

On “decide”. Acousmatic Lectures as Conditions of Participation

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Introduction

Through this lecture I aim at exploring acousmatics or more specifically the situation constrained by the realization of an acousmatic lecture as a set of conditions for participation. It would be problematic to approach this endeavor without delivering at least a minimal definition of the concept of participation at stake, that is, the concept of participation I will operate with while examining the possibilities of understanding an acousmatic lecture—the ostensible shared situation enabled basically by the simultaneous giving and listening to a lecture acousmatically. In this inquiry I depart from a basic outline of “participation” as “being part”, “becoming part” or “taking part” of or in something. This first definitional move implies the existence of a whole and the possibility of relating to it from a certain perspective, occupying, constituting or configuring a section—that is, anyway, fractionally or partially. The three varieties of relation to a whole I just mentioned, although sharing a common aspect—to relate to a whole as a part, which could imply neglecting at least temporarily the state of the part as a whole in and for itself—present significant differences. While “being part” stands for an ontologically founded relation between part and whole—a relation that is given—“becoming part” and “taking part” imply a process, or more specifically a directed movement of the potential part towards the whole and therefore towards its actualization as part. Whereas in the variant “becoming part” the distribution of agencies in this process is undetermined or at least non-explicit, “taking part” manifests intentionality: an action undertaken by the potential part toward the whole-to-become-its-whole through the fulfillment of the intentional movement of becoming part—of participating. “Taking part” implies the finalistic performance of an agent, the actualization of an agency in order to enter a frame, to seize, appropriate, occupy, or perhaps to generate a section, a fragment, a piece, an area, a component, a constituent, a member of a whole. This uncompleted list of concepts presents different forms of relationships between part and whole.

In order to fulfill the task I am undertaking through this lecture I also have to position myself regarding the kind of relationship that is or will be established through “being part”, “becoming part” or “taking part”. Following my strategy of minimal definitions I opt to define this relationship, basically, as “being in touch” or “getting in touch”. With these formulations I am trying to outline a basic form of contact characterized, on the one hand, by the potentiality of mutual awareness between parts and thereby between parts and whole and, on the other hand, by a non-intrusive, respectful link that ensures the maintenance of each entity’s autonomy while—or even although—becoming part of the same whole. This minimal form of association, although in principle restricted, might suffice to enable a potential transformation. By virtue of becoming in touch to one another, each entity—each part—acquires the agency of intervening, of influencing or, as I formulated in my acousmatic lecture, of deciding not only about one’s own activity but about the activity of the whole, or more precisely the activities of the parts.

From this position, that is, from a configuration of entities in touch as a basic form of participating in a whole, I can address the last necessary conceptual delimitation: the outline of the concept of “whole” I am operating with. In doing so I am going to invert the logic that has been underpinning my former minimal definitions. This logic has as a first premise the existence of a whole in which entities participate by being in touch with one another. This premise has made it possible to talk about “being part”, “becoming part” or “taking part” by providing a conceptual stability to which these formulations could refer through the prepositions “of” and “in”. This is logically correct. Nevertheless, my question now is this: is this whole, this ostensible space or sphere of participation, given in advance, meaning before the parts—its parts—get in touch with one another? In other words, must the whole precede its parts? My answer, and therefore, my first definitional gesture in relation to the concept of whole, is no, or maybe better, not necessarily. I am operating here conceptually with a whole that emerges out of the haptic coexistence of entities—its parts—which in turn become parts due to the emergence of a whole—their whole. Simultaneity, thus substitutes sequence as emergence or better co-emergence substitutes linear causality. Whole and parts—this is my conceptual choice here—co-emerge, that is, come into being as such—as whole and parts—in mutual conditioning or dependent co-arising.

On this basis I can specify the task I am approaching through this lecture. I am inquiring here into acousmatics and more precisely acousmatic lectures as an intervention in a process of participation, understood as the co-emergence of parts and whole and the performance of the parts’ agency to condition the whole, that is, to decide—only partially, of course.

