Confronting continental philosophy’s fears of biologism

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Abstract
Continental philosophy, argues Catherine Malabou, has disavowed biology. This article examines the ways in which philosophies of listening risk eschewing the biological and material dimensions of aurality in favour of its symbolic or spiritual aspects. It explores in detail the dangers that deconstructive approaches to listening face in their endeavours to confront the materiality of sensation and it presents Malabou’s concept of plasticity as a way out of these aporias.

Keywords
Biology, Catherine Malabou, deconstruction, listening, philosophy, plasticity

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Why does continental philosophy reject the ear? Or, more precisely, why does the modern European philosophical tradition reject our flesh-and-blood ears? Why does philosophy disparage the ear as biology when it at the same time cherishes – and even stakes its own survival upon – the ear as concept? Continental philosophy is often criticized for eschewing the engagement with scientific knowledge that one finds, for instance, in the Anglophone philosophy of biology, instead figuring natural science as an excluded other in relation to which philosophy defines itself. While noting that distinctions between analytic and continental traditions in general demand to be deconstructed, this caricature also overlooks the contributions of thinkers such as Bergson, Deleuze, and Canguilhem to dialogue with the analytic philosophy of science. Catherine Malabou’s ambitious fusion of neuroscience and post-Hegelian thought stands out nonetheless for the way in which it reveals biology as continental philosophy’s repressed other – as something which philosophy struggles to master. What is especially intriguing is that continental philosophy from Plato’s cave to Heidegger’s anti-scientism has thought its relation to its repressed outside as a practice of listening. French deconstruction, for instance, frequently figures philosophy’s relation to its constitutive outside as an exercise of the ear (for example, Derrida, 1990). Music and sound represent that which is inaccessible to philosophy. This desire to reveal what has hitherto remained unreachable has not only shaped the German idealist conceptions of music in the 19th century and concomitant notions of a structural listening that discerns meaning hidden beneath the sensuous surface. This insatiable theoretical curiosity, as Michael Eng (2017) observes, also motivates the recent sonic human in the humanities with its exhortation that a sonic perspective upend existing epistemological paradigms. It is for the same reason that Sarah Hickmott (2015) describes Jean-Luc Nancy’s recovery of listening and resonance as part of a long tradition of what Martin Scherzinger has termed “sonotropism” (2012).

The danger here, then, lies in imagining that a salvaging of biology might do something similar for philosophy. The (neuro)biological conception of listening, however, unlike the idealist metaphysics of music, is unabashedly materialist. If continental philosophy situates the sonorous as the disavowed ground of sense-making, biology has an altogether different account of how we make sense of sound. The sciences of auditory perception examine the interplay of physical, biological, and psychological processes, investigating the ways in which the physiology of the ear, mediated by physical acoustics, connects with the neurobiology of hearing and the plasticity of the auditory system. In this way biology provides an alternative way of thinking.

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about the subject’s relation to the world around it. Sound is not something that remains “beyond” but something which is capable of reshaping the human brain. Human hearing not only adapts in response to stimuli in its acoustic environment but, moreover, is capable of transforming itself after trauma in order to keep making sense of that environment. The transformations are not ideal constructs, but empirically verifiable changes at the level of matter. While the brain is developing, neural circuits are formed and refined in reaction to the varying demands of the environment. Such modifications at the level of neurobiology are not restricted to the developing brain. Even adults can, for instance, “relearn to localize sound in the presence of substantially altered auditory spatial cues” (Schnupp, Nelkin, & King, 2011, p. 291) or can accommodate changes in input associated with hearing loss. Neurobiology thus offers a materialist account of hearing’s environmentally mediated plasticity.

By contrast, listening in the post-Kantian continental tradition names philosophy’s relation to its limits, to the outside that it posits in order to define the boundaries and coherence of the philosophical subject – which is to say, to its transcendental, to its impossible condition of possibility. Without listening, there is no philosophy. Philosophy stands or falls on the ear. If philosophy cannot do without the ear, whence comes its ambivalence towards our ears? As I will show, it is precisely its dependence on the ear as its condition of possibility that leads philosophy to reject listening as biology. If philosophy is an incarnation of listening, it produces two listening bodies. As I argue, once philosophy takes listening as its condition of possibility it creates a caesura within listening between a material, biological capacity (the organ of the ear) and a spiritual, philosophical use of the ear that transcends the natural dimension. What is thus at stake here is the possibility of dissolving this opposition between continental philosophy and the sciences of hearing.

