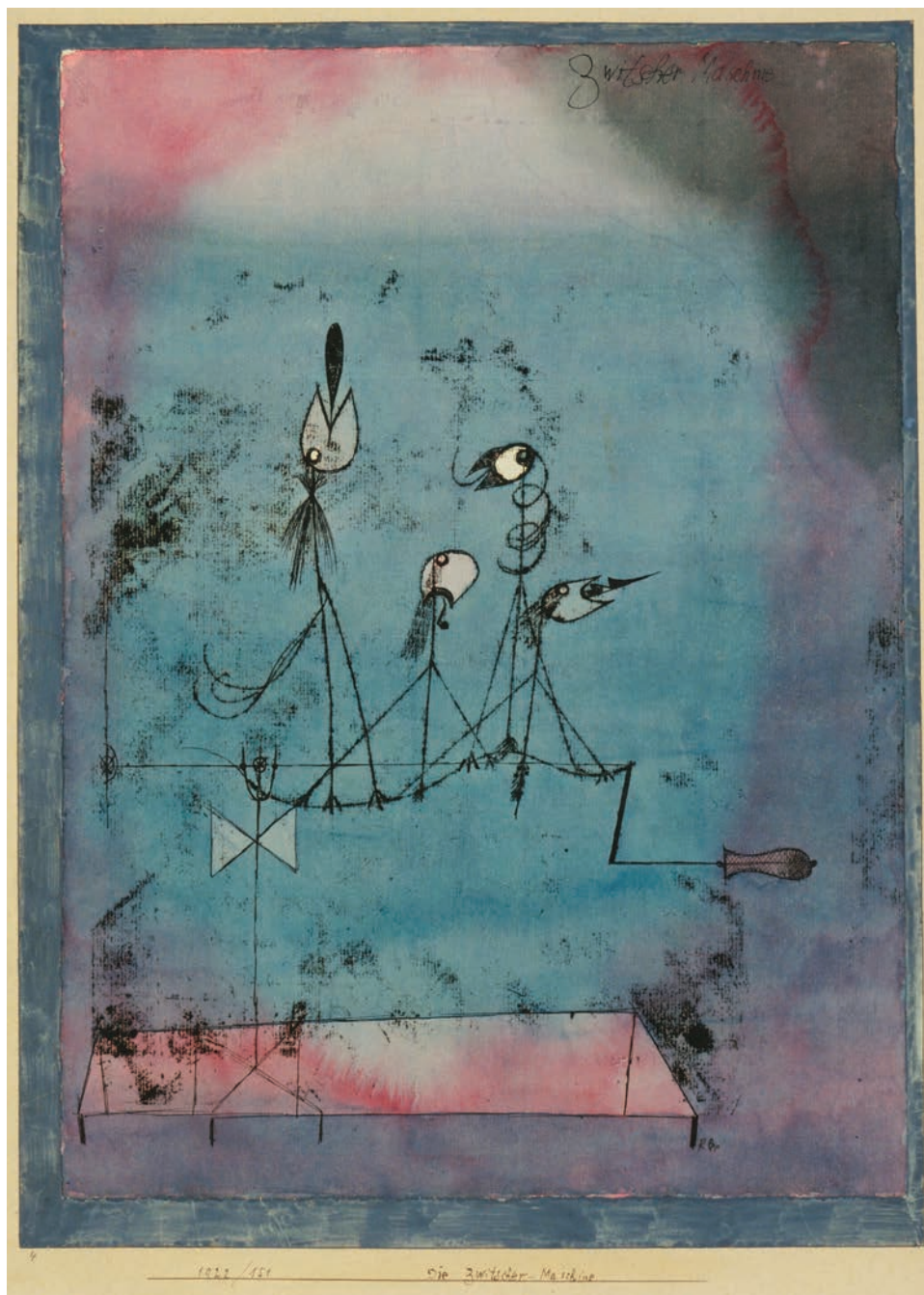


Paul Klee, *Twittering Machine* (*Die Zwitscher-Maschine*). 1922. Oil transfer drawing, watercolor, and ink on paper with gouache and ink borders. © ARS, NY. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.