I am approaching this question through a phenomenological practice: the observation of an experience that took place on October 19, 2017 at the art space Errant Sound in Berlin. There I gave an acousmatic lecture entitled “decide”. Through writing the lecture I am giving today I tried, first, to describe how the sense of participation—of my participation and of those, who were sitting, I guess, on the other side of the curtain—arose. Secondly, I tried to identify the ways in which the basic setting of the situation in which this experience—my experience—took place—the acousmatic setting—conditioned the specific modality of appearance of this sense of participation. Breaking the phenomenological orthodoxy—assuming it exists—I combined description and analysis (text in square brackets) by regarding two different sources simultaneously: my memory or reenactment of this experience, which I explored in first person and present tense, and the text of my acousmatic lecture (in italics).

What follows is a fragment of what came out of the performance of this phenomenological practice. A fragment because the length of the whole generated material exceeds by far the given framework of 30 minutes.

I enter the space using an entrance to be used only by the lecturer—by me, in this case—an entrance different from the one the listeners will use.

[This simple gesture makes it evident that there are two fundamental differences that we, the listeners and I—the lecturer—will inhabit in the near future. The first is obvious: we use different doorways. In this sense, perceptually, we enter different spaces. The second difference relates to time. I am there already, they are not there yet]

They will be “there”, while I am here.

[A third difference, which is not so clear as the words “here” and “there” apparently establish themselves.]

I am entering the same space that the listener will enter and simultaneously I am entering a space designated and only accessible to me.

Obviously, what makes the difference is not so much the different entrances, but fundamentally the curtain. A curtain I face inevitably when I cross the door frame that marks the beginning of this space—this weird space where I am in now.

A chair, a table, in a small, tight, triangular space compressed by two walls—one of them perforated by the entrance I just left behind me—and the curtain.

I sit down. I put the papers, on which my lecture is printed, on the table, maybe also a pencil—I can’t remember that but it seems plausible to me now to have done so. And that is for now. Here I am.

I am happy to be here, alone, in this small cell, in this reading/thinking cell that, as the monk cell, enables me to be by myself and simultaneously, in the near future, with others. And as the case for the monk, these “others” are not concrete ones, not specific ones I know and can silently call by name. They are others, in general. Others I don’t know and, what is more singular, I know I will not see.

Now, sitting here in front of the curtain, it is absolute clear to me that the certainty that they—whatever they will be—will not see me is what triggers a conspicuous feeling of freedom.

[In this point, the fact that they will not see me, is more relevant for me, that the other, complementary fact, that I will not see them]

I feel extremely protected by this kind of anonymity.

[Literally, this is not a case of anonymity, since they will know my name—they will know, somehow, who I am, who will be speaking—but a case of absence of face, of body]

Being here, a memory shows up spontaneously. Some years ago I was in Hamburg, visiting with a group of students an exhibition called “Dialog im Dunkel” (dialog in the dark): a big space, in absolute darkness, in which the architecture of everyday life situations was simulated. Each of us were invited to traverse this space in a group with the help of a blind cane and the guidance of a blind person.

The last station was a bar. We, the whole group and our guide were sitting there, around a table, talking about our experiences. Right at that moment—I have an absolutely vivid memory of it—sitting on a bench, playing discreetly with my blind cane, I felt the most intense and all-embracing sense of freedom I ever felt—a feeling that remains untouched until now, while writing (and giving) this lecture. The expression of this feeling was and is simple: I had complete control over my phenomenal existence for the others. “If I don’t talk I don’t exist”. On this basis, I had the feeling I could invent myself—a feeling maybe triggered by the spontaneous appearance of the mental image of Jorge Luis Borges, which I felt as being myself. I had the enormous and radical privilege of being able to be whatever and whoever I wanted, a possibility whose actualization depended exclusively of the very specific use—or not use—I made of my voice.