In what sense, then, is philosophy a use of the ear? In the post-Kantian continental tradition, philosophy defines itself in relation to what is not philosophy and to that extent depends upon an outside that it excludes from its own sphere. Philosophy, it might be argued, consists in a disavowal – or, more precisely, in a triple disavowal. First, it disavows what is not philosophy (sensuous materiality, music, etc.), declaring that it is outside its grasp – that it cannot be conceptualized in meaningful speech but can only be listened to. And yet philosophy disavows its other only so that it might more readily claim this outside as its own. In this second move it thus disavows its relation to its outside: it appropriates its other so that the relation of listening disappears from thought. It disavows the disavowal. This is why Jacques Derrida (1990, pp. xii–xiii) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2007, pp. 1–2) will suggest, as we shall see, that philosophy is incapable of listening and is only able to hear – which is to say that it can only make sense of sound, grasp it as intended meaning, as signification, as concept, compulsively turning what it hears into thought. And yet philosophy – at least in its deconstructive incarnation – defines itself as nothing other than this urge to appropriate that cannot possibly be satisfied, as a frustrated desire to consume the other, the impossibility of possession, as thought’s ever-thwarted relation to the material. (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, pp. 110–111) calls this relation “exappropriation” to signify the coincidence of appropriation and expropriation – that every attempt of philosophy to make the other its own confronts a limit of impossibility. But this relation might equally be called listening.

Each of these disavowals involves making a minimal distinction between philosophy and its other, between what can be thought and what can only be felt via sensuous perception – between, one might say, the insensible and the sensible or, in Catherine Malabou’s (2014a) terms, the symbolic and the biological. The disavowal consists in the gesture of opening up a gap, of drawing a line between two things – of disavowing what is outside. This gap, however, is in turn itself disavowed. The disavowal is itself disavowed. In a first step, a distinction opens up between philosophy and its outside (often figured as the sonorous). The relation between the two – what at once joins and divides philosophy and its other – is listening. And yet listening is, in a second step, itself disavowed once philosophy imagines that it can devour the sonorous and make it entirely its own. At the same time, however, a distinction opens up between this metaphysical hearing that consumes its object and a deconstructive listening that allows it to resonate.

Deconstruction too, I would argue, persists in this logic of disavowal and its disavowal – this metaphysical logic of dividing into two and forgetting the relation that comes between them. Deconstruction seeks to demonstrate the mutual contamination of two seemingly opposed terms, but one fairly compelling critique of deconstruction is that it simply produces an infinite regress of division, discriminat-
deconstruction tends to disavow – is what I call plastic listening. Peter Szendy (2008) has already proposed such a paradigm with (a thinly veiled) reference to Malabou’s concept, but I argue that such an approach can only realise its potential more fully when it engages more directly with the themes of biology and neuroplasticity that assume such prominence in Malabou’s thought.

My point of departure in this article – that the continental-philosophical account of listening disavows biology (as both a mode of scientific enquiry and the form of life that this science constructs as its object) – takes its inspiration from Malabou’s critique of the philosophy of sovereignty and biopolitics. Malabou never considers aurality, but, having set out the principal components of her argument, I set out to show that a similar critique may be made of the deconstructive model of listening developed by Nancy. This involves reading closely not only his writings on music and listening, but also his work on the body alongside Derrida’s response to Nancy’s efforts to deconstruct mind–body dualisms (Derrida, 2005). Against the backdrop of Malabou’s rescue of biology via neuroplasticity, I then consider whether Szendy, in developing Nancy’s thought in the direction of a plastic listening, manages to dissolve philosophy’s repeated division into two bodies. Drawing on recent developments in our understanding of the role of neuroplasticity and epigenetics in hearing loss and aural rehabilitation, I suggest that there is a way to recover a biological basis for listening without reverting to the scientific essentialisms that philosophy fears. By way of conclusion, I propose instead a new materialism of the ear that asserts the coincidence of the philosophy and science of listening.

**Listening without ears**

Post-Kantian continental philosophy is seemingly allergic to biology. This reaction reaches a heightened intensity in philosophical critiques of biopolitics – critiques of the control, training, and disciplining of bodies. In its classic Foucauldian formulation, biopolitics emerges as a form of power and domination at the same time that biology emerges as a science to replace natural philosophy. In fact, from Foucault’s standpoint, biology is the condition of possibility for biopolitics. On his reading, biology as a science instrumentizes and domesticates living bodies through a power of normalization. Unlike more recent theorists of biopolitics such as Derrida and Giorgio Agamben who underscore the continuity between sovereign power and biopolitical governmentality, Foucault argues that biopolitics marks an historical rupture that breaks with – even deconstructs – the structure of sovereignty. The structure of sovereignty lies in the king’s decision between norm and exception, between citizen and outlaw, between man and beast. In this way, sovereignty has what Agamben (1998) describes as a logic of inclusive exclusion: the outside is included within the reach of power – at the sovereign’s mercy – precisely to the extent that it is excluded from the sphere of its exclusion. For Foucault, the model of sovereignty is Hobbes’ Leviathan, which exhibits the division of the monarch – in Ernst Kantorowicz’s famous phrase – into the king’s two bodies. Parallel to the division between norm and exception there is, then, also a division within the sovereign between the king’s natural body and the non-material body politic that exceeds and transcends it. It is worth noting at this point that the deconstruction of listening has the same structure. The relation of philosophy to its outside (which is frequently characterized as a form of listening) has the structure of sovereignty: it includes its outside to the extent that it excludes it. Furthermore, the division between philosophy and its outside that the ear opens up and traverses is paralleled by a division within the ear between hearing and listening.

