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To the Boundary
of the Known
World: Acousmatic
Listening and
Imagination in
Derek Jarman's *Blue*

abstract This article argues that
ACOUSMATIC LISTENING may enkindle
imaginative modes which gesture
towards potentiality: what might be.
Departing from Pierre Schaeffer's

conceptualization of acousmatic sound as autonomous sound object or ideal objectivity, it emphasizes the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of this modality of listening. It follows sound scholar Brian Kane's theory of ACOUSMATICITY: the underdetermination of material source and causal event by sonic effect. One audio-visual artwork —Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993)—is analyzed as calling for a practice of acousmatic listening which includes the perception of unseen sounds and the imaginative production of sonic bodies. The article proposes that *Blue* has many different degrees of acousmaticsity. Such richness of acousmaticsity allows the piece to invoke a POETICS OF PROXIMITY: an (im)possible touch of incommensurable events, spaces, and temporalities, through and as sound. *Blue*'s acousmatic sounds, voices, and

I watch and listen to English artist Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), an audio-visual piece comprised of a seventy-six minute projection of a blue screen overlaid with a sound collage of Jarman's experiences related to living—or dying—with AIDS. While the optic plane stubbornly remains a deep ultramarine blue, the sonic world layers noises, voices, silences, sounds, and music, so as to sculpt an unpredictable aural universe which demands acts of imagination from the listener. *Blue* activates the perceptual and imaginative modes of experience by separating eye and ear, by never visualizing what the ear hears. Jarman's audiovisual artwork requires a practice of ACOUSMATIC LISTENING; the sources and causes of perceived sounds remaining unseen, the listener is invited to imaginatively complete what the ear could only suggest.

Failure

The screen fails right in front of my eyes, on purpose. *Blue*'s blue screen references nothing but its own failure to make something visible within its frame. To be sure, from a strict phenomenological point of view, I see a framed blue light which, indeed, is a visible image. Film scholar and philosopher Vivian Sobchack summarizes this point very well: “watching *Blue*, we are not looking at a non-image, at ‘nothing’; rather, and more precisely, we are looking at an image of ‘no “thing”” (197). But, despite the bluntness of the blue optic plane, the screen deliberately fails. And,

by doing so, it interrupts the reign of the eye over other sensory registers.

The screen fails by emptying out the frame, fully and exclusively becoming blue ether. Paradoxically, such depletion of the frame also saturates it: chromatic fullness impregnates my eyes. Did I see a greenish tonality? A yellowish one? They appear and disappear, untraceable; tones are born in the organ of sight. Are these subtle color changes a trick played by my perceptual apparatus? The enduring intensity of the blue light affects my eyes. My entire body is enmeshed, embraced by color, by changing color.

The screen fails to objectify and to represent a world consistent with human understanding and to human need. It fails as a cultural practice that represents and explains through representing. It fails to reproduce an image that makes the world an object for consumption. *Blue* disturbs the technologies — cultural and social practices — that standardize the image as an image-*of*, that which makes evident what manifests and displays for the eye.

The screen fails because by doing so it can become an arena for an event — an event that structures a virtual time and a virtual space: time freed from the arrangements of chronological linearity; space as moving color.

The screen fails to disclose the sources and causes of the fleeting sounds which accompany it. The screen is independent of sound, and in return,

sound is emancipated from the projected screen. As a result of this rupture, a practice of acousmatic listening begins.

Imagination

Conventionally, ACOUSMATIC describes sounds whose source remains unseen. Acousmatic: audible but invisible. Understood in this way, the acousmatic experience of sound often materializes in everyday life — when one listens to a podcast, music on a computer, or the radio, for instance. Modern audio technology, with its capacity to record, store, and reproduce sound, creates more and more acousmatic situations, which then become normalized in daily life.

However, the origin of acousmatic listening predates the birth and development of modern forms of audio technology by millennia. The acousmatic setting has a much older genesis — as ancient as the school of Pythagoras. Etymologically, the term refers to a sect of Pythagorean disciples, “the *akousmatikoi* — literally the ‘listeners’ or ‘auditors’ — who, as the legend has it, heard the philosopher lecture from behind a curtain or veil” (Kane 4). In this context, the veil functioned as a pedagogical tool that aimed to draw attention toward the meaning of Pythagoras’s discourse by drawing attention away from his physical appearance. In other words, the cognitive dimension of experience was modulated by separating eye and ear.

