Educational Soundings: a Cryptogenealogy of Sounding Differently

Tyson E. Lewis1 · Christopher Moffett1

Accepted: 28 June 2022 / Published online: 7 July 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

Abstract
This essay presents an imaginative ‘cryptogenealogy’ of four different educational soundscapes spanning several thousand years of Western history. It begins with a return to the Odysseus myth, and in particular Odysseus’s sonic struggle with the Sirens. The article then charts the echoes of this foundational image through two educational spaces—the study and the classroom—as they appear in the Western tradition of educational thinking. Grounding the analysis in historical documents by Comenius and Vives, the essay demonstrates how educational soundscapes are haunted by Odysseus, and in particular themes of embodiment and disembodiment, location and dislocation. The cryptogenealogy then culminates with a turn to the postdigital, which brings disembodiment and displacement to their absolute dominance, and how these sonic tendencies might be interrupted to produce a new educational acoustics beyond the sacrifices traced throughout the cryptogenealogy.

Keywords Postdigital education · Genealogy · Educational history · Critical sound studies

If sound has cleaved to educational theory and practice, sometimes appearing to take center stage as authentic voice, it has perhaps most often haunted education by its absence, its drowning presence, or its Doppelgänger dislocations. This article undertakes a cryptogenealogy (a genealogy that is imaginative, monstrous, and unorthodox but also invisible and inaudible by more familiar sonic mappings) of sound in the production of educational spaces. If a genealogy attempts to uncover or expand the perceivable conditions of possibility of a certain arrangement, a cryptogenealogy critically plays across the very conditions of perceptibility, revelation, and hiddenness that such arrangements establish. The crypt doesn’t simply mute, muffle or distort a proper history of sound, but—through etymological familiarity—evokes Calypso, ‘the concealer of knowledge’, who sings inside her cave, holding

---

Tyson E. Lewis
lewistyson4@gmail.com

1 University of North Texas, Denton, USA
out an alternative, underground, sonic relationship. The crypto-sonic uncertainty, as Calypso puts it, is precisely ‘how these things work’ (Homer 2018: 181–183). Rather than a decryption or uncovering of a proper history of sound, our cryptogenealogical approach aims to listen through and with the crypt. We thus set out to move through the particularity of different educational soundscapes in order to attend to how different sounding environments produce conditions for unique educational experiences of hearing and listening (cf. Wozniak 2015; Ford 2022). Through an examination of different educational situations, we will demonstrate how education itself is a constant reconfiguration of the diverse possible relationships between embodiment and disembodiment, placement and displacement. Our goal is to open up educational space to new experiences of sonic dissonance and resonance, each containing unique possibilities for study, learning, teaching, and thinking.

To approach this cryptogenealogy of the intersection of sound and education, it is important to note that while there may be specific sounds within educational or schooling contexts—sing-song or scolding teachers’ voices, call-and-response, conversational rhythms, etc.—even this short list suggests that sounds can only be understood as expressions of certain material assemblages that they in turn influence. To that end, we should note that to the extent that we reference the now classic term ‘soundscape’ we mean it not simply as a metaphoric landscape of the sonorous, but in this expanded sense. A cryptogenealogy of sound in the production of educational spaces entails a type of listening that can attend to the emergence of different acoustic situations. We could say that not only do these acoustic situations create a particular sonic notion of what education entails, but that we also come to understand—for better or worse—how to enter into, participate in, and shape these forms of situatedness.

