

## Listening as Agon in the Society of Control

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Before we move too quickly to discuss “the politics of listening”, I would like to offer some philosophical caveats aimed at reconfiguring the ontological field in which we understand “listening” and “the political”. The question of listening seems to me to be fundamentally a question of interpretation, in the expanded sense in which Nietzsche uses the term. For Nietzsche, “to interpret” is to be confronted with a flow (of words, sounds, images, information, whatever) and to filter it in some way according to some set of interests or constraints. “The essence of interpreting”, he writes, is “forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, padding, inventing, falsifying”, and so on.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is what the scholar does when she selects a particular passage, reads it in a particular way, and makes it serve a particular purpose within her argument. But it is also what the body does when it ingests food, extracts from it the nutrients it needs, and eliminates the rest; and it is what takes place when molecular bonds are broken and reconfigured in a chemical reaction. For Nietzsche, then, interpretation accounts for “all events in the organic world”, and beyond. He goes on to remark that, in this broad sense, interpretation is the essence of “the will to power”, and that will to power is the very principle of change in the world.<sup>2</sup> In this model, then, listening is interpretation, which is necessarily political insofar as it involves a constant struggle and negotiation among entities.

But why return to Nietzsche for an analysis of listening—especially listening today in the age of big data and surveillance capitalism? I do so for two reasons: first, to remind us that our current situation is not as novel as we sometimes take it to be; and, second, to make a broader point about what listening is and what a politics of listening might be. Let me take up the second of these points. Nietzsche’s polemically broad conception of interpretation contests the special status of human beings and of human interpretation, asserting that all entities (human, animal, vegetable, mineral, mechanical, etc) are engaged in this battle of interpretations. This is relevant to our consideration of both listening and politics. In the announcement for this symposium, the organisers quote a passage by sound artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan, who writes: “Listening is not a natural process inherent to our perception of the world but rather [is] constructed by the conditions of the spaces and times that engulf us.”<sup>3</sup> Now, I am very fond of Abu Hamdan’s work, which, I think, is smart, subtle, and richly manifests the role of sound in social struggles. But I want to contest a key presupposition in his claim about listening. Implicit in the passage is an opposition between “hearing” and “listening”, the former conceived as merely natural, animal, and passive, the latter as properly cultural, human, and active.<sup>4</sup> This distinction is problematically humanist, taking human intentionality to be fundamentally different and distinct from the receptive capacities of other beings. And it is metaphysically problematic, insofar as it affirms age-old but dubious oppositions between nature and culture, sensation and thought, passivity and activity, instinct and reflection, the animal and the human, the material and the spiritual, the inanimate and the animate, and so on.

The distinction between hearing and listening is not only ontologically problematic; it also misleads us about the politics of

listening. If we take listening to be “socially constructed” rather than “natural”, we project a second world of culture on top of nature or the real; this allows us to ignore Nietzsche’s point that every entity in the world is fundamentally interpretive—that nature is already interpretive, and hence political, insofar as interpretation is “will to power”. The notion of social construction and the elevation of listening above hearing places agency only at the level of the human and suggests that technologies of listening are inert and passive. Yet, as AJ Hudspeth nicely shows, the human apparatus of listening is far more passive and habitual than we take it to be, and mechanical *apparati* of listening are far more active and “interpretive” than we take them to be.<sup>5</sup> A fully materialist conception of listening would level the ontological field, rejecting the ancient metaphysical hierarchy that elevates the human above the animal, the inanimate, and the mechanical, and would reconceive listening in terms of capturing (and being captured by) flows of sound rather than in terms of some uniquely human intentionality. Indeed, it would turn the discussion away from human intentions and turn it toward the complex material conditions and *apparati* that determine what is captured, how, and why.

Let me bring this back to the discussion of listening in the age of surveillance. What Seeta Peña Gangadharan and Shoshana Zuboff call “surveillance capitalism” is what, 25 years earlier, Gilles Deleuze proposed to call “control society”. In a brief but remarkably prescient text from 1990, Deleuze notes that we are moving from what his friend Michel Foucault called “disciplinary societies” toward a new organisation of power that Deleuze termed “societies of control”.<sup>6</sup> The “disciplinary societies” that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were fundamentally concerned with social regulation through the visual surveillance of bodies and operated through spaces of confinement such as the school, the army, the factory, the hospital, the

asylum, and the prison.<sup>7</sup> But in the “societies of control” in which we now live, argued Deleuze, power is exercised differently. Instead of confining bodies to institutions, “control societies” are decentralised and flexible, involving “ultra-rapid forms of apparently free-floating control” that encourage the mobility of bodies while carefully tracking their movements, charting the nodal points in the networks through which they pass.<sup>8</sup> In short, control societies are post-Fordist societies characterised by precarious and immaterial labour, information, social media, e-commerce, data mining, and so forth. The form of surveillance that characterises societies of control is not the visual surveillance of bodies but the statistical accumulation, linking, and parsing of data that transforms individuals into “dividuals”, identities reduced to packets of information that generate social, economic, and military profiles.

