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“Hearing Things Through Things”: Hong-Kai Wang’s *Music While We Work*

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Introduction

Displayed on adjacent video projections are two perspectives of a sugar factory in Huwei, a small industrial town found in present-day Taiwan. On the left screen an initial long shot renders a mostly-cleared sugar cane field. A large harvesting vehicle drives slowly across the daylight-filled horizon extracting still-standing cane husks. The other screen shows a large factory warehouse from which a set of train tracks emerges. The opening scene begins as a factory transport train shuttles toward the camera; the engine crescendos as several train cars shuffle across the screen. After the locomotive clears from view, the scene cuts to a distant shot of a Taiwanese woman standing in the field not far from the harvesting area. Facing the approaching harvesting vehicle while wearing a pair of headphones, the woman holds out a portable sound-recording device with an attached microphone.

The preceding description comes from Hong-Kai Wang’s *Music While We Work* (2011), a two-channel video and sound installation included in MoMA’s 2013 exhibition *Soundings: A Contemporary Score*. The 39-minute work follows a group of retired Taiwanese sugar factory workers and their spouses through a factory owned by Taiwan Sugar Corporation as they execute a series of listening and recording exercises devised by the artist. Wang began initial work for the project in January 2011 by conducting interviews with a group of five of the workers and their families assisted by her collaborator, Taiwanese musician and political organizer Bo-Wei Chen. “Are you retired?” Chen asks Kun-Shan, the husband of the woman seen during the opening sequence of the video. “He used to work at the Railway Section of the department of transportation,” notes an offscreen voice. Chen

introduces himself to the families and Wang explains to them the premise of the project. “I am interested in sound,” Wang begins, “because I am drawn to the people, and to the history of the social relations behind sounds that we hear and listen to.” She continues, speaking to the entire group: “This project aims,” Wang asserts, “to paint a world composed by your own listening.”¹ In her concise formulation, Wang brings together both active and passive modes of sound production while synaesthetically conflating the visual and the aural. This irresolute “split” between the visual and aural—Wang’s formal separation of the video into two channels subtly mirrors the “stereoscopic” nature of hearing—becomes complicated, in our analysis, through further bifurcations of sense and metaphor, fact and ideology. The crux of this article concerns the respective philosophical valences of the visible and audible registers in Wang’s rendering of laboring subjects.

Music While We Work speaks to the emergence of a contemporary desire for mediatized depictions of bodies engaged in industrial labor processes. Themes of pastness, obsolescence, and historicity coalesce around a gesture of *return* in Wang’s intervention: through her invitation to revisit the factory, Wang brings the retired workers back to the site of a subjectivizing and ritualized trauma; for viewers, she stages an encounter with the real of an “anachronistic” form of labor in an era in which, while intrinsic to the reproduction of capital, the body of the industrial worker is increasingly made invisible, moved off-site, or “offscreen.”² While referring to historical representations of industrial work in film, we intend to situate Wang’s *Music While We Work* in relation to philosophical debates around sound and music, and recent appearances of film/video in contemporary art.

Wang’s project frames sound reproduction technics through the lens of moving image technology, while placing historical and philosophical terms of film and photography in dialogue and conflict with those of music and sound. In terms of sound, Wang’s project stretches the notion of “field recording” from its early application in ethnomusicology—the recordings by Alan Lomax, for instance, which link the emergence of American blues to the

forced labor, segregation, and racism suffered by black Americans during the first half of the 20th Century—to the term’s more recent appearance in experimental music and sound art. With respect to the visual, Wang’s *Music While We Work* can be thought to share in the twofold gesture of a cinematic medium self-reflexivity which implicates the technics of both labor and its representations. Examples of the latter can be found in Vertov’s canonical film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and more recently in Tacita Dean’s 2006 work *Kodak*, a film which consists of footage of a soon-to-close Kodak film factory in Chalon-sur-Saône, France, offering a self-referential statement on technological obsolescence and its requisite material labor support. In Wang’s work, however, the focus is notably displaced from that of framing the apparatus of ocular representation to the inscription of a socio-acoustic topology of laboring bodies through participatory field recording.