[I have to admit that the deepest feeling of freedom related to the possibility of not making any use of my voice and therefore the possibility of a total dis-appearance]

After this deeply moving experience, while incipiently abandoning the complete darkness, I thanked our guide heartily. He stayed on the threshold between darkness and light and said to me: “you’re welcome. I go back to my realm”. And he disappeared. He disappeared behind the curtain.

Now I am in front of another curtain. This one is white—well, rather whitish, light beige. The one in Hamburg was completely black and thicker. Nevertheless, the sense of freedom is, although not so intense, present again. I can sit comfortably, not attending to the image that my body will deliver, not mobilizing my body in order to generate an exteriority that supports the content of my lecture, that makes it more understandable, more acceptable in the context in which I give the lecture. Knowing that the others will be blind to my body, I assume their blind-

ness and inhabit my body from my own, rather kinesthetic sense. Instead of activating my body to produce and control an image of itself, my body actions are supporting, facilitating my reading.

[My reading: the fixation of my visual skills on the organized black signs on white sheets of paper that are already familiar to me as I read the lecture a couple of times before—I rehearsed; my reading: the production of aural signs—oral signs—enabled by the interaction between my sensorimotor skills and the graphic signs on the paper]

I feel I have again the privilege of focussing exclusively on the production of vocal sound. But now, this production relates to a text. I have the feeling of sitting here in order to animate a text, to make it fly, abandon the stability of the dry ink absorbed by the sheets of paper and acquire a transient, fragile but potentially powerful quality. I have the feeling of sitting here in order to project—literally to throw-outside—organized, potentially significant, maybe even meaningful vocal sounds.

But in this case—and this is a constitutive difference—I’m going to throw them through a curtain. I’m not going to do it while standing and looking at their potential receptors but only looking at the written signs, almost talking with them, to them and trusting that someone is going to be there and that the intensity of my voice will enable to reach them—through the curtain.

I know I will not have real-time feedback or at least not as much as I would have without the curtain. I’m going to talk inside a protecting, deeply blind but porous sphere. I have the feeling of going to throw my voice through the curtain like throwing a message in a bottle to the sea. And this, instead of worrying me, reinforces my feeling of freedom and my desire to concentrate on the vocal performance of the written.

I hear people coming in. Not in my space but in the space behind the curtain—in their space. So: two spaces? It feels like that. Two spaces for two groups for two kinds of actions: here and there, me—not really a group—and they, lecturing and listening. Right now, I feel these spaces, these spheres as completely separated from each other. Only a thin, invisible thread—a thread of thought and observation—connects them. Maybe also a network of thin and invisible threads—

threads of curiosity, of interest—trespasses the boundary—the curtain—in the other direction as well. I don't know.

I feel hidden: probably they don't know I'm here already. I feel like a small animal looking—in my case listening—from its den, still, motionless, waiting for the right moment to go out, to become present for others.

I know I will not be introduced. I will have to decide when I break my silence, when I begin to lecture (although I believe I remember to have asked the organizer of this lecture series to give me a sign, to tell me, when to begin). Anyway, I'm ready to start. But I don't know who is there and how many there are.

I make, myself, present speaking out these words. Articulating, myself, these sounds the very way I am doing. The very way I decided to do it. The way I decided to organize these sounds in order to make, myself, present: to be in front of you. To be before you. To be pre-sent for-you

These are my first words.

[It is clear that I wrote my lecture specifically as an acousmatic lecture. My lecture, therefore, thematized its subject-matter as much as its setting]

I broke my silence and I have the feeling to have caused an intensification of the silence on the other side of the curtain. So there is a contact. So we share a space. So we are in touch.

Through my sounding words and my feeling of being heard—this as inexplicable as present and operative feeling of attention, of receptivity, of being listened—the curtain is transformed into a semipermeable membrane, into a skin. And consequently the two spaces are, at last incipiently, transformed into one or, to be more precise, into one unit that keeps alive, to a certain extent maybe even untouched, the difference. A spatiotemporal unit that embraces the difference generously allowing an initial state of coexistence to emerge.

