

Ear Room

[Steven Connor](#)

A talk given at the *Audio Forensics* Symposium, Image-Music-Text Gallery, London, 30 November, 2008.

I want today to set out some thoughts about sound and space, in particular in relation to the siting of sound in art spaces, galleries and museums among them.

Disposition

When I was sent the schedule for today, I saw that my title had affixed to it the descriptor ‘seated’. This made me wonder quite how compulsory this was, and whether the choreographing of the occasion would extend to other kinds of stage direction and characterisation of posture – whether others had been hired to give their presentations on their knees, or lounging, lunging, lurching, crouching or slouching. I once had a student who explained that she needed to lie down during a lecture I was chairing, as she had a back problem that made sitting uncomfortable. She stretched out behind the last row of seats, and I thought how deliciously spooky it would be if she were to be the first to respond when I called for questions from the floor.

Of course it is very common for speakers, performers and other producers of sound to adopt particular positions. The voice is full of implicit postures, indeed one might even say that a voice is a certain kind of posture in and of itself (which is, of course, precisely what makes it possible for it to be an imposture). But it seems less natural to us to think of listening as tied to or requisitioning characteristic postures. An exception might be the particular kind of bodily comportment implied in ‘hearing a case’, which typically takes place during what in French is called a ‘séance’, as paralleled in English when we say that a court is ‘in session’; judgement, and the acts of forensic listening associated with it, are often delivered from some kind of judgement seat. But listening usually does not require particular kinds of pose, posture or deportment. To look at something, by contrast, or to taste it, requires a particular orientation of the body towards it, a particular kind and angle of approach. This is partly a consequence of the localisation of the organs of vision and taste. You can catch sight of something out of the corner of your eye, but you certainly can’t see it, saving some ingenious backwards-facing

periscope arrangement, when it is behind you. Touch is not, of course, as highly localised in the body as other senses, but is spread over the whole surface of the skin. Nevertheless, although one can touch or be touched with any part of one's epidermal surface, one can only register or attend to tactile sensation in quite localised areas at any one time. Highly-diffused in potential, the sense of touch is always quite tightly tuned or focussed in actuality.

Hearing seems different. To be sure, our sense of hearing is localised to a certain degree. If you want to check that your watch is still going, then you may bring it to your ear, or one of them (more on this in a moment). But, where we have a strong sense that we taste things in our mouths, or touch things with our hand, or elbow, and that we see things, if not 'in' our eyes exactly, then from what we call a particular 'point of view', we seem to hear things from where *they* are, rather than from where we are. Staring at fine detail or small print may well make our eyes ache. It is only when something is loud or piercing enough for us to register it no longer as sound but as pain that we start to hear it as a sensation in our ears. Let us say that hearing both occupies and evacuates us, fills us up and spreads us out.

One of the most irresistibly recurrent conceptions in thinking about the experience of sound and listening is that of 'sound-space'. We have a very strong predisposition to believe that hearing is specially spatial or localising, that it puts us in some sense in the world in a richer and more three-dimensional way than seeing, which seems by contrast to make of the world a flat screen, or the other senses, that seem to give us only small slugs or slices of the sensible totality of the world. For we can hear textures and qualities, or at least judge of them by their sounds, and we can thus hear the insides of things, while we can only ever see their outsides – which is why we speak of sounding things, and may refer to something as 'sound'.

However, the stubborn belief in the reality of sound-space seems a little mysterious to me after having spent six years or more thinking about ventriloquism, which is precisely the art of the duping or misdirection of the ear. That work repeatedly provided evidence of how fragile and volatile sound-space was