The Sirens: Production of the Acousmatic

Let us start with one of the earliest stories of sound, to be found in Book XII of the Odyssey (Homer 2018), with an ear toward the way in which it speaks of a specific scenario of listening. The tale of the Sirens is a story in part about the possibility of telling a certain kind of history, and the kind of person who might hear it without being tricked. The Sirens lure:

All those who pass this way hear honeyed song, pouring from our mouths. The music brings them joy, and they go their way with greater knowledge, since we know everything the Greeks and Trojans suffered in Troy, by gods’ will, and we know whatever happens anywhere on earth. (Homer 2018: 186–191)

The solution to gaining access to this knowledge without being shipwrecked, is given to Odysseus by Circes: have yourself bound to the mast, while placing wax in the ears of your crew. This sonic tale, however, must be understood within the larger soundscape that the poem generates. The Odyssey as a whole, it should be noted, is a
story about an extended sonic inquiry. The *Odyssey* begins with the poet—in a kind of sonic reversal—asking the Muse to tell him a story:

Tell me about a complicated man.
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy.
...
Now goddess, child of Zeus,
tell the old story for our modern times.
Find the beginning. (Homer 2018: 1–10)

Indeed, after Athena descends to Ithaca, the story begins, in four books, by telling the story of Telemachus traveling to hear stories of his father. The larger soundscape is thus one of travel and the ambiguities that cleave to the established rituals of hospitality: eating, the giving of gifts, and the telling of stories. After a brief interlude and intervention by Hermes, in the following books Odysseus mirrors this same soundscape. Arriving at the Phaeacia palace, and hearing his own story told, Odysseus then recounts his own litany of challenges. It is here, in a sequence of scenarios of hospitality’s misadventures, that he recounts the encounter with the Sirens. Or rather, the story is told three distinct times: first he tells of the prophecy and strategic advice from Circe, the secret of which he then shares with the crew, before narrating the encounter as it unfolded.

One of the things that this repetition suggests is that to the extent that the soundscape of this tale is educational, it hinges less on the knowledge that the Sirens might pass on (which elude all but Odysseus, and oddly seem to have no specific effect even on him), nor even on the specific construction of an apparatus that will allow him to hear the Sirens sound, but on the ways in which the soundscape creates the conditions for its own phase shifts. Persuaded by Hermes, Circe, shifting from captor to host, gives voice to a danger of future sonic hospitality and a new listening assemblage to solve for it. Odysseus in turn must share it with his crew, as it requires a shift in their own hearing to take part. They must hear him now so that they won’t need to hear later. And only on the other side of the assemblage, once it is decoupled, can Odysseus recount the tale to his audience. An educational tripartite soundscape takes shape: I was told, I enlist, I recount. The effect is to generate a kind of inevitability to the sequence, reinforcing the unthinkable nature of the alternative. This can also be seen in the shift from Circes’ ‘if you wish to hear them…’ of the first telling, to Odysseus’ recounting, ‘[a]nd she says that I alone should hear their singing’, in the second. Of course, this analysis of the context and sequence of the larger soundscape simply suggests the narrative acoustic effect at work in what Horkheimer and Adorno argue is the production of the bourgeois individual, as distinguished from the mechanical labor of the oarsmen (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007). This must be generated not just at the level of praxis but through recounting as myth. Thus, at a narrative level, the recounting of the successful differentiation of hearing ordains class difference in the face of a dangerous sound that threatens to foreclose any such return and retelling. Such a strategy bifurcates the bourgeois from the worker by distinguishing who must speak and who must obey, who must listen
from who must not. That is, it denotes the specific distribution of gestures that it is suggested will keep the ship alive and on course. But at the same time, this assemblage generates a new kind of sound, a sound—we could say, as Homer asked of the Muse—for our ‘modern time.’

The bonds by which he has irrevocably fettered himself to praxis at the same time keep the Sirens at a distance from praxis: their lure is neutralized as a mere object of contemplation, as art. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007: 27)

Before we follow this sonic shift and neutralization, we should note that this shift in what constitutes a soundscape is wedded to the production of a new relationship to time and history. Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly link this to the landscape:

The realms of time have been separated for [Odysseus] like water, earth, and air. The tide of what has been has receded from the rock of the present, and the future lies veiled in cloud on the horizon. What Odysseus has left behind him has passed into the world of shades: so close is the self to the primeval myth from whose embrace it has wrested itself that its own lived past becomes a mythical prehistory. It seeks to combat this by a fixed order of time. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007: 25)