The important consequences of Wang’s intervention, we want to argue, lie beyond isolated concerns with form, medium, or even “materiality” (a term referred to over 20 times in the *Soundings* exhibition catalogue), but rather extend to engage with the recent re-emergence of philosophical materialism within contemporary art. *Music While We Work*, more specifically, invites a reconsideration of the model of ideology in which the perception of real “material conditions”—human material production in the broad sense—is inverted through the optical device of the *camera obscura*. In short, as opposed to Marx’s original metaphor of retinal inversion central to his and Engel’s materialism, what would it mean to derive a conception of ideology (or its potential displacement) based on acoustic inscription or musical organization? While alluding briefly to the music-derived philosophical materialism and political economy of Adorno and Attali, this article attempts to position the Marxian conception of ideology and Rancière’s subsequent critique in an intervention intended to challenge the philosophical frameworks undergirding the recent reception of sound in contemporary art.

Reworking Ideology: Ocular Obscura or Acoustic Lucida?

During the onset of industrialization in Europe, Marx and Engels launched a scathing polemic against the Young Hegelian idealist philosophers—the German “ideologists” Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner, and Bruno Bauer—in their famous deployment of a radical materialist philosophy based on human production. As already suggested by the primary opposition between idealism and materialism, antinomic operations such as

¹ “Music While We Work (documentary of Recording Workshops).” <https://vimeo.com/43627255>

² Michel Chion’s conception of offscreen sound, closely linked to his notion of the *acousmètre*, is a noteworthy reference given Wang’s foregrounding of audio recording. See Michel Chion. *Audio-vision: Sound on Screen*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. Ed. Walter Murch. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.

inversion, substitution, ascension/descension, replacement, revolution, flipping, and turning form primary tropes in the Marx-Engels text. Specifically, it is the image of the camera obscura and its inversional function upon which their conception of ideology apparently hinges. “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*,” begins the well-known passage, “this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process” (14). This upside-down flipping/turning process alludes simultaneously, it would seem, both to basic human perception—naked retinal seeing—as well as to technologized ocularity, scientific or artistic imaging.

And yet, while the ocular is primary in Marx and Engel’s formulation of ideological inversion, there is nevertheless from the outset a hint of the audible. The figure of “*echoes* of [the] life-process” (14 *emph. added*), for instance, imbricates across ideological reflections as a consequence of *actual* life. Life includes reverberations of ideology rippled across its surface. Indeed, “[t]he metaphor of reflection,” as Kofman notes, “works to convey the sense that the autonomy of ideology is illusory” (3); the stronghold of ideology is supposedly only temporary or partial. In Marx and Engel’s account, it is not art per se, though, in which we find the possibility of piercing through the prism of ideology to reveal a *camera lucida* view. Rather, the savior is science: “where speculation ends,” they argue, “real, positive science begins” (15). The “dark passage” marking the origins of photographic inscription (Barthes 106) and ideological delusion alike has a corrective. In his critique of *The German Ideology*, however, Rancière provokingly asks, “what makes it possible for science to tear the tissue of the production of material life as well?” (*The Philosopher and His Poor* 76)—what gives “science” this penetrating and incisive power?³

Rancière, moreover, rejects altogether the very notion of ideology *tout court*, replacing it with his conception of the “distribution of the sensible.” The philosopher defines the latter as the

system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common [...]. This

³ For a comprehensive engagement with the relationships between Marx, Marxism, and science, and their historical ramifications, see Paul Thomas, *Marxism and Scientific Socialism: From Engels to Althusser*. London: Routledge, 2008.

apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the [...] way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 12)