The word was taken up again in the twentieth century by French composer Pierre Schaeffer, who gave a canonical account of acousmatic sound in his *Traité des objets musicaux* (1966). The basic tenet of the Schaefferian tradition is that the acousmatic situation is favorable for a reduced mode of listening (*l'écoute réduite*) — a mode of attending aesthetically to sounds by disregarding their worldly sources and causes. Put differently, reduced listening isolates the ear so as to provide PURE AUDITION (Kane 148), understood as a modality of experiencing sound without visual interference and without contextual meaning. Schaeffer writes: “Often surprised, often uncertain, we discover that much of what we thought we were hearing was in reality only seen, and explained, by the context” (91). This realization points to the ways in which the experience of hearing itself is affected, shaped, and interpreted by the preeminence of vision at the expense of the other senses, as well as by the operations of symbolic meaning. In order to get to the ‘essence’ of sound, Schaeffer aims to reduce sounds to the sphere of hearing alone: sound without visual attachments, sound without external significations — sound for and by itself. This aesthetic orientation draws an *ontological* line that separates sounds from physical sources and causes.

Yet the acousmatic situation by itself does not banish indexical listening, for a listener can still ascertain the physical source and/or causal event of

a perceived sound, even when she is deprived of the visual means to fully identify the sonic origins. As I type these words, I hear my dog sneeze. I do not see her perform the action for she is outside my field of vision. However, I do not experience this canine sternutation as an autonomous aesthetic object with no worldly ties. I can easily determine that the *ACHOO!* is a product of my dog's nasal mucosa being irritated by some foreign particle which caused her to expel air through her nose. In short, the *ACHOO!*, viz., the sonic effect, can be quickly reunited with its source and cause: a barking mammal who happens to be sneezing in that particular moment.

But what happens when the determination of the source and cause becomes difficult, if not impossible, and the listener cannot simply ontologically sever what she hears from that which may have caused the sound? In other words, what does the experience of acousmatic sound entail when a sonic effect cannot be linked to, nor detached from, physical sources and causal events? What is at work when the listener senses the *trace* of an unknown sonic source that cannot be expunged from the auditory experience?

Philosopher and sound scholar Brian Kane posits in his book *Sound Unseen* a model in which acousmatic sound can be understood in terms of “the *spacing* of source, cause, and effect, without simply permitting their separation” (149). Drawing his theory from unorthodox sources such as Franz

Kafka's tale *The Burrow* and Jacques Derrida's account of ESPACEMENT, Kane contends that "acousmatic sound is neither entity nor sound object nor effect nor source nor cause. It flickers into being only with spacing, with the simultaneous difference and relation of auditory effect, cause and source" (260). Put another way, a sound *is* acousmatic when it is haunted by the shadow of its enigmatic source and cause, "a shadow it cannot escape because without it, the acousmaticity of a sound simply dissipates" (148). Kane's theory assesses the division between the visual and the aural as a kind of sensory substrate in which the acousmatic situation is grounded. But that which determines this experiential mode is what he terms ACOUSMATICITY, the extent or degree to which a sound's source or cause can be determined. This theorization of the acousmatic situation emphasizes the *cognitive* and *epistemological* dimensions of listening: what does the mind do when it attempts to apprehend the world it inhabits by listening to that world's undeterminable sounds?

Crucial to Kane's theory is the "imaginative projection" which the acousmatic situation elicits (8). Kane writes: "one central, replicated feature of acousmatic listening appears to be that underdetermination of the sonic source encourages imaginative supplementation" (9). For how long can a listener survive the uncertainty provoked by a sourceless sound? Scholar of the senses Steve Connor remarks that "human beings in many different cultural settings find the experience of

a sourceless sound uncomfortable, and the experience of a sourceless voice intolerable” (35). Such discomfort provokes the projection of what Connor calls the “vocalic body,” that is, “the idea — which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine or hallucination — of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice” (35). The listener provides an imaginary body, a body-in-invention, to the autonomous voice. Kane expands Connor’s theory to encompass not just the voice but acousmatic sound in general: “acousmatic sounds encourage the imaginative production of a *sonic body*” (8).