This combat, attempting to shift the felt nature of time, is waged both through the repetition and temporal shifts of the telling of the tale mentioned above and the embedded strategy of listening that is craftily assembled between the bodies, ship, seascape, and Sirens’ song. The sonic effect of an abstracted and neutralized sound is thus produced. As Horkheimer and Adorno (2007) argue, the threatening power of the Sirens’ song resides in the relationship it maintains between art and praxis. A cryptogenealogy thus entails carefully attending to how this apparent neutralization and abstraction of sound is generated. At the general level of the tale itself, the strategic shifting in the conditions of listening within the land/sea/soundscape generates both a new mode of listening and a new experience of sound. In other words, against the vertiginous, disembodied power of the Širen’s song, a new disembodiedment is constructed: a body apparently decoupled from its ears. Sound is now doubly abstracted from the landscape (by way of the modification of this landscape), creating the perception of a soundscape that refers only to itself, a topology of sound to be contemplated directly. If we are to resist this counter-lure of a promise of ‘pure’ art, taking it as a fait accompli, we have to listen carefully to the shift in how we are arranging ourselves to hear. The creation of an experience of a disembodied soundscape itself is the result of a particular embodied practice enacted in and against the land/soundscape in which it finds itself. Put simply, the act of disembodied hearing is itself an embodied practice. Only by attending to the specificity of this relationship between the gestures/assemblages of hearing, and the ways in which they produce an experience of a soundscape, can we begin to see what is at stake in this shift.

Michel Bull suggests, in Sirens: The Study of Sound (2020), that the story of the Sirens, in this early version at least, is specifically an ‘acousmatic’ (289) encounter, that is, the hearing of a sound the source of which cannot be spatially located. As we’ve seen, however, this acousmatic experience is actually doubled in a kind of technological counter-assemblage. But further, each of these acousmatic functions
is generated out of a particular local arrangement. On the one hand, the Sirens sing from a meadow beyond the navigable world, threatening to sweep away those who are making their way through it. As Bull notes, ‘[t]here is little physical description of the Sirens in Homer, merely that they possess lips, are able to sing and to sit’ (Bull 2020: 289). Thus, while emanating from bodies and a shore, they nevertheless function as a kind of sound from nowhere, as long as we understand ‘nowhere’ to mean a kind of potential residing within or across the land/sea/soundscape itself. To the extent that their own embodied and situated source remains elusive, they also threaten the disembodiedment and dislocation of those who might hear and attempt to locate them. On the other hand, it is the counter gesture of the wily Odysseus, who disperses functions across the social body to create a disembodied listener. As long, that is, as we think this functional disembodiedment as the effect of the creation of a specific embodied and technical assemblage. Lashed to the mast, the rower’s ears plugged, they form a kind of extended and active body, one that although at sea is still locked on its homeward course. This counter acousmatic experience is generated by locating the body so firmly in the midst of the threatening nowhere that its relationship to sound makes no difference.

Between these two gestures, we see a kind of reversal of the order of things: the Sirens’ call subverts, apparently, not just the order of time but the order of aural hospitality. The call comes from the meadow to the passing ship, and the ship, tipped off in advance, becomes for a moment—lashed down and plugged up—a home, a place to hear stories. As long, that is, as we understand stories to mean this new kind of sound. The whole apparatus forms to create something like the perception of a pure sound in itself, apparently independent of the very conditions that generate it. Whether we take the Sirens’ promise of knowledge of the past and the future at face value or imagine a kind of pure aesthetic experience, what is critical is that it produces the notion of a sound that can only be heard by way of a certain kind of expertise marked by a technical/gestural differentiation of the social.