This logic is why deconstructive critiques of biopolitics are able to discern an underlying continuity between the two regimes. Indeed, even going back to Foucault’s theory of normalization, it can be seen that the structure of sovereignty is in fact repeated in biopolitics; only now it is internalized within the body. On this reading, the science of biology organizes the body into functions, programmes, and teleologies. For Foucault and other critics of biopolitics, the biological conception of life opposes and subordinates the body and its organs to their functions. Similarly, in Nancy’s characterization of philosophy the ear as biological organ is subordinated to its function in the service of understanding (entendre in French means both to hear and to understand). Philosophical hearing, on this model, transcends merely sensuous, material listening, diverting it to loftier ends. This model gives rise, in Hanslick’s reflections on music, to a tension between an overriding transcendental aesthetics and gestures towards empirical analysis. Such idealist conceptions of music and listening repeat an intuition, prevalent in a philosophical tradition wary of scientism and biological determinism, that the body in its biological dimension is to be transcended by something irreducible to its material condition. In the coming pages, I shall evaluate whether this can also be said of Nancy’s much subtler philosophy of sense and its relation to the body. From the standpoint of the deconstruction of sovereignty and biopolitics, it is because the science of biology is already always biopolitical that, in Malabou’s scathing judgement of Foucault, “apparently, there cannot be any biopolitical resistance to the biopolitical” (2016, p. 430). Echoing Roberto Esposito’s evaluation of Foucauldian biopolitics (2013, p. 71), Malabou is here taking issue with an undialectical model in which life moves inescapably into the clutches of power without any capacity to respond to or disengage from governmental control.

For Malabou, the Derridean and Agambenian deconstructions of biopolitics remain within the horizon of sovereignty insofar as they perpetuate the division of life into two dimensions. Challenging its “antibiological bias”, Malabou contends that:
Malabou sees this tendency to privilege a transcendent dimension of life in Derrida’s poetics of animal life (Derrida, 2009) and in passages elsewhere where he claims, for instance, that the “dignity of life can only subsist beyond the present living being” (2001, p. 87). A similar transcendence pervades Derrida’s understanding of music as something that must be allowed to resonate beyond philosophical appropriation:

I wonder if philosophy… has not meant the repression of music or song. Philosophy cannot, as such, let the song resonate in some way… I do not write about these voices… I try to let them speak… The music of voices, if there is any, I do not sign it… first of all I listen to it. (Derrida, 2001, p. 87)

Derrida dare not make music his own (“I do not sign it”), but only permits himself to listen. Similarly, in a recent conversation with the author, Nancy described music as the point at which philosophy stops (itself) (s’arrête), repeating a gesture at the heart of the European philosophical tradition since Plato that situates music or sound as philosophy’s exteriority. Music, on these readings, is something that transcends philosophy. In these instances it is not the philosophical or symbolic dimension that takes priority but the sensuous or material dimension that is irreducible to the symbolic. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the irreducibility of either to the other troubles Malabou. Rather than arguing for the primacy of biology, she insists upon the “coincidence of the symbolic and the biological. There is but one life, one life only” (Malabou, 2016, p. 438). Her objection is to any form of transcendence.

It remains for us to investigate further whether this charge may be justly levelled at Nancy’s theory of listening. What is perhaps surprising, given this insistence on the indistinction of the two, is that Malabou includes Agamben among the objects of her critique. Malabou focuses her critique on Agamben’s concept of bare life, correcting a common misconception that it is irreducible to biological, natural life. It would be easy to assume that bare life coincides with Aristotelian ζωή or nutritive life in contrast to the political life of the citizen or ζωή. Ate the centre of Agamben’s project, however, is an attempt to show that biopolitics involves a deconstruction of this distinction. Bare life, as Agamben defines it, is in fact biological life only insofar as it captured by the sovereign exception. By exception Agamben means the logic according to which what appears to be excluded is at the same time included: the life that is subject to the law of the sovereign is simultaneously excluded from its protection and therefore fully exposed to its violence. This means that bare life, far from representing a purely biological life distinct from politically qualified life, is in fact included in political life and thereby becomes indistinct from it. Bare life is actually the “zone of indistinction” between the two. Closer reading of Agamben’s writings shows that bare life is the capture of the disavowed condition of possibility that opens up the distinction between biological and political life in the first place. Moreover, Agamben does not valorise bare life as such. Rather, as his recent writings demonstrate, Agamben counterpoises to bare life a positively-valued “form-of-life”, defined as “a life inseparable from its form” (2015, p. 432) and a “use of bodies”. Consider, for example, the following passage in which Agamben rejects the biopolitical transcendence of function over bodily organ, with an explicit reference to the privileging of hearing over the ears:

Pushing to the extreme the Epicurian critique of every teleologism, Lucretius thus affirms that no organ was created in view of an end, neither the eyes for vision, nor the ears for hearing nor the tongue for speech: “Whatever thing is born generates its own use… The ears were created long before a sound was heard.”