For Rancière, the difference between ideology and the distribution of the sensible lies in the contention that the latter is not a matter of illusion or knowledge, but rather of consensus and dissensus. “A belief is not an illusion to be replaced by knowledge,” Rancière explains, “it’s a consensus: a way of seeing and saying, of being and doing in accordance with a distribution of the position that puts you at your place.”⁴ There is no “inversion” for Rancière because belief in a heaven or hell is not an illusory distortion of a hierarchy to be overcome, but merely one component of a broader topology arranged, in a sense, horizontally. Contrary to the vertical orientation of the viewer required for the flipping function of Marxian ideology—“*vom Kopf auf die Füße stellen*” requires *standing*, however oscillatory—sound is orientation-independent: whether standing on one’s head or not, factory noise sounds pretty much the same. Is it possible then that in Wang’s work we witness an attempt to render a “distribution” of acoustic “facts of sense perception”? Sidelining the *distortion* of ideological optics, in the acoustic domain, if we follow this line of thought, “signal” is a function of *noise*. The opticality of ideology is counterposed by the signal-to-noise ratio of the sensible.

Our aim, however, is neither to resort to a simplistic privileging of sound on the one hand, nor to repeat on the other the well-rehearsed tropes of “anti-ocularcentrism,” the variously conceived criticisms of vision’s alleged dominance found throughout Western thought. Martin Jay traces a broader history of these “downcast eyes” critiques of visuality, including the “antivisual” French Marxist thinkers of the ‘60s and ‘70s such as Althusser. Is not the *Apparatus*—a term encompassing juridical, military, technological,⁵ and aesthetic connotations—of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses, however, a kind of techno-perceptual metaphor (think “recording apparatus”) ultimately not unlike the camera obscura?

⁴ “Revising ‘Nights of Labour’: Talk by Jacques Rancière.” Feb. 2009. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.

⁵ Drawing upon Foucault’s discussion of the French term *dispositif*, Giorgio Agamben derives these categories from the common French dictionary definition in his recent essay “What is an Apparatus?” in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2009), p. 7.



Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)



Hong-Kai Wang, *Music While We Work* (2011), Video still, Courtesy of the artist

“Hearing Things Through Things”: Music with a Video Camera

A fruitful comparison can be drawn between Wang’s *Music While We Work* and Vertov’s watershed 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*. The latter presents the self-reflexive framing of cinematic capture through a

virtuosic rendering of the totality of activities of an imaginary Soviet city (amalgamated from actual 1920s Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa) by collapsing the breadth of industry occurring during the working day into the length of a single film. While diverging in various ways, both works can be said to contain technological encodings of labor processes, while also reflecting upon the functioning of the recording apparatus. Relevantly, through its insistent reference to the lens and the machinic processes of the camera, the *camera obscura* metaphor can be said to run throughout *Man with a Movie Camera*. In addition to outlining this self-referential framing of filmmaking as labor, Annette Michelson has also argued that *Man with a Movie Camera* goes so far as to form a kind of *realization* of *The German Ideology*, “for [Vertov] situates the production of film in direct and telling juxtaposition to that other particular sector, the textile industry, which was for Marx and Engels a status that is paradigmatic within the history of material production” (xxxvii-xxxviii).

Filmmaking itself is conceived as labor in *Man with a Movie Camera*, evinced by the numerous sequences representing shooting, editing, projecting, and even viewing the film. The film’s pulsing rhythmic editing structure, according to Michelson, binds “the movements of industrial labor (the work of mason, axe grinder, garment manufacturer, miner, switchboard operator, cigarette maker)” to filmmaking (xxxix). There is perhaps a similar sense in *Music While We Work* in which the task of sound recording takes on a quality of work, noting the deliberation and exertion of the retirees as they travel from site to site. In Vertov, the cameraman, comparable to the “field recorders” in Wang, leads the viewer through the city just as the recorders move through the factory. In one segment, the antiquated, primitive labor of mining with an axe is highlighted. The repetitive manual movement of the axe-wielding miner is mirrored by the cameraman’s hand-winding of the camera crank. Meanwhile, Wang’s field recorder remains patiently still, holding out her microphone as the worker fills giant bags with sugar. Further distinctions should be added regarding the types of industry referred to and their respective political-economic and historical statuses. In *Man with a Movie Camera* the optimistic focus is on textile manufacturing, in the Soviet Union of the 1920s a major staple of the economy, while *Music While We Work* stages a kind of lamentational *return* to a consideration of the sugar industry in present-day Taiwan, where the towering prominence sugar held for the Taiwanese economy for centuries has dwindled to near obsolescence.