If this soundscape prefigures the bourgeois self and its relationship to sound, then Homer’s myth becomes an echo that can be traced throughout various unique material assemblages that we call ‘studios’, ‘classrooms’, and even ‘postdigital platforms’. The echoes of this myth can be heard in persistent questions concerning embodiment and disembodiment, the location of sound and its dislocation. Let us follow this echo, and in so doing, take the wax out of our ears, release ourselves from the mast of the ship, and wander into the tangled cryptogenealogy of educational assemblages to listen for traces.

**Silence of the Studier’s Studio**

Hannah Arendt once wrote that thinking is a silent conversation or ‘soundless dialogue’ (2003: 184) with one’s self. Thus, silence marks the *vita contemplativa* of the scholar, a figure often associated with pure disembodiment (a thinking mind without a body or a place). This is perhaps best represented by the scholar’s studio, depictions of which emerged during later Middle Ages, and focused on the (typically male) scholar, alone in his studio, quietly lost in contemplation, away from the world and its various
distracting noises. This was a radical transformation in the way in which scholars were represented. For instance, scholars in the central Middle Ages were often shown as teachers talking to students or dictating to a scribe. As such, the scholar is the one who speaks. His thoughts were connected directly to vocalization, and thus to sound (and thus replaying the formula ‘I was told, I enlist, I recount’). Yet in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these same scholars were increasingly represented as seated, reading, and thinking, alone in their studies (Algazi 2012). If the scholar was accompanied by anyone or anything, it was a sleeping dog, which was often curled at the scholar’s feet or near a door. Iconographically, such dogs had multiple meanings, including sagacity, devotion to study, and perseverance (Reutersward 1981). But most importantly, these dogs were rarely awake and attentively listening (for intruders), but rather asleep, unmoving, coiled-in upon themselves. As Gadi Algazi states, unlike aristocratic hounds (barking and active), the dogs of scholars became ‘visible icons of the silence reigning in the studio, of its penance and quiet—essential preconditions for bookish scholarship, reading, excerping, thinking, and writing’ (Algazi 2012: 32).

It is also important to note how often study is described as taking place at night, when sound is dampened or set at a distance. The nocturnal practices of the studier hush the possibilities for any distraction from the act of thinking. Here we can turn to Juan Luis Vives ‘The Sleeping-Room and Studies at Night’ in the book Tudor School-Boy Life written in the sixteenth century (Vives 1908). In this chapter, the character of Celsus is asked by Plinius why he prefers to study at night when it would seem that the morning is more suitable to such work. Despite the fact that the body is refreshed and mind alert in the morning hours, Celsus responds: ‘But this hour is very quiet, when everyone has gone to rest and everything is silent’ (Vives 1908: 111). Thus, it would appear that silence is an essential prerequisite for study, a condition that is to be sought after above all else.

If Enlightenment attempts to cleave reason and resonance, the mind from the ear (Erlmann 2014), then we find the spatialization of this logic at work in the study. While Odysseus’s bondage offers a disconcerting reminder that the disembodied body remains (tormented, preventing Odysseus from any kind of disinterested pleasure in hearing the Sirens), for the studier, such traces of the body disappear into the silent, internal dialogue of the self with itself. The dampening of the nocturnal studio is a necessary spatial configuration for one to hear the self split into two and debate itself in a state of nonclinical (critical) schizophrenia. External stimulation must be eliminated for a divergence within the self against itself to emerge, and for the scholar to be attentive to the cleavage of the self. The scholar therefore dwells within the space of silence as a muted orchestration for the practice of thinking. In this manner, the studier becomes disembodied and the space of the studio takes on the characteristic of a non-place or utopia, lacking the specific sonic density of a tangible, physically present place. In the absence of sound to direct attention away from the act of the thinking, the scholar is able to hear the silent rhythms and arhythms of thinking. Indeed, the studio paradoxically amplifies the conversion of the self insofar as it disappears, isomorphically echoing the internal sphere of thought as if it were an architectural mindscape (a mind now turned inside out). If Odysseus’s strategy was to neutralize the Sirens as a mere object of contemplation, then the studio fulfills this mandate, pushing it to an extreme to the point where the affective,
embodied nature of Odysseus’s confrontation is fully displaced by thought’s dialogic relationship to itself.