The reversal of the relation between organ and function amounts to liberating use from every established teleology... the living being does not make use of its body parts for some one predetermined function, but by entering into relation with them, it so to speak gropingly finds and invents their use. The body parts precede their use, and use precedes and creates their function. (Agamben, 2015, p. 51)

Stepping back from the function of hearing to a “use” of our ears refocuses attention on the relation between the living being and the body. In other words, this offers a way of reorienting listening towards the material without reproducing the biological determinism that philosophy is eager to avoid. Just as there is no predetermined function of the ear, the ear does not predetermine its use; rather, it is invented through the process of use. In another passage in the same book, Agamben describes use as an “echo” that consists in “modifications” of the manner of being (2015, p. 170).

Alert to the same issues that concern Malabou, he asserts that “just as a mode adds nothing to substance and is only a modification or manner of being so life adds nothing to the living... living and life become indiscernible” (Agamben, 2015, p. 222). This notion of modifiability of life brings Agamben’s thought close to Malabou’s concept of plasticity as a mutability or capacity for transformation. But this is a proximity that Malabou seemingly prefers to disavow.

This proximity is the subject of Arne De Boever’s recent book Plastic sovereignties (2016). Seeking to downplay the force of Malabou’s critique of Agamben, he suggests that she herself reproduces the logic of sovereignty by...
proposing two types of symbolic life (De Boever, 2016, p. 30). De Boever is undoubtedly right to say that Malabou oscillates between identifying symbolic life with non-biological life and with the “structural spacing” that gives rise to difference and separates the two. What De Boever highlights is the need to clarify whether one is talking about the gap that opens up when the transcendental withdraws or about this withdrawn condition of possibility itself – the disavowal or the disavowal of the disavowal. For Agamben, bare life clearly corresponds to the presupposed condition of possibility rather than to one term of the opposition. The concept that Agamben evidently has in mind is Derrida’s use of *retrait* to suggest a retreat that at the same time draws (trait) a line and keeps drawing further lines (re-trait) between two terms. As the opening section aimed to show, however, the retreat and the division are implicated in one another and form a recursive process, so that the disavowed transcendental is also subject to division. Recall how listening is the disavowed spacing that separates and joins philosophy and its other, but in turn aurality splits into listening and hearing – into sensation and understanding. What is at stake is the disavowed mode of listening that comes between them, allowing one to transform into the other: that is, a plastic listening.

**Plastic listening**

What, then, does Malabou mean by plasticity and in what sense does it mark a (re)turn to biology? Plasticity concerns form and specifically its capacity for metamorphosis. By plastic is meant the capacity to give form (clay is plastic) and receive form, as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery. But plastic, in the sense of plastic explosives, also designates a capacity to destroy form. Crucially, though, plasticity is a capacity for transformation that belongs to form itself – an autoplasticity, if you like. It is not a question of a transcendent force imposing itself upon raw material, but of an immanent possibility within form to shape, receive, and annihilate forms. In this way, the concept of plasticity dissolves any form–content opposition. Malabou derives this notion of plasticity not only from a novel and highly ambitious reading of Hegel’s phenomenology but also by expanding beyond the realms of philosophy to draw upon ground-breaking work in neurology and specifically its capacity for metamorphosis. By plastic is meant the capacity to give form (clay is plastic) and receive form, as in the plastic arts or plastic surgery. But plastic, in the sense of plastic explosives, also designates a capacity to destroy form. Crucially, though, plasticity is a capacity for transformation that belongs to form itself – an autoplasticity, if you like. It is not a question of a transcendent force imposing itself upon raw material, but of an immanent possibility within form to shape, receive, and annihilate forms. In this way, the concept of plasticity dissolves any form–content opposition. Malabou derives this notion of plasticity not only from a novel and highly ambitious reading of Hegel’s phenomenology but also by expanding beyond the realms of philosophy to draw upon ground-breaking work in neurology and specifically the increasing recognition given to the role of neuroplasticity. In contrast to the flexibility of the neoliberal subject, insights into how the brain works testify not only to a mutability but also to a capacity to resist change. Malabou’s work has given considerable attention to the destructive aspects of neuroplasticity: to brain trauma and irreversible accidents. If philosophy worries that biology remains predetermined, genetically programmed, and without broader significance, neuroplasticity “opens, within organic life, a supplement of indeterminacy” (Malabou, 2014a, p. 104). Noting how the field of epigenetics illustrates that the brain exceeds our genes, Malabou notes that:

Plasticity is in a way genetically programmed to develop and operate without program, plan, determinism, schedule, design or pre-schematization. Neural plasticity allows the shaping, repairing, remodeling of connections, and in consequence a certain amount of self-transformation of the living being. (Malabou, 2014a, p. 105)

A greater understanding of neural plasticity thus allows biology to free itself from programme and function.