In Pursuit of the Object of Sound: An Introduction

If something is to stay in the memory,” writes Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, “it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory” (sect. 3, 61). This remark not only underscores the ineluctability, in the process of memory-making, of a marking by force, it also articulates the role of the human sensorium as a *receptor* that effects the materialization of memory in accordance with the intensity of the pain that is felt. For something to endure as memory, according to Nietzsche, it must keep hurting; for it to keep hurting, it must be burned in. This characterization recalls Aeschylus’s notion, as expressed in *The Agamemnon*, that all learning is accompanied by pain. Yet the significance of Nietzsche’s remark is less such apparent historical and conceptual continuity than its current status as an anachronism. A short while ago, we would still have been able to update Nietzsche or Aeschylus by proclaiming that a little object, a compact disk, had taken the place of the mind and that it was now the CD that was receiving the burning-in and doing the hurting—and the remembering—for us. From the perspective of our current digital world, however, the externalization of memory may still

hold, but we increasingly talk not of burning and hurting but of flows and streams. Compact disks and other hard storage devices have given way to a softened materiality and, indeed, ethereality. We now store our memories and our music “in the cloud,” an expression that conjures changeability, intangibility, and an almost angelic transcendence of the bodily. How, then, should we rethink Nietzsche’s metaphor and its materialist associations?

The interplay between technological mediation and perception—including the metaphors and associations that entangle them, as in the classic figure of memory storage and retrieval outlined above—forms the basis of our collective inquiry into what may, if ever so tentatively, be called the object of sound. Our contributors call on a series of related terms that slide between referential and figurative registers: *resonance*, *timbre*, *whisper*, *echo*, *silence*, *voice*, *rawness*, *rhythm*, *noise*, *antinoise*, *near inaudibility*, *signal*, and *dissonance*. Using these terms—and often in the form of synecdoche for something like sound in general—they pursue this elusive object along philosophical, scientific, technological, musical, historical, and other paths of inquiry. What they all bring to the fore is the key challenge posed by the sense of sound: the question of (sonic) objectivity itself.

An image appears before us—or at least appears to appear before us. As a visual phenomenon, objects are generally discrete; they have a (sur)face and exteriority. The beam mechanism of projection captures this nicely: the images are *out there*, on the screen, and framed by it. Sound, on the other hand, does not appear to stand before us but rather to come to or at us. Yet even when we attend to a sound’s source, we sense sound as an emanation and as filling the space around us. Objects as sonic phenomena are points of diffusion that in listening we attempt to gather. This *work* of gathering—an effort to unify and make cohere—implies that subjectivity is involved whenever we try to draw some boundary in the sonic domain.¹ This is perhaps why sound has traditionally been conceptualized—or perhaps idealized—in terms of plenitude and as a continuum—that is, as something not obviously divisible. In the English language, such a conceptualization seems at play in various connotations of the word *sound*: as a deep body of water; as the quality of firmness or of purity (the ringing of coins made of precious metal as opposed to the clunk of a base alloy); as an unbroken condition (as in being sound asleep).² When we recognize that these uses are etymologically unrelated to “sound” meaning sonic phenomenon, do these connotations decay? Or do they resonate around us all the more?

Turning to religion, myth, and fiction, we find that the occurrence of sound has been narrativized in a number of fascinating ways. Here sound is frequently treated as a source of mystery and of power—one that arouses emotions of fear, bewilderment, anxiety, disorientation, or madness. In the Book of Genesis, God’s voice is not only a creative force but is also heard in Eden as an unseen source of dread by Adam and Eve after they have eaten of the forbidden fruit. Or consider the same numinous voice instructing Abraham to kill Isaac. The unverifiable location of this aural encounter—which we might also describe as unfathomable or unsoundable—becomes for Erich Auerbach the definitive stylistic feature of the Hebraic representation of truth, which in turn leads him to propose an alternative inception for the Western literary canon to the Hellenic one (*Mimesis*, ch. 1). To use a term coined by Michel Chion, God in Auerbach’s reading is the first *acousmêtre* (a being who is nothing but a voice and whose visual presence is obscured) (*The Voice in Cinema* 17–29).⁵