Blue’s sonic world envelops the listener, who in her powerlessness to visualize the sources and causes of the enigmatic sonic events, can only attempt to compensate the indeterminate force of the sounds by imagining the (im)possible world that seems to be lost, so to speak, in the blue ether of the screen. *Blue* forces me to operate in a subjunctive mode in which I can only imaginatively weave potential universes. Even though the relation of sound to image remains identical throughout its duration, Jarman’s audio-visual piece has many different degrees of acousmaticity. That is to say, regardless of the blue screen’s refusal to make anything visible to the eye but its own blueness — in spite of the screen covering *all* material sources of *all* heard sounds — some of *Blue*’s

sounds have a greater spacing of source, cause, and effect than others.

It is precisely such richness of acousmaticity in *Blue*'s sonic universe that allows Jarman to thread what I want to call a POETICS OF PROXIMITY. Layered sonic materials bring into contact remote spaces, as well as discontinuous blocks of time which fold the chronological continuum. Yet Jarman's aesthetics admit its own limitations, for the (im)possible nearness it attempts to entwine *through* and *as* sound can only be that: an impossible touch that fades away as soon as the sounds die. To illustrate, at the beginning of the piece, a speaker utters:

I am sitting with some friends in this
café drinking coffee served by young
refugees from Bosnia.

The war rages across the newspapers
and through the ruined streets of
Sarajevo.

Tania said your clothes are on back
to front and inside out. Since there
were only two of us there I took them
off and put them right then and there.
I am always here before the doors
open.

TO THE BOUNDARY OF THE KNOWN WORLD

What need of so much news from
abroad while all that concerns either
life or death is all transacting and at
work within me.

The sourceless voice is layered by a multiplicity of sounds. As soon as the 'café' is mentioned, familiar sounds, whose source can be (hypothetically) traced back to a coffee shop, verify the situation just described. In other words, even though the café cannot be seen, it can be heard, as tiny coffee spoons touch white porcelain plates, and as a cacophony of voices reverberate in the background. But, how do I know these details? How do I *actually* know that the metallic spoons touch the china plates? I don't. Yet I supply these sonic bodies; I imaginatively project these containers for the particular environment I do not have visual access to. Now, as soon as the 'Bosnian refugees' are mentioned, a rather strange, unfamiliar sound resonates. It could be the sound of an explosion. It could be the sound of thunder. Once the detonation-like sound fades away, the voice speaks about the war in Bosnia, while the sounds that belong to the coffee shop regain their presence.

What is that indeterminable sound? Is it an attempt to materialize through and as sound the invisible trauma that is engraved in the bodies displaced by the internecine conflict in the Balkans? Is this a gesture to give sonority to that which is silently imprinted in the

exiled bodies who now serve coffee somewhere else? Is it an effort to give Sarajevo a voice? Philosopher Don Ihde tells us that “we may miss the voices of things because they are often, left by themselves, mute or *silent*” (190). Is Jarman trying to give an active voice to that which I cannot hear? How would the virus that destroyed Jarman’s body have sounded?

The sound ecology that sculpts this episode layers sonic materials so as to knit a poetics of proximity that brings together discontinuous spaces and events: Sarajevo, Jarman’s failing body— “all that concerns either life or death is all transacting and at work within me”. Furthermore, if we take the voice of the bodiless and faceless speaker to be a sort of container through which the other sounds circulate, then the explosion-like sound is taking place *within* this VOICE-BODY. In other words, death is indeed circulating and transacting within the vocalic body in my own present; this event (re)occurs every time I listen to the piece. The temporal distance between Jarman’s (past) time and my own time is reduced. We both meet in a complex temporality that gathers all temporalities at once.