In his own essay on Vertov, Rancière argues for a *Man with a Movie Camera* implicitly at odds with Michelson's equation of Vertov's work with *The German Ideology*. Rancière uses many of the tropes of "the distribution of the sensible" in championing Vertov. He describes one of Vertov's goals as "making community visible," a task which entails the conflicting features of showing "the relatedness of all activity to all others" on the one hand, and exhibiting their similarity on the other (*Aisthesis* 230). Rancière adds, "the sensible interconnection of activities is primarily the relation of their *visible* manifestations" (230 *emph. added*). Is there not, however, an inherent contradiction concerning Rancière's own critique of ideology and his championing of what arguably figures as the "camera obscurity" of Vertov? Interestingly, the title of Rancière's essay is "Seeing Things Through Things," a phrase borrowed from critic Imail Urazov's text which accompanied the release of Vertov's *A Sixth Part of the World*. Perhaps Wang's intervention would suggest a consideration of the variation "Hearing Things Through Things."

By isolating principal terms from the works' respective titles ("camera" and "music"), the shift from *Man with a Movie Camera* to *Music While We Work* transposes from one system of signification and its concomitant philosophical homologues to another.⁶ We proceed from the notion of the camera obscura to a network of philosophical thinking which links the economic to musical organization. Adorno's "forces of production" and "relations of production" (*Produktivkräfte, Produktionsverhältnisse*), for instance, refer not to the music industry as such, but rather to the relationships between distinct actors within the presentation of musical works; and rather than incidental, music is intrinsic to Adorno's materialist philosophy (Buck-Morss 33). Another example is located in Attali's iconoclastic *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), where he insists the "constitution of the orchestra and its organization are also figures of power in the industrial economy" (66). He continues:

The musicians—who are anonymous and hierarchically ranked, and in general salaried, productive workers—execute an external algorithm, a 'score' [*partition*], which does what its name implies: it allocates their parts. [...] Each of them produces only a part of the whole having no value in itself. (66)

⁶ In addition, Wang's title already contains a *détournement* of *Music While You Work*, a BBC radio program that aired between 1940 and 1967 which sought to improve factory productivity. The BBC title's pronoun is met with plurality and the suggestion of collectivity as Wang replaces "You" with "We."

Yet as the synaesthetic thrust of Wang's intervention would insist, the move from one sensory-philosophical register to another is here not simply a matter of antivisuality (or pro-aurality, for that matter). Indeed we are still left with the task of theorizing the contradictions which mark out and cut across the historical-formal categories of music and the cinematic and force new philosophical thinking. If not the musical "forces of production," if not the prism of ideology, if not the sensible, then through what mechanism, what metaphor? Are we back to the proliferation of "ideologists," to philosophy simply doing what it does? Ironically, while *Music While We Work* was the ostensible centerpiece of the *Soundings* exhibition, and perhaps fittingly so, it has received little attention outside of journalistic coverage. The polemics around the *Soundings* exhibition have argued against the reductive and acritical grouping around medium and materiality, calling in the most extreme instance for "*No Medium*."⁷ The unfortunate banality of "sound art" aside, we are nevertheless left, Wang's work suggests, with the insistence of *sense*—not an autonomous sense ascribed to medium-specific art forms, but, as with the sensible/camera obscura contestation, a sense for the metaphoricity of sense itself.

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⁷ In his critique of the *Soundings* exhibition, Seth Kim-Cohen cites Craig Dworkin's recent work *No Medium* (MIT Press, 2013) in arguing against the equation of medium with material; instead Kim-Cohen insists upon medium as a "social category" if the term is to be used at all (*Against Ambience*, Bloomsbury, 2013. e-book, Location 1191).

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