For his part, Homer tells of Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens, whose alluring sounds have compelled many interpretations over the centuries. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno recast the episode into a vivid image of modern man’s existential predicament. While Odysseus cleverly plugs his oarsmen’s ears with wax so they can row at full strength, he himself is, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, “bound impotently to the mast” (34) like a prisoner. If Odysseus can hear the Sirens’ songs, he is also immobilized, whereas the oarsmen, precisely because they cannot hear them, are able to proceed with their task, doggedly and with mechanical efficiency. Odysseus in this account prefigures the cunning of bourgeois rationality and its attempts to control and to instrumentalize nature. In his encounter with the Sirens, we also glimpse how the sensuous pleasures integral to aesthetic enjoyment are segregated from manual labor. Art in modern times, as personified by Odysseus, has become abstract and inconsequential.

In his short tale “The Silence of the Sirens,” Franz Kafka, less dour than the Frankfurt Institute theorists, responds to the alarm sounded by the songstresses in a decidedly strategic yet playful manner by rewriting Homer’s episode in two major ways. First, he has our hero plug up his own ears with wax, as though, to stave off distraction and danger, he must arm himself with something like iPod earbuds or the noise-canceling headphones preferred by voyagers today. Kafka then delivers another surprise by proclaiming that the Sirens had a “still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence,” and that in their encounter with Ulysses they

“actually did not sing” (248–49). In an inversion of the acousmatic, the Sirens are reduced to lurid visuals: they are “lovelier than ever” in their part-human, part-animal creatureliness, “[clinging] with their claws to the rocks” as Ulysses makes his escape sailing past them. By doubly turning the Sirens off—we might say that he hits the mute button twice—Kafka not only honors the classic patriarchal preference for women to be seen, not heard, but he also transforms his Ulysses into the figure of allurements who now vies with the females in being seductively mysterious. At the end of the tale, a codicil suggests that Ulysses, who the reader has been led to believe did not perceive the actual silence of Sirens, was more clever than that and had simply feigned ignorance. Naive or devious, innocent or cunning—Kafka leaves us with questions that are less about the Sirens themselves than about their resister.⁴ Is the silencing or silence of these females the effect of his plugged-up auditory capacities? Or is it something that he knows but pretends not to? Does the condition of female silence have a reality independent of male hearing or even of (possibly feigned) nonhearing?

By way of contrast and perhaps complement, we might recall how Ovid handles gendered divisions in relation to sound. By making woman the emitter of echoes of amorous communication, however incomprehensible, Ovid reveals that sound, as personified by the nymph Echo, rather than image is the unacknowledged foundation of male narcissism and ultimately of mortiferous self-knowledge.⁵

The ambiguous oscillation between sound as that which one tries to capture and that itself is a force of capture is particularly prevalent insofar as boundlessness remains a determinant in the thinking about sound (or, for that matter, about silence). Sonic objectification is almost by default organized through *a Romantic paradigm, whereby sonic capture is understood implicitly as the capture of that which is lost*. More succinctly put, *sound is always capture, and capture is always loss*.⁶ This Romantic legacy helps explain why the study of sound tends to follow two major trajectories of explication. One involves the elaboration of the sonic in an empirical network of scientific and technological inventions. In this trajectory, technical skills, instruments, and experiments, often rendered as measurable and quantifiable, become the means of charting the sonic as mediated by machines and technologies. The other trajectory, typically focused on the sonic as ineffable effect, moves us instead in the direction of the phenomenology of audition and perception, for which the sonic is mediated first and foremost by the human sensorium, through the ears and

the skin, and through cultivated habits of response.⁷ In this instance, the human sensorium's lack of precision—its propensity toward error, deception, and subjectivism—makes for an interesting contrast with the path of machines and technical skills. In both instances, however, the approach to mediation rests on the assumption that sound is elusive. No matter how meticulous and refined, sonic capture is imagined as a pyrrhic victory: sound is forever elsewhere; it has always already escaped.