A system is born. A small field of dynamic relationships.

Now they know I—someone—is here. Now, the expectations are, on a very basic level, fulfilled: some is giving a lecture behind a curtain.

And now I know—differently, but I would really say that “I know”—that they are there fulfilling my very basic expectation: someone is listening. I am in touch with someone through my sounding voice, through the sounding text, through their attention, through their listening—through the curtain.

Two mediums of touch. Two textures, two intensities, two haptics, two resistances, two offerings. Sounding words—objects sonores without corps sonores—and a curtain.

[Phenomenologically speaking: do they hear sounds or rather meaning? In other words: what is the phenomenon appearing on the other side? Is the timbre of my voice, my accent, my articulation, the speed of my words appearing as such? Or is it rather “pure meaning”, “pure concepts”, “pure discourse”? Are both aspects always present, but in changing proportions, in a dynamic relationship of background and foreground, of figure and ground? What is the specific form of appearance of the phenomena arising there?]

[And changing modality: are they looking at the curtain, at the section of the curtain where they identify the sound source? Are they mimicking the gesture of looking at the face of the speaker? If yes, does this happen only at the beginning, only for a while?]

Sitting here, giving my lecture [or maybe is rather me, now, sitting somewhere else, remembering this past situation, reenacting its experience as the source of my new lecture] I can imagine someone on the other side, listening in the same way I am reading, that is, mobilizing her body in a similar way that I’m activating mine, not taking care of her posture, her gestures, the body image she might co-constitute with and, maybe, for the people around, but rather disposing her body—disposing herself as body—in order to just—as a focus, as a limit—listening. I can imagine, thus, another blind body on the other side, listening, feeling as free as I feel by reading.

[It is more difficult for her: they see each other. A few days after giving my lecture I imagined a radical form of acousmatic lecture enabled by the separation of each listener from the others through curtains: an acousmatic listening room]

Since I began to read aloud, I'm focussing entirely on the way I make sound and sound out my written text.

In the situation we are now, I become present for you articulating, myself, these sounds. Articulating my-self through the articulation of these sounds.

My lecture, although written in advance, quite precisely expresses what is happening: a double articulation, or better, the constitution of two phenomena—myself and my lecture—through the articulation of an aural flow. It is not that I identify or equalize myself—my-self—with the lecture. What is happening is that, conditioned by the acousmatic setting, the lecture and I are coming to be simultaneously as phenomena through aural articulation.

Articulation: Separating, dividing, making parts and simultaneously bringing them together.

[Accordingly, articulation was the fundamental operation by which the space where my lecture took place was organized and furthermore the generative operation of the acousmatic setting: the division of one space in order to bring the parts differently together or, relating to the issue of this lecture—acousmatics as a condition of participation—separation in order to allow the parts to come in touch differently.]

Organizing: delimiting units as inherent parts of a whole—an organization, an organism. Units defined simultaneously and intrinsically by their ownness and by their relational potentiality, by being enabling conditions for more complex units to come to be.

My words, thus, these articulated vocal sounds as organizational forces, as agents interacting with the agency of the articulation of the space and the agency of a collective process of listening. My sounding words, my sounding, invisible self—maybe too—as one set of conditions for the coming to be of an epistemic system, a delimited, dynamically cohesive network of embodied epistemic agencies—subjects, things—enabling the emergence of sense, or better, the collective modification of the flows of sense participating in other collectives, converging here and now through a con-vocation: a call to come together in order to be part of a vocal gathering.

Parts, as a condition of possibility for part-icipation, for becoming part through being part-ial: incomplete, fragmentary but also biased. A part taking part, breaking the illusion of an ostensible neutrality, recognizing and assuming the inherent vector, the intrinsic valence, the nuclear agency of each part, their power to configure, in a certain di-rection a whole emerging by virtue of the coalescence of the partiality of the parts.

To be continued.