The sound’s high degree of acousmaticity enkindles a type of imaginative supplementation that allows me to move through a series of hypotheses which tie together incommensurable events, sites, and temporalities. Such binding of disparate happenings by way of acousmatic sound activating imaginative production can be considered an instance

of Foucauldian HETEROTOPIAS. Foucault writes of these counter-sites that they are “enacted utopias that juxtapose several places that are foreign to one another in one single site” (22, 27). By providing sonic bodies to Sarajevo, the café, and the bodiless voice — as well as by looking at the smooth space of the screen — I occupy a virtual space which connects sites that are “simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (9). Certainly, the mentioning of the Bosnian refugees and of Sarajevo has acted like a magnet that attracts the sound to its own field of signification. Therefore, language does exert an influence in the way I treat the peculiar acousmatic sound. But, once again, since I cannot fully ascertain the causal context of this mysterious sound, given its high degree of acousmaticity, I cannot completely determine this sound as *belonging* to Sarajevo. In other words, the sound is inhabited by an uncertainty that cannot be entirely resolved. Furthermore, given the fragmented narrative that accompanies the acousmatic sounds, *Blue’s* labyrinthine world is one in which I, as a listener, cannot wholly know the extent to which sounds are faithful to the sources that language suggests.

Jarman’s writing is not tied down to representation. It produces what is not already recognizable; it is a language becoming sound that is open to mutation. In some cases, language names an absence which requires the listener to imaginatively hear sounds which are not given. For instance, a voice whispers:

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I fill this room with the echo of many voices
Who passed time here
Voices unlocked from the blue of the long
dried paint
The sun comes and floods this empty room
I call it my room
My room
My room has welcomed many summers
Embraced laughter and tears
Can it fill itself with your laughter?
Each word a sunbeam
Glancing in the light
This is the song of my room
David, Howard, Graham,
David, Paul, Terry, Graham
Blue stretches, yawns, and is awake
Blue, blue

Even though the speaker refers to ‘the echo of many voices,’ to ‘laughter and tears,’ and to the ‘song’ of his room, in no moment do these sounds actually resonate. In other words, those sounds are heard as absences which I, as a listener, must supply via auditory imagination. Thus, I must engage in the unlocking of those absent voices, in the materialization of tears as sounds, and in the creation of an unavailable song by imaginatively hearing them.

The interplay between sound and language, sensation and association, affect and idea, enables the

incessant birth and rebirth of meaning; signification is not fully given to the listener. *Blue* demands that its perceiver actively produce and endow sonic bodies with a SIGNIFICANCE-IN-FORMATION that can only begin to emerge as she experiences the artwork. In this sense, *Blue* does not impose an enclosed meaning; it does not give the whole. On the contrary, it operates as an event that asks me to listen and to dream, to listen and to create. I am an agent that completes the artwork, albeit always partially and limitedly.

Jarman's audio-visual piece calls for a practice of acousmatic listening which includes the perception of unseen sounds and the imaginative production of sonic bodies — a form of listening that involves the co-presence of the perceptual and imaginative modalities of experience. Those sounds that present a higher degree of acousmaticity may materialize a productive difference within themselves, one that threatens their own selfsameness. Such sounds ask for acts of imagination which are in excess of perception. This point can be better understood by listening to an episode in which a speaker says:

I'm walking along the beach in a howling gale
Another year is passing
In the roaring waters
I hear the voices of dead friends
Love is life that lasts forever.

My heart's memory turns to you
David. Howard. Graham. Terry. Paul.

At the very beginning of this episode, the words are embraced by sounds of sea waves, whose foaming tails have a velvety texture, as well as by soft wind whistles which quickly become vigorous moans which then become noise. What begins as a sound that references the movement of the wind turns into a sort of primitive moan, which then transforms into dissonant noise, as if a radio signal had been lost. Despite the actual origins of these sounds, they are experienced as one sound, whose self-alteration produces multiple sonic sensations that are drastically different. They are experienced as if the same source and/or cause had provoked a sonic effect which is actually *various* sonic effects. The more I attempt to settle the sound's causal object, the more I nurture the productive force of this sound to beget new senses. Put differently, there is non-selfsameness within selfsameness, for it is the *same* sound which produces an irreducible alterity that throws the sound's self-identity into question. This self-changing sound complicates the determination of a delineated physical source and causal event, for what kind of body (source) and action (cause) could be producing this mutating sound? What kind of body-in-flux could emit this *wind-becoming-moans-becoming-noise*? This sonic effect is experienced as a sound that changes qualitatively — as one sound which is many sounds. Any attempt to

ascribe a source becomes tremendously complex, yet engrossing, for the listener. *Blue*'s sonic events demand imaginative acts that posit a world which is in excess of our own.