The persistence of the Romantic paradigm is perhaps one reason that the discourse of loss continues to drive audiophile communities. Audiophiles are typically obsessed with fidelity and reproduction of the live original as the technological ideal, and they tend to love analog technologies such as turntables and vinyl since analog suggests reproduction via isomorphism: following the real contours of the sonic sources themselves. The discourse of loss is also evident in the terminology adopted by sound engineers such as *lossy*, *degradation*, *deterioration*, and so forth. Even so, we would like to propose that something of a rupture may be tracked in the midst of all this—and not simply because there are now lossless formats, which seem to promise plenitude through digitization. The larger question is, rather: *what has become of loss in the age of digitized sound, with MP3, MP4, and other file formats that contain more and more information?*

Using a lossy compression algorithm, the MP3 format, for instance, records and stores data as strings of binary numbers, translating sound into discrete states of zeros and ones. Frequencies that are perfectly “natural” but inaudible to the human brain can be left out. Data can also be further processed and “cleaned up” in a variety of ways. To pick one example: the singer's breathing that used to fill the gaps and silences in a recording can now be eliminated. Yet what digitization as a process suggests is that while certain elements of the supposed original (such as the sounds that accompany the normal functioning of the human body or frequencies beyond our range) can be made to disappear, we might think of such disappearance less as loss than as supplement: the addition to what is “stored” and “recovered” of a new quality of purity—and one that will not diminish with repeated use. What has in the tradition appeared to be a negative trait is by the same process recoded as a positive outcome: additional compactness, additional pristineness. Capture, in other words, need no longer be imagined as simply a form of subtraction: the always less-than-perfect remainder taken from a plenitude. It is rather a formalization of an instantaneous conversion—and limitless replenishing—in which actuality turns into potentiality and vice versa. The *correspondence*

between capture and loss, a correspondence that has for so long been accepted, naturalized, and taken for granted in our habits of thinking, has been interrupted.

It is tempting to compare such interruption to Walter Benjamin's famous description of the interruption and decline of the traditional artwork's aura in the age of technical reproducibility ("The Work of Art"). Benjamin's thesis, which, among other things, pertains to the new repeatability of the image in the age of celluloid (significantly, with the use of photographic negatives or, in French, *clichés*),⁸ prompts the parallel observation that sound, in the age of mass recordings, is also eminently repeatable and copyable. Indeed, the age of mass recordings has made certain questions inevitable: Is not what we call hearing and listening always a form of recording, an organic copying? Is there, then, any sound as such that is not already a copy? Are not all sounds, even the most revolutionary, sonic clichés? These parallels between the mass-produced image and mass-produced sound notwithstanding, it is sound, on account of its age-old association with both unbroken plenitude and loss, that we believe more pointedly spotlights—or amplifies—the phenomenon of *a sense's separation from itself through mediation*, a process that is at once alienating and productive of reflexivity (the opening of self-awareness and of self-critical distance). As is evidenced by chronologically earlier recording technologies such as the phonograph, the gramophone, the vinyl record, steel wire, reel-to-reel magnetic tape, and cassettes, sound's separation from itself almost invariably takes the objectified form of writing, through which a machinic-cum-perceptual boundary emerges between sound's appearance (as recorded sound) and disappearance (whatever remains unrecorded). Even though that boundary used to be drawn on an analog basis of sound capture, with amplitudes of vibrations that can always contain more variations (or impurities), it would seem fair to say that, once sound begins being recorded or written on a material surface (as the words *graph*, *gram*, and *track* remind us), the paradoxical situation of sonic loss and gain—of sonic loss *as* gain—has already begun. The digital revolution, in this regard, has simply brought that paradoxical situation up to date by giving it a high-definition rigor and clarity.