**Acoustics of the Classroom**

Let us return to Vives’s text once again for insight into the soundscape of the Tudor school. In diametric opposition to the study, Vives describes the classroom as overflowing with noise. First there is the noise from the teacher. The character of Spudaeus complains that the teachers ‘repeat and think over what they have received from their masters, like as if they were chewing over the cud of their lessons’ (Vives 1908:104). Notice how thinking is not a silent conversation with one’s self. Instead, it is a vocalization directed at someone else (the student). Further, it is the repetition of a lesson that comes before thinking. Thus, noise does not follow from thinking, rather thinking is subordinate to verbal repetition. The second character, Tyro, innocently asks if the point of such repetition is to achieve learning, and Spudaeus cynically responds: ‘On the contrary, so as to shout’ (104). It is as if the production of noise has overcome even the educational purposes of learning and thinking. In such a situation, the overabundance of noise makes it impossible to listen (and thus to learn). Instead, the classroom is the circulation and repetition of a certain frequency of noise.

Johan Amos Comenius’s *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, first published in 1658, likewise emphasizes the circulation of voices in his depiction of the classroom (Comenius 1887). The teacher speaks and students listen. Students speak only in order to recite what has been learned. The classroom is an amplifier for various levels of recitation. The teacher speaks what his master spoke to him while the student, in turn, recites what has been vocalized by the teacher. This is not the sound of thinking so much as the sound of speaking repeating itself in an infinite loop. The function of the teacher is interesting to note. His role is to monitor and discipline the sounds of the classroom in such a way as to maintain a certain normal or typical balance between watching (the teacher), speaking, and listening. Deviances from this norm are to be punished. Comenius comments: ‘Some [students] talk together, and behave themselves wantonly and carelessly; these are chastised with a Ferrula and a Rod.’ (Comenius 1887: 119–120) In other words, what is disciplined is not thinking so much as speaking. The classroom concerns when, what, and how to speak, but also when, what, and how to listen. It is an educational technology for disciplining the ear and the mouth to hear and speak when and what is appropriate (according to the Rod of the teacher). The recitation is the perfected form of speech, which again, takes the form of ‘I was told, I enlist, I recount’.

The ear is directed away from thought (and how it enunciates itself in its silence, and in turn how this enunciation is embodied and enacted) toward the instruction of another (the teacher or other students reciting, drowning out the subtle sounds of study). Dissonance here is not internal and immanent so much as external, coming from the teacher (shouting) or other students (chatting away). One becomes aware of how one produces sounds, and in turn, how sounds affect others. There is thus an intersubjective dimension to the proportionality between listening and speaking lacking in the studio, but at the cost of losing the sound of thinking within the din of
the classroom noise. It is therefore telling that the proximity of students and teachers in a shared, intersubjective space of a classroom is immediately juxtaposed by Comenius to the studio in which the scholar sits alone, at night, ‘apart from Man... addicted to his Studies’ (1728: 120). If one is addicted to study, then no discipline (no Rod) is necessary to ensure a certain proportionality between seeing, hearing, and speaking. Instead, there is an internal, immanent measure at stake in the addiction which comes from inside thought itself and then mimetically echoed by a studious mindscape. Yet in the classroom, discipline is needed to maintain a ‘socially’ and ‘educationally’ acceptable rhythm, which is, in the last instance, held firm by the threat of the Rod.