An area that Malabou does not explore is the powerful role that neuroplasticity plays in audiology (Tremblay & Kraus, 2002). Specifically, research at the frontier of audiology in recent years has investigated how changes in neural pathways and synapses take place in hearing loss; a more thorough understanding of these neuroplastic changes allows amplification and sound therapies to be better tailored to the individual patient. For instance, in hearing loss pruning of synapses occurs when auditory stimulus is inhibited, leading to diminished listening skills. But the brain also has the capacity to forge new neural connections through processes of synaptogenesis (development of new synapses), neurogenesis (generation of new neurons), and neuronal migration across different processing areas of the brain. Studies have discovered that the brain is in fact highly adaptable in the face of hearing loss. Perception of frequency, for example, is made possible by the vibrations of the basilar membrane that divides the cochlea that stimulate an inner row of hair cells (IHCs) onto which the auditory neurones synapse (see Stainsby & Cross, 2016, pp. 64–65). At the same time the resulting neural excitation pattern is more finely tuned by a second process involving stimulation of the outer rows of hair cells (OHCs). This second process crucially is mediated by the neural responses produced in the first: via the olivocochlear system, the signals from the IHCs impact the movement of the OHCs. This means that the transduction of acoustic energy into neural responses is itself shaped by those neural responses. Moreover, studies in mammals (Qui, Salvi, Ding, & Burkard, 2000) have shown that when the IHCs suffer damage, there is a neuronal gain in the central auditory pathway in order to compensate for the reduced neural activity from the cochlear. Other scholars (Krauss et al., 2016) have theorized that stochastic resonance plays a role in compensatory plasticity in the auditory system, suggesting that adaptation can take place at various stages of the process.

Another possible, more anomalous, adaptation in response to hearing loss is what is known as cross-modal cortical reorganization; this is where areas of the brain responsible for sight or touch, for example, recruit areas of the brain where hearing would usually be processed but which now receive little to no stimulation (Sharma, Campbell, & Cardon, 2014). In cases of sensory deprivation, areas of the primary auditory cortex adapt to assist in visual and language processing. In particular, deafness seems to lead to changes in visual periphery processing, the brain...
apparently compensating for the loss of hearing by increasing its capacity for spatial attention.

There are also marked disparities in response to cochlear implants that reflect the differences in neuroplastic changes between those who become deaf pre-lingually, whose auditory cortex has been more thoroughly reshaped for visual processing, and the post-lingual deaf who exhibit considerably less compensatory adaptation. For those with extensive cross-modal reorganization cochlear implants may be ineffective because the brain has fewer resources available for processing sound even though there is now direct stimulation of the auditory nerve. Advances in the science of neuroplasticity are revolutionizing audiology. Not only is there a greater understanding of the effects of sensory deprivation on the brain but there is also evidence showing that, even during deafness, the auditory system retains its capacity for change and hence remains susceptible to targeted stimulation through auditory training. Recognizing if a patient shows cross-modal reorganization by vision, for instance, can assist doctors in devising optimal rehabilitation strategies.

Neuroplasticity also explains variable performance in those with cochlear implants: it is the individual’s capacity for neural change as much as – perhaps even more than – the technology that affects the capacity to regain hearing. At another level, epigenetics — the branch of biology that studies modifications in gene expression, which is to say, changes that take place under the influence of environment and experience rather than being predetermined by genetic code – continues to gain new insights into the role of epigenetic mechanisms in hearing development, loss, and rehabilitation (see Layman & Zuo, 2014; Provenzano & Domann, 2007).

The role of neuroplasticity in listening shows that, if listening is a relation to the other, as philosophy imagines, then it is always also a matter of relating to itself as other because the self is always in the process of transforming itself. Neurological developments demonstrate that in most neurally typical and many neurally atypical individuals, the auditory system is highly plastic, showing a huge capacity for adaptation and change — that listening is capable of its own modifications, always in the process of metamorphosis. In short, one might say in Agamben’s parlance, that listening is a use of the ear — not a disavowal of its transcendental but an embrace of the mutability of its conditions of possibility. Listening in this way comes up against its own modifiability.

