

Where do we stand? On Embodiment and Isolation

In one of the first scenes of *The King's Speech* King George V of England explains to his son the importance of broadcasting for the modern monarchy during a perilous international situation. But his son, Bertie, suffers from stammering and hates public speaking. During a therapy session, Bertie is asked to put headphones on and to try to read without listening to his voice. While he plays the therapist's recording he finds himself making an unbroken recitation of Shakespeare. The isolation from his surroundings, and the total immersion in a sound environment, plays a crucial part in relaxing his muscles, letting his body emit sounds and the words to float freely into the air.

The isolation from everything else, the immersion in sound, and at the same time the impossibility to listen to one's own voice, creates a sense of physical and psychical displacement, which can eventually lead to perceiving the surrounding as a new territory to be explored. This physical displacement might be appreciated as disrupting one's ability to precisely decode the signs and structures by which reality is constructed and represented. The sense of isolation produced by sound, indeed, can generate beneficial effects for people with neuropsychological problems – the same people who mentally and physically possess, as Felix Guattari believed, the concept of "potentialities" as lively emblems of the disorder and anarchical becoming of reality. Certain experiences of isolation, including isolation generated by sound and sound technologies, can lead to the possibility of a different perception of spaces and time. In a sense, sound is not only infiltrating and all encompassing, but it is also a source of isolation, loneliness and separation.

The "setting apart" caused by this altered mode of perception is a totalizing experience of perceiving the body and the self from the inside, not really a subjective experience, but more the possibility of looking from a distance. A displacement, a separation is a necessary condition, as Giorgio Agamben pointed out, of the contemporary: "contemporariness is then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it." (from *What is an apparatus? And other essays*, Giorgio Agamben, Stanford University Press, 2009).

An isolated body is a body that has lost its certainties; every spatial-temporal coordinate is subverted, and in some cases, converted into a different universe of functions. Isolation has often had a negative connotation, especially if linked to questions of race, gender or class. In addition, to be isolated could also mean to have a deficit of information, or the opposite, to have an excess of information, in both cases, it expresses a sense of lack, incompleteness and an impossibility of grasping the world as a whole. This temporary feeling of separation can also be seen as a form of autism within contemporary society, a subjective reaction or attempt at preserving what daily life takes from our body and mind in post-capitalist society.

To separate or to draw a line between different spaces means at the same time to express a need for defining differences, and the necessity for defending one's own territory. Where do we want to stand? How do we consider reality from the perspective of the upside-down of our senses? How can isolation help in reconsidering our position within the social sphere? How can an investigation of sound uncover and highlight certain behaviours, feelings and modalities through which contemporary reality is perceived and represented?

Perhaps through differentiation and voluntary isolation people may reconsider reality for what it is, in its simple and more personal perspective, and from there, to begin to shape it otherwise.

Forms of acoustic isolation, indeed, regardless how such a situation is constructed – through the use of specific devices as in the case of headphones, or as a natural condition as with deaf people – can potentially enable the body to listen and visualize imperceptible and apparently meaningless details.

Such experience, for example, was central to the practice of Bruce Nauman during the late 60s. His investigations centred on an analysis, comprehension and response to the experience of the body and of language in conditions of isolation from the external world. Videos such as *Walking in an exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (1967-68), or *Bouncing in the corner* (1968), stressed Nauman's interest in isolated situations, as "in a laboratory" environment, where one might experiment and create conditions for better understanding the self, human behaviours and one's relationship with reality. Nauman literally used the individual subject as the starting point for an investigation of society as a whole, its norms and mechanisms.

The works of artist and theoretician Brandon LaBelle possess a similar keen poignancy towards the investigation of the relation between the individual and social body, but his practice breaks the surface tension of the social sphere to reveal unknown zones within subjective territories. The echo of a voice or the friction between two bodies reverberates in the profundity of our ears, engaging in a dialectical relation between the inner and the outer, the personal and the social space.

Through the use of sound, LaBelle investigates how reality is produced and perceived and how identity is generated and represented within the social sphere. His practice points at analysing and producing space between structures and to provoke the destabilization of structures that otherwise feel solid. His interest in the sounding of voices, in the investigation of language as a source of sound production and the exploration of the body as sound device, highlights the necessity of a *turning back* toward the role of a subjective dimension in the construction of reality – a dimension that today exceeds the concept of relationality and moves towards the specificity and "locational" character of any experience, be it collective or individual.

LaBelle's *The Sonic Body*, and his *Lecture on Nothing* take isolation as a starting point for an investigation of the condition of the self on its way towards a collective dimension; at the very same time, where sound starts to function as a bridge, a projection of the self into outer, social spaces.

The sound of bodily movements, of a breath, the friction provoked by a foot landing on the floor or the pauses and distortions provoked by the voice of a deaf person, all these elements stress Brandon LaBelle's interest for capturing and reflecting those moments of silence and pause, "isolation" as I'm using it, that frame the space of our experience of the everyday. Like the space between the words, the zoom of a camera or a sleeping body in the dark of the night, such rare moments give you a different, perhaps a more subjective and fictitious perspective on the inhabited world.

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