This depiction of the classroom is further reiterated by none other than Friedrich Nietzsche who responds to the question ‘how are students connected to the [nineteenth century, German] university’ with the following observation: ‘we answer—through the ear. They take part in university life as listeners’ (2016: 75). Of course, this does not mean that students are completely passive. Instead, it is with regards to the proper nature of listening that the struggle between students and lecturers is waged. For instance, Nietzsche observes a student that attends a lecture ‘can choose what he wants to hear; he does not necessarily have to believe what he hears; he can shut his ears if he does not want to hear at all’ (75). The lecturer’s job is to train this ear to hear the right things in the right ways at the right time. In other words, to discipline the ear. Such discipline is the hallmark of the bourgeois individual such as Odysseus, whose listening was only possible through a certain strenuous practice of bodily restraint. The German etymology between hören (to hear) and Gehorsamkeit (obedience) should not be underestimated in this context. While listening provides students with what Nietzsche describes as ‘extraordinary freedom’ (73), it is also the faculty through which the body and mind as a whole is potentially disciplined. There is a radical reduction here of the student body to the ear, which must be made docile, transformed into a purely receptive organ that attunes to the lecture in order to record and recount (through verbal recital) according to a single style of listening and speaking. In Nietzsche’s fanciful dialogue between a retired professor and students, we can hear Nietzsche’s sarcastic critique of this university tradition. The retired professor asks the students, ‘What? You were afraid a philosopher would prevent you from philosophizing? That sort of thing can indeed happen—hasn’t it ever happened to you? Not even at your university? You do go to philosophy lectures, don’t you?’ (11) The implication is that the disciplined ear leads to a diminishing capacity for thought (philosophizing). When one becomes the ear, one can no longer think—a radical form of embodiment that makes it impossible for mental contemplation (philosophy) to take place. Listening to the silent dialogue with one’s self might be a font of freedom for the student, but in the end, it is this silent conversation that must be silenced in order to hear the voice of the lecturer. Whereas the studio embraces the freedom to listen to the internal rhythms of thought arguing with itself, in the context of the university classroom, such silence is too defining, too noisy, and must be curtailed through discipline.

At the risk of being reductive, perhaps we can summarize the distinction as follows. Within the interior soundscape of an enclosed architecture, the body turns in relationship to its own threshold:
Studio: hearing the sound of thinking’s silent conversation (a turning inward). 
Classroom: silencing the silence of thought’s internal dialogue by hearing the voice of recitation (a turning outward).

Postdigital Protocols for Listening to the Ear

Often, we think of education in and through the mediation of the digital screen as disembodied, fully abstracted. This particular educational assemblage distances us from the other while at the same time putting us in constant contact with one another through the instantaneousness of email, texts, and Zoom conference calls. Once again, the myth of Odysseus is retold. The mast of the ship kept Odysseus at a distance from the Sirens’ song while all the while remaining in constant contact with their alluring song. The postdigital world in which screens can no longer be separated from our lived experience suggests the final absolutization of this bourgeois technology: we are always at a distance from content that we can never fully locate (displaced content) and yet are tethered to the mast of social media, unable to detach ourselves from a state of constant contact. Perhaps even more extreme than Odysseus’s mast, we do not even hear any longer; instead the apparatus of the screen hears on our behalf so that we can become fully disembodied. The screen becomes our postdigital ear, hearing so that we do not have to. Anyone who had to teach during the Covid-19 crisis experienced the strange sensation that no one might be on the other side of the screen hearing what we are saying, that we were ‘teaching to the screen’ devoid of human presence. Odysseus’s mast as the originary bourgeois hearing aid now, in its postdigital apotheosis, no longer needs the hearer as the device can record, transcribe, and circulate (‘I was told, I enlist, I recount’) all on its own.

But as already pointed out in relation to Odysseus, the act of disembodied listening is itself an embodied practice. How can the postdigital soundscape recuperate this body? In studios, studiers lost their ears (becoming nothing but minds), and in the classroom, learners lost their minds (becoming nothing but ears), then in the postdigital era, the student is no longer mind nor ear but code or digital abstraction! How to listen without ears, when ears have been displaced into digital devices? How to think when one no longer hears? These are the current questions facing education: What would a postdigital education without sacrifice (of mind for ear or ear for mind) be, and how might this overcome the (digital) differentiation and discretization of the two?