In the realm of sound, therefore, a kind of ephemerality is structural to processes of transmission, but, as digitization has made explicit, such ephemerality might be treated as less about decay, degradation, and depletion—the wearing out that comes with time and with copying—than about a state in flux, indeed the state of what might be called

to-be-improvedness. If and when actualized, such to-be-improvedness would turn what has hitherto been assumed as normal sound and hearing into a kind of inferior sound and impaired hearing. Digitization, in other words, has brought about a basic reversal of the Romantic paradigm. If “origin” was once likened to an indivisible continuum, digitization has turned sonic origination itself into an unfinished and impure copy, one that awaits—or potentiates—enhancement in the very process of being recorded, transmitted, and retransmitted, ad infinitum. The object of sound, if it can be so called, is now a series of infinitely encodable variations, a series in which what is specifically human (such as a cough or a sigh), as it is being archived and reused in bits and pieces, has become joyously superfluous—or transformed into a mere starter. Is this joyous superfluity a sign of the posthuman, the condition in which the human as such is no longer either the origin or destination? Or is it the latest version of idealism—what might be called digital idealism and that we glimpse in the ethereal data cloud—and thus another form of humanism? If the discourse of loss, including the technical talk of lossy and lossless formats, should remain constitutive of the way we make sense of sound, as we suspect it will for some time to come, the nostalgic, humanistic tones of Romanticism should probably be among the first to be remixed and reprocessed.

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Notes

- 1 In a related vein, see Nancy's suggestive remarks on the occurrence of music: "[M]usic (or even sound in general) is not exactly a phenomenon; that is to say, it does not stem from a logic of manifestation. It stems from a different logic, which would have to be called evocation, but in this precise sense: while manifestation brings presence to light, evocation summons (convokes, invokes) presence to itself" (20).
- 2 The "sound" of hearing is derived from the Latin *sonus*. "Sound" as a body of water seems to have come from an Old English term *sund* ("the power of swimming") with a Proto-Germanic root meaning "sea." "Sound" as a description of pure metal or profound sleep is traceable to the Old English *gesund* (from a Germanic root) and means "healthy."
- 3 Chion uses the term *acousmêtre* in relation to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, in which Norman Bates's mother makes an exemplary appearance as a voice seeking a body (we will turn to the gendered nature of sound discourse shortly) (*The Voice in Cinema* 140–51). Chion's analysis of the film also appears in a modified translation under the title "The Impossible Embodiment" in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan*, edited by Slavoj Žižek. This version includes a long note on Pierre Schaeffer's retrieval in the 1950s of the ancient term *acousmatic*, which supposedly was the name given to a Pythagorean sect "whose adepts used to listen to their Master speaking from behind a hanging, so that, it was said, the sight of the sender would not distract them from the message" (206). Chion adds that the production of an acousmatic voice through the prohibition of sight can be found in many rites and religions, and in psychoanalytic practice, as well as in cinema.
- 4 Compare Shapiro's analysis of sound and subjectivity in his "Silence of the Sirens" (33–35).
- 5 See Spivak's groundbreaking discussion, which challenges the elision of sound—and with it, the significance of Echo—that is characteristic of major renditions of Ovid's story of Narcissus and Echo, including Freud's and Lacan's.
- 6 If we call this Romantic, it is not as a vague gesture. Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, describes his early attempts at poetry in terms of a sonic materialization that fails to capture poetic thought: "My own voice cheared me, and, far more, the mind's / Internal echo of the imperfect sound" (376 [Bk. 1, lines 64–65]). If there is a deconstructive aspect to this—the mind is not given as an origin but rather as an echo or subsequent effect of sonic materialization—it only emphasizes the notion that sonic capture is always imperfect; an impossible goal is here paradoxically *expressed*.
- 7 For an exquisite example, see Nancy.
- 8 For an argument that Benjamin was mistaken about major aspects of his topic and that this is the reason his essay has become so widely popular, see Hennion and Latour.

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