Jarman's piece also complicates the recognition of a selfsame-speaking human subject. As queer theorist Jacques Khalip remarks, *Blue* "refuses to fold back into any kind of unified perspective or signature" (83). Even though *Blue* is deeply personal—as Jarman's writing discloses intimate details about the illness—the artwork's formal structure, use of voice, and use of the *I* shatter the dichotomy of the individual/collective, and of the self/other.

The intoxicating blueness of the screen is interrupted by voices which always use the *I* so as to narrate disconnected events. Without the possibility of visualizing the self-referential subject who speaks, the distinction between one speaker and another becomes impossible. The likeness of these voices further complicates any attempt to recognize unique subjects; none of the voices reveal a singular speaking subject that can be identified via the unique character of his vocal enunciation. As Khalip emphasizes, in listening to *Blue*, "one should not be listening to the grain of the voice, as Barthes might suggest, but to the sound of one's dispossession from oneself" (96). *Blue* dilutes the materiality of the voice—a kind of bodily expression that bypasses the semantic sphere—so as to preserve a resolute anonymity, an

impenetrable impersonality that refuses the recognition of any subject. Mirroring the refusal of the screen to visualize the particular, the voices who share the *I* do not reveal a unique self; voice does not reveal a knowable entity. By contrast, as Khalip summarizes, in *Blue*, “the act of speaking for someone means attending to the nonvocality of their sound—the ‘taking place’ of their sound within our own, without fetishizing voice as a sign of sound’s humanistic modulation into ‘authenticity’” (97). The act of speaking for someone invokes a poetics of proximity in which the ‘uniqueness’ of the self, the edifice of subject, is shadowed by “the disturbance of violent relatedness” (Nancy xiii), by a shared intimacy which proves to be the very foundational possibility for any ‘self’. As Jean-Luc Nancy remarks: “Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence” (3). *Blue* refuses to operate under a logic of recognition through which the other becomes *other*. This rejection of representing determined identities, of identification altogether, is materialized in the blue optic plane, and in the use of the acousmatic voice: a voice(s) purposely failing to disclose its (their) source(s); a voice(s) whose utterance of the *I* does not complete a self-reference but makes an open reference. Through this abandonment of oneself, the voice(s) constitutes an irreducible plurality in which *I* is not prior to *we*.

failure — lack, omission, collapse, non-performance — I suggested that, by welcoming such failure, the spectator becomes a *listener*. The ear comes to be a key player in our relation to the external world and in our own self-relation. Thus, the abandonment of vision is nothing but a productive movement that allows the body to navigate the world by using a sensory mode which remains largely overlooked. In this sense, Jarman's artwork affirms universes of possibilities that have to be listened to, that have to be discovered by attuning to the sounds and voices of its enigmatic world. This is a difficult request. Deprived of representational and explanatory images, facing the intoxicating blueness of the screen, I must listen to sounds, voices, and noises which also resist complete identification, which are occupied by an absence which cannot be ignored. I must engage in a practice of acousmatic listening.

Following Kane's model of acousmatic sound and acousmaticity — a theory that emphasizes the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of listening, and the spacing between sonic source, cause, and effect — I argued that Jarman's *Blue* has many different degrees of acousmaticity. This richness of acousmaticity allows the piece to invoke a poetics of proximity: an (im)possible touch of incommensurable events, spaces, and temporalities, *through* and *as* sound. Significantly, such poetics of proximity require the listener to complete them with acts of imagination.

TO THE BOUNDARY OF THE KNOWN WORLD

Blue's acousmatic sounds, voices, and noises make a suggestion that can go in many different directions, depending on the listener's imaginative capacities.

Blue does not give a whole. Contrarily, the piece hints at possible readings of its sonic universe. But, again, since the piece needs the listener to *complete* it, albeit always partially, there are as many possible readings as listeners. There are as many versions of *Blue* as there are listeners who give themselves into a lived relation with *Blue*'s aural world.

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