One possible way to achieve this might be through various listening protocols. Protocols in postdigital educational assemblages are sets of constraints that enable experimentation (Lewis and Hyland 2022), or as Derek Ford might argue (2022), protocols are minimal pedagogical supports for sonic détournements back into the educational crypt (acoustic disruptions that open up the ears to the qualities of sounds that are not yet identifiable). Rather than tending to a specific learning outcome, protocols open onto new possibilities latent within the present circumstances, points of stupefaction that resist falling—once again—into the rhythmic dialectic defining the sacrificial bourgeois subject (‘I was told, I enlist, I recount’).
As a way to engage with these potentials within the current postdigital soundscape, let us pose a protocol for experimenting with the embodied assemblages of postdigital listening, with an ear toward the uncanny. We should recall that the embodied technical listening assemblage the Sirens’ acousmatic experience entailed being bound hand and foot, so that Odysseus can only gesture to his technicians with his brow. Today, what is it? We find ourselves, more often than not, sitting and facing a screen where the sound comes to us vaguely frontally. Or perhaps we have headphones in, so that no matter where we turn our heads the sound continues to appear again vaguely frontal, decoupled from an external orientation. It is not so much a question of what we can hear (in terms of meaningful lessons to be recited and obeyed), but rather how we listen to the almost inaudible sonic dynamics of the postdigital soundscape itself (Ford 2022). How can we listen to the ear itself (how can the ear hear itself hearing as part of the displaced and disembodied soundscape of the postdigital)?

Try this.

- Still looking here in front of you, listen for whatever sounds might be around you. Take your time. How near or far do they sound? Where do they appear to come to you from? If you can’t sense anything much, what does that sound like? Where is the silence?
- Again still looking here, as you listen around you, how can you tell where you are listening? Do you feel an ever so slight shift in your body, your neck, head or face, your ears, your balance? If you are not sure, try listening in a direction and then let it go. Try this a few times. How can you tell what changes between listening and letting go?
- Keep your eyes looking forward, but this time listen for a sound just over your right shoulder and very close. Maybe there is no sound there, but you are listening for it. Try this a few times, seeing if you can reduce any strain and releasing the listening gently. Each time, get a little more precise and subtle.
- Now listen toward the same spot a few times, but this time let your eyes follow, as if to look at the potential sound.
- Next, with a very subtle gesture, see if you can listen over your right shoulder but let your eyes look ever so slightly to the left while doing so. Make it small and easy.
- Return one last time to looking and listening together over your right shoulder. Keep it easy, and see if you can coordinate it with your breath. On the outbreath you settle back to the middle.
- Settle back into the middle, and see what you can notice about how you are listening? Is there a difference between your right and left? Listen to any sounds around you one last time, and notice how you go about it.

Bearing this protocol for listening in mind, let us return for a moment to the studier, alone (with a dog) in his/her study. With the aid of a phenomenological imagination, the ‘silent’ room of the studier becomes populated with various echoes and whispers. For instance, the rhythm of thinking might very well be vocalized by a faint hum or the tapping of toes. The scholar’s pen might make subtle sounds in the act of writing or taking notes. The turning of pages produces a rustling noise that
marks the passage of time that is internal to the act of studying. One can almost hear the dog breathing (or snoring!) or an owl hooting off in the distance. And certainly, one can perceive echoes down the corridors of the household, even if doors are closed (or locked). Or, perhaps even more interestingly, to hear one’s thoughts is not without its own sonic qualities, such as buzzing in the ears. Thus, what is most distinct about the studio space is not the absence of sound but rather the amplification of the background sounds of reading, writing, and thinking. The sound of study is, in this sense, a sub-lingual gesture, and study itself is a clearing of the sonic space for such gestures to be heard. Indeed, such sounds are the phenomenological evidence of the embodied (rather than disembodied) nature of thinking as it connects up with corporeal rhythms, material surfaces, and various animate and inanimate objects. Furthermore, the scholar’s studio is revealed to be a sounding box for listening to the total studious environment as a kind of extended amplifier for the sonic resonances produced by ‘silence.’ If this is the case, then the studio becomes an architectural ear (rather than an architectural mind). Indeed, one cannot hear the splitting of the self into two without also hearing the echoing sounds of an exasperated sigh, or a prolonged ‘hmmmmmmm’. The body is thus returned to the disembodied studier by way of certain ‘good vibrations’ that are, perhaps, the traces of study as they emerge and resonate within and through the body of the studier as well as the material assemblage of the studio space.