Deleuze’s notion of “control societies” derives from the writer and sonic experimentalist William S Burroughs, who, in the 1960s and 1970s, developed a conception of control that seemed paranoid at the time but has turned out to be strikingly accurate.<sup>9</sup> Alongside this notion of control, Burroughs developed a rigorous conception of listening as a political practice. Instead of asserting the value of human intentionality and insisting that we wrest control from machines, Burroughs argues that everything is fundamentally a machine. The mind or the brain, for example, is a recording apparatus—a “soft machine”, as Burroughs called it: an archive of received opinion, prejudice, ideology, gossip, instinct, physical habit, conceptual furrows cut by grammar and logic, and mental patterns of association. This is made apparent to us by another machine, the tape recorder. In an experimental text titled “The Invisible Generation”, Burroughs writes:

[A] tape recorder is an externalized section of the human nervous system...

you can find out more about the nervous system and gain more control over your reactions by using the tape recorder than you could find out sitting twenty years in the lotus posture or wasting your time on the analytic couch... listen to your present time tapes and you will begin to see who you are and what you are doing here... study your associational patterns and find out what cases in what pre-recordings for playback.<sup>10</sup>

We must become attentive to the mechanisms of control, Burroughs insists; and this requires that we make manifest its codes, defaults, and memes. For Burroughs, this was primarily a practice of listening, of careful attention to the word as it is registered and looped back through "pre-recordings" that infect and replicate in our cognition and imagination in the form of speech patterns, cognitive habits, and earworms. More broadly, Deleuze suggests, it means becoming attentive to the ways that our bodies, capacities, attentions, and desires are solicited, routed, and routinised. Awareness of these control mechanisms enables new forms of resistance. To this end, Burroughs devised a host of procedures to manipulate and alter audio recordings as a way to scramble the viral code, "isolate and cut association lines of the control machine", and generate liberatory juxtapositions, texts, sounds, and ideas.<sup>11</sup>

In this Burroughsian, Deleuzian, and Nietzschean sense, then, the politics of listening is a battle of interpretations, an *agon*. Within this agonistic space, everything listens, everything interprets. And in this battle, our machines are neither simply our tools nor entities that dominate us but participants in this struggle that have their own means and ways of listening and interpreting. If we reconceive ourselves as recording machines, as tape recorders, we might become more attentive to the mechanisms of control that we are and to experiment with ways to subvert or resist this control in alliance with machines and other non-human entities that exist with us on the same ontological plane.

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale trans, New York: Vintage, 1989, 3: 24, p 151.
2. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 2:12, p 77. For a more detailed discussion of this expanded conception of interpretation as will to power, see Cox, Christoph, *Nietzsche: Naturalism and Interpretation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, chapters 3 and 4.
3. Lawrence Abu Hamdan, notes on the project *Tape Echo*, 2013, <http://lawrenceabuhamdan.com/#/tapeecho/>, cited in <http://www.veralistcenter.org/engage/event/1951/what-now-the-politics-of-listening/>
4. For a text that develops this distinction, see Barthes, Roland, "Listening", *The Responsibility of Forms*, Richard Howard trans, New York: Hill and Wang, 1985, pp 245–260.
5. Hudspeth, AJ, "A Scientific Definition of Listening", paper presented at the 2015 symposium What Now? The Politics of Listening, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, The New School, New York City, 24 April, 2015.
6. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies", *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, Martin Joughin trans, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp 177–182. See also "Control and Becoming", a discussion between Deleuze and Antonio Negri from the same year, in the same volume. Deleuze first made the distinction between discipline and control two years earlier, in a 1988 text on Foucault called "What is a Dispositif?" in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, David Lapoujade ed, Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina trans, New York: Semiotext[e], 2006, pp 345–346.
7. See Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan trans, New York: Vintage, 1977.
8. Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies", p 178.
9. This notion is developed in the cut-up novels *The Soft Machine*, 1961/1968, *The Ticket that Exploded*, 1962/1967, and *Nova Express*, 1964, and developed in essays such as "The Invisible Generation", 1966, "Electronic Revolution", 1970–1971, and "The Limits of Control", 1975, all reprinted in *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*, James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg eds, New York: Grove Press, 1998. See also Burroughs, William S, and Bryon Gysin, *The Third Mind*, New York: Viking, 1978.
10. Burroughs, William S, "The Invisible Generation", p 222.
11. Burroughs, "The Invisible Generation", p 224. Many of these experiments can be found on *The Best of William Burroughs* from Giorno Poetry Systems, Mouth Almighty Records, 1998, Disc 4, and *Break Through in Grey Room*, Sub Rosa SR08, 2001.