What then would a plastic listening look like — sound like even? At the end of his book *Listen: A history of our ears* (2008), Peter Szendy proposes — clearly in reference to Malabou’s critique of deconstruction, though without citing her name — that we lend our ears to listening’s plasticity. I would like to highlight the defining characteristics of Szendy’s notion of plastic listening before turning to its connection with Nancy’s theory in order to ask whether its fascination with the bodily and sensation offers the possibility of overturning philosophy’s disavowal of biology. One thing is clear: Szendy’s account of plasticity is largely philosophical in tone. There is no reference here to the developments in neuroscience that have captured Malabou’s attention, resulting in a notion that has far more to do with questions of historical transmissibility than with the brain. And yet his notion of plasticity retains a number of salient features from Malabou’s theory. Above all, Szendy’s plastic listening hinges on modification and proliferation in a number of dimensions. In the first instance, Szendy’s plastic listening indicates a historical mutability in the forms of listening. Central to Szendy’s argument is the claim that the musical work does not predetermine the type of listening that it summons. Much as neuroplasticity weans the field of biology off its functional predilections, opening up a path away from the biopolitical, plastic listening is not a function of the work (Szendy, 2008, p. 103). Rather, the work “asks us to hear it plastically, rather than according to one type of listening or another” (Szendy, 2008, pp. 142–143). Using figures from music history and opera characters to model modes of listening, Szendy takes Don Juan as his paradigm for plastic listening. “Thus, before he is a dissolve listener rather than an expert one (before he enters one class or typology or another), Don Juan has been a plastic listener” (Szendy, 2008, p. 143) — that is to say, that he has always been capable of hearing in different ways. In turn, this reveals not simply the plasticity of forms of listening but also the plasticity of the listener who assumes different figures.

The work is at work only insofar as it is, in a Derridean phrase, yet to come — insofar as “it leaves something to be desired” (Szendy, 2008, p. 143). It is for this reason that Szendy aligns plastic listening with the practices of arrangement, especially in its more recent digitalized, hands-on manifestations, that blur the boundary between composer and listener, between authorship, performance, and reception. These practices cut, move, recombine, and operate anew on the musical work. It is the specifically digital dimension of recent practices that resonates with Szendy’s conception of the plastic. Indebted here both to Derrida’s grammatology as a science of writing and Nancy’s attention to touching, Szendy describes plastic listening as a process of manual inscription.

The DJ’s inscriptions, their track-marks, are operators. In what Adorno called the “fine undulations” of the grooves on a disk, on the very surface of this mysterious tracing “which here and there forms more plastic figures,” they engrave instructions… They inscribe signs, like us summoning music from our fingertips, with words. Their manipulating the disks resembles ours touching the keys of a keyboard. It resembles the hand that Adorno described in a wonderful little text entitled “Worte ohne Lieder”: “The hand that strikes keys in the material,” he said “chisels”; and, after that, these words that “are formed plastically” are no longer read, “they let themselves be fingered again.” (Szendy, 2008, p. 136)
In this way, Szendy excavates a Malabouian concept of plastic from Adorno (via a reading of Roland Barthes’s writerly listening) – demonstrating the historical plasticity of plasticity itself. Szendy’s account foregrounds the sculptural and manual qualities of plasticity – its capacity to mould form – while at the same time privileging the figure of the grapheme – a capacity to inscribe. And yet Szendy’s concept has a distinctly Nancean expression when he argues that listening is “above all . . . a matter of touching” (2008, p. 137). This provocative confusion of one sense for another – a kind of neuroplastic cross-modal reorganization – has its origins in Nancy’s reflections on listening as its relation to the other senses. For Nancy, listening is not simply one sense among a set of discrete senses. In his definition, listening consists, like sound itself, in a metaphorical resonance – that is, in an echo that, like the referral between signifier and signified, doesn’t quite return to itself but continues to space itself out. Resonance in its spacing out is not unique to aurality, but is rather paradigmatic for all sensation. However, Nancy tends towards elevating listening-as-resonance into a quasi-transcendental of sensation, arguing that, while nothing that can be said of listening cannot also be said of the other senses, but listening is distinct in being “nothing but” this resonance.

The result is that aurality’s resonance is a basis for all sensation (it unites all the senses) and at the same time its spacing is what separates sensation out into a spectrum of sensory modalities, meaning each sense differs not only from the others but also from itself. To say that listening is plastic is to observe how it is never self-identical but always differs from itself and thus assumes many diverse forms. By placing spatiality at the heart of aurality, Nancy, and Szendy following him, show the intimacy between touch and listening: they both consist in a spacing out that brings an element into contact with one another while at the same time separating them. At the heart, then, of Szendy’s conception of plasticity is a deconstructive notion of touch as spacing, of con-tact – that is, of being with, of intimacy, while also being tactful, which is to say finding the appropriate touch and being careful not to touch too much.

Writing the ear

The issue that concerns us here is whether this privileging of difference-as-spacing also continues to privilege a separation of biology and philosophy – a splitting into two ears just as sovereignty divides into two bodies. I would like to approach this issue from three interrelated angles: (1) a residual tendency to bifurcate listening into two opposed types (e.g., structural and distracted); (2) the appearance of plasticity under the guise of listening’s self-reflexivity; and (3) the centrality of inscription in Szendy’s account given that Malabou offers plasticity as an alternative to Derridean grammatology. In each case, comparison with Nancy’s theory of listening is instructive.

Szendy’s Listen can be understood from one perspective as another attempt to overturn the privilege of structural listening and the priority of the autonomous work in musical aesthetics since early German Romanticism. As Brian Kane’s review (2008) illustrates, reducing Szendy’s contribution to another round of the Adorno–Benjamin debate or another attack on organicism overlooks its novelty. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the way in which binary oppositions structure Szendy’s thought on the way towards the theory of listening’s plasticity. Szendy begins his critique from the dualisms between a structural listening that is attentive, functional, expert, and attempts to render the work transparent (Szendy, 2008, p. 127) and a listening that is variously describes as “distracted”, “lacunary”, “wavering”, and even as deafness (pp. 103–105). Does this mean that Szendy’s plastic listening perpetuates the divisions of sovereignty by deciding between an ordinary haphazard way of listening and a more attentive form of listening that transcends its material conditions in an effort to make sense of what is heard? At first blush, this seems like a trace of the bifurcation that Nancy makes between hearing for sense and listening to resonance (2007).

But – and this is what Kane is quick to overlook – Szendy, like any good scholar of deconstruction, demonstrates the mutual contamination of these two poles of listening: “isn’t a certain distraction a condition that is just as necessary for an active listening, as total, structural, and functional listening is?” (Szendy, 2008, p. 128). The effort of Nancy’s thought likewise goes towards showing that there is always something other than hearing in hearing. That supplement is in fact what makes entendre as sense-making possible: the resonant spacing out and referral that allows for the dance of signifier and signified. And this is exactly what Nancy means by listening. It is not something that is entirely outside or other than hearing. Nancy (e.g., 2008) has painstakingly developed a notion of sense precisely designed to deconstruct opposition between body and spirit, between signification and sensation. Rather, what he calls sense is their immanent condition of possibility or the disavowed transcendental whose withdrawal opens up the division and spaces them out in the first place. Szendy adopts this deconstructive logic.

Elsewhere (Szendy, 2016) he argues that any attempt at total listening will come up against a deaf point (rather like a blind spot) in the field of listening. As he comments in the preface to the English translation of All ears, he conceives of this moment of deafness as the condition of (im)possibility or the “quasi-transcendental” of listening (Szendy, 2016, p. xi) – a term used by Derrida to indicate a term that is not entirely excluded (like the classic Kantian transcendental) but which belongs to the series of terms while also distinguishing itself insofar as it is also the condition of possibility for the series (see also Waltham-Smith, 2016). Szendy’s comments here betray some anxiety about the persistence of Kantianism in this figure of impossibility (“I would perhaps today no longer say this using the same
vocabulary” [Szendy, 2016, p. xi]). Certainly, for thinkers such as Malabou and Agamben, this residue of the transcendental is highly problematic for a materialist critique of sovereignty – it perpetuates a minimal exclusion or transcendence. As I have described above, post-Heideggerian thought has often figured philosophy’s own sovereignty as a form of listening. From Agamben’s standpoint, the mutual imbrication and indistinction of inside and outside (inside the series yet also stepping outside of it) shows the limits of the deconstruction of sovereignty: the quasi-transcendental brings to light the structure of the transcendental but without deactivating it. Malabou (2015) likewise has argued that deconstruction is loath to relinquish the transcendental and instead ends up maintaining the (if only minimal) irreducibility of the supplement or exemplary term to the others in the series.

Plastic listening can be thought of as a transcendental of listening in two ways. In the first, plastic listening may be a disavowed transcendental on the Kantian model (excluded so that it might be wholly reabsorbed in Hegelian fashion) whose exclusion opens up the space between various dualisms of aurality (listening and hearing, structural and distracted listening). Or, in a second interpretation, plastic listening may be aligned with one of the terms in the series, thereby deconstructing the opposition between inside and outside: distracted listening, on this reading, in its tendency to proliferate, reform, and recompose, would exemplify and thereby ground listening’s plasticity. This, I think, is the model that Szendy is proposing. And this brings me to the point about self-reflexivity that I want to touch upon briefly. Like Nancy, Szendy has recourse to a reflexive figure in which listening listens to itself listening. At first glance, this could seem suspiciously like a self-grounding sovereignty – the idea that philosophy constitutes itself in relation to its own condition of possibility, founding itself sovereignly by giving itself to itself. Closer inspection suggests, however, that Szendy’s plastic listening points more in the direction of sharing and community than it does towards autonomy and narcissism. To listen to my own listening I would have to stop listening. My listening thus always summons the listening of another who is able to overhear my listening. Accordingly, arrangements are ways in which I can make my listening heard. Listening is a desire for someone else to listen to me. In this struggle to evade the sovereign logic of the transcendental, Szendy leads us into an infinite regress of listening – its infinite proliferation and modification, “always one more” (2008, p. 143).

