Society, Culture and the Auditory Imagination in Modern France

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The Humanity of Hearing

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Preface

Tracing a history of hearing is not straightforward. It requires that we consider not simply the sounds or sonic fields of the past but the broader imaginative models that hearing encompassed at that particular time and place. Throughout French modern history, hearing was a fundamental part of the way in which humans thought about themselves and those around them. Embedded within its meaning was not simply the activation of a specific physiological human “sense” but a specific stance or posture that caused the redefinition and reshaping of social, political and cultural boundaries and their spaces. Hearing, from this perspective, went well beyond auditory languages and landscapes of information to encompass those discourses and spheres emphasizing critical forms of social and political care and protection: the courtroom, the hospital and the disabled schoolroom. Hearing might involve hearing actual sounds in these places, but it was not ultimately dependent on them. Rather, hearing in these sites primarily occurred through the positive activation of the human imagination.

Implicit in the imaginative hearing model was a paradox – a crisis, perhaps – that positioned the individual at the crossroads of their own individual sense of self and the collective social sphere. How can we exist as ourselves whilst coexisting with others at the same time? Yet hearing offered powerful resources in resolving this paradox. To hear was to confront the fragile edges of the self and in turn free one from oneself to forge a positive relationship with others. It is easy to overlook such a radical self/subject framework. Indeed, as we rely increasingly on subjective experience, abstract pools of information and the visual field, hearing, aside from acting as a basic mode of cognition, appears almost obsolete. Yet in recent public and scholarly discourse, particularly in the medical and public health field, consideration for hearing and listening in this more deep, holistic sense is gaining ground. Doctors are now asked, for example, to listen more carefully to patients. Alternative medicine is gaining mainstream recognition. Modern medical practice involves not only thinking about a patient’s problem but also imagining how they might feel and acting appropriately. There is an increasing sense that, without evidence of a sophisticated hearing stance, the modern medical industry cannot purport to care for people or understand their needs.

This book brings the historical narrative of this hearing stance into greater focus. It reveals that hearing in France played a formative role in shaping modern society as we know it today. Significantly, the book focuses a great deal on the role of medicine within this process. Just like medical practitioners today, those in French modern history were concerned with how they were hearing their patients. The collision of medical otology and French philosophy during the Enlightenment initially forced hearing as an empathetic social practice into the public domain. Prior to the revolution, the French élite again consolidated hearing's presence at the forefront of social change by envisaging radical spaces of hearing, such as the medical clinic, the courtroom and the modern hospital. They reinforced the broader political message that the people must be heard. During the post-revolutionary period, the body, as a whole, took on a hearing stance. The auditory body was a dynamic hearing posture in which the individual self could attach itself to a collective form of state care. Technologies became increasingly important in this listening act, fixing the individual listener to his/her own intimate communicative framework.

To study such a history of hearing is not to undermine the significance of music, art or science, disciplines which intersect with hearing in important ways. Rather, it is to reinterpret and highlight these disciplines and their languages as key tools in contributing to a more powerful social metalanguage that had the capacity to create change entirely on its own. Significantly, medical and judicial institutions, where techniques and practices of hearing were most evident, became central in channelling and shaping this agenda. In the clinic, pulse theories reinvented musical idioms in order to connect patient to doctor. Industrial materials fashioned linguistic devices so that the blind could hear messages of belonging in their own institutional spaces. The modern hospital and the small claims courtroom emerged as one of the most sensitive listening sites. This was where the cry of "humanity" was loudest and most intense.

This book does not chart a straightforward chronological history. It suggests through a variety of case studies the ways in which hearing might have shaped modern French society from the Enlightenment to the modern industrial age at its deepest level. Hearing becomes an open and closed mode of topographical analysis, an anthropological tool for uncovering relational patterns which became set in the landscape to form our modern, social settings. Such a process of activity, like hearing itself, was inherently dynamic. Shifting voices created shifting spaces which might succeed or fail. The French Revolution can be interpreted

as a heightened point of intensity in society's hearing flow. It represents the fragile point in the hearing process where perceptual gambling had to begin. The crisis of the "false noise" consumed the entire social and political setting for a considerable period of time until the hearing process could resume and the social setting stabilize. Hearing as a positive practice in constructing human relationships has continued to feature as a key defining cultural, political and social force within the modern world.

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