Whereas Odysseus bound himself to a mast so as to hear the Sirens’ call, we are offering as a small reprieve to turn from the question of hearing this call to listening to the background conditions of possibility (the crypt of sounds which educational discourse often keeps shut so that proper lessons can be heard). This means shifting from the compulsion to hear (the Sirens, the teacher, one’s internal dialogue with the self) to the more studious practice of listening to the noise on the periphery in order to understand and thus potentially challenge the educational soundscape. Because the postdigital world is, in many cases, the intensification of the dialectic at work in the Odysseus myth, it is also the point at which we can, at this junction, listen to the dialectic with a newfound acuity, and thus experiment with what can be listened to on its immanent horizons.

A cryptogenealogy of various soundscapes suggests a kind of differential function of sound broadly that allows it to establish, evoke, or perhaps simply attend to, different possible arrangements through simple practices of listening for dissonance and arhythmic divergences. Sound hovers between location and dislocation, embodiment and disembodiment. It confirms what our eyes are seeing, or as in Plato’s cave allegory, tells us of something just over our shoulder and out of direct line of sight. Perhaps this is why a cryptogenealogy of the differential of soundscapes in particular is so critical. Sound is located at the unlocatable threshold between different possible arrangements, creating the possibility for something else to come along, a different order of time, while at the same time binding us across great distances. Can we begin to discern the potentials of listening within our technical assemblages that allow for the production of new soundscapes that trouble these configurations? And just as importantly, can we do so in such a way that they are not simply recuperated within the kind of apparent inevitability that marks Odysseus’ establishment.
of a new order of time through his sacrifice? Otherwise, we are merely left with the echoes of a heroic and proper genealogy that continues to perpetuate and update itself, ‘telling the old story for modern times’.

References

Algazi, G. (2012). At the Study: Notes on the Production of the Scholarly Self. In D. W. Sabean & M. Stefanovska (Eds.), Space and Self in Early Modern European Cultures (pp. 17–50). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Arendt, H. (2003). Responsibility and Judgement. New York: Schocken Books.
Bull, M. (2020). Sirens. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Comenius, J. A. (1887). The Pictus Orbis. Syracuse, NY: C.W. Bardeen Publisher.
Erlmann, V. (2014). Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality. London: Zone Books.
Ford, D. R. (2022). Arrhythmanalysis and Revolutionary Rupture of Détournement: Lefebvre and the Pedagogical Rhythms of Post-Fordism. Postdigital Science and Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00285-x.
Homer (2018). The Odyssey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2007). Dialectic of Enlightenment. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Lewis, T. E., & Hyland, P. (2022). Studious Drift: Movements and Protocols for a Postdigital Education. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Nietzsche, F. (2016). Anti-Education: On the Future of our Educational Institutions. New York: New York Review of Books.
Reutersward, P. (1981). The Dog in the Humanist’s Study. Konsthistorisk Tidskrift, 50(2), 53-69.
Vives, J. L. (1908). Tudor School-Boy Life. London: J. M. Dent and Company.
Wozniak, J. (2015). Towards a Rhythmanalysis of Debt Dressage: Education as Rhythmic Resistance in Everyday Indebted Life. Policy Futures in Education, 15(4), 495–508. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317715798.