Where is biology amid all these philosophical aporias? Where are our flesh-and-blood ears in this chain of ears that touch like fingertips and reinscribe these listenings? Isn’t the philosophy of listening in all this infinite regress simply becoming self-obsessed if not entirely self-possessed? Malabou (2007) conceives of plasticity as the “end of writing”, so Szendy’s adherence to figures of writing may seem surprising. I suggest, however, that it might be read as a kind of resistance to Malabou or even a resistance imminent to the concept of plasticity itself – precisely the kind of resistance to form-taking and that Malabou herself sees as a defining characteristic of plasticity as opposed to elasticity’s bouncing back. Is it then possible to see in the persistence of writing a plasticity of plasticity – its own stubbornness to change that is its condition of impossibility? And where does that leave biology? That is the stubborn question that thus far stubbornly resists an answer.

If writing is on the side of the symbolic and biology on the side of (neuro)plasticity, Malabou’s proximity to deconstruction (touching but not quite touching) means that she must make a fine distinction between Derridean grammatology and her own theory of plasticity. She argues that writing always has a non-grammatological supplement but is at the same time eager to distinguish this idea of supplement from Derrida’s. Both are theories of difference and of differentiation. For Derrida, différence means both a deferral or detour and not being identical, being other. But Derrida neglects a commonplace sense of différence as variation or change. This is what Malabou is getting at with the notion of plasticity: différence as a capacity for material to transform itself. Derrida refers to a plurivocity of writing and yet this modification must stop at writing. If Derrida defines writing as a supplement, writing must surely also have its own (biological) supplement. Hence Malabou argues that there must be an end of writing – a metamorphosis of writing into something else – otherwise writing would end up remaining irremediably identical to yourself. “This nongraphic supplement does not introduce a logocentric residue, but it marks the difference of the grammatical instance from itself, which is also its end” (Malabou, 2007, p. 439). And, in turn, if writing’s supplemental character means that it must come to an end, so too is plasticity not a definitive terminus, but something waiting to be changed in a new direction. To remain within the horizon of grammatology, though, is to continue to think of a temporal or spatial gap, a minimal spacing between philosophy and its outside, to think of listening as a gap, as dislocation.

The issue, then, is whether Szendy’s appropriation of plasticity leads in the direction of an infinite chain of eavesdropping, perpetuating the transcendence of listening over itself – is there here a temporal and spatial deferral of biology? – or whether listening can truly be plastic while also remaining a form of writing. It may well be that it is precisely the refusal to decide between writing and plasticity that at once deconstructs the persistent opposition of symbolic and biological. Plasticity is, after all, the condition of possibility of writing. And it is not set apart from writing; rather, it is a part of writing. Forcibly moulding this discussion back towards the theme of biology, it is not that the body is not a passive recipient of its inscription but that the body is what makes inscription possible. It is because writing is always already corporeal – bodily to the letter – that its sense extends signification outside of itself.
Exscription thus deconstructs the opposition of the symbolic and the biological. Writing, Nancy claims, is itself always swerving away from signification towards its own limit, towards the body in a movement that he calls “exscription”, an inscribing outside (Nancy, 2008, p. 71).

It will be necessary, then, to develop Szendy’s notion of a plastic listening beyond the inscription of grooves on vinyl, beyond the marks and signs on the body. A body is not “where we write, nor is a body what we write—but a body is always what writing excrribes”; “that we write is, no doubt, the body” (Nancy, 2008, p. 87). Nancy thus cautions us against allowing philosophy to subject the body to the law of signification, to turn it into the incarnation of sense. In this model, bodies become the exterior referents to sense as an untouchable interiority that transcends materiality. So, one must also take great pains not to turn philosophy into an incarnation of the ear or listening into an incarnation of philosophy, for “incarnation is structured like a disembodiment” (Nancy, 2008, p. 69). If the body is only a body when it is the body of a spirit, then it is always minimally disembodied. In both cases, there is a constant oscillation between inside and outside, between body and spirit, philosophy and biology, one always transcending the other.

Malabou’s radical proposal for doing away with the idealization of the material is to make biology the transcendent. Biological life, she contends, “is what modifies the transcendental, what relinquishes it by forcing it to transform itself... become plastic” (Malabou, 2014b, p. 253). A bodily metaphorics of listening is insufficient. A truly material philosophy of listening, therefore, can only transform itself reducible to the biology of our ears in all their escape the transcendental’s logic of irreducibility by making itself reducible to the biology of our ears in all their plasticity. Philosophy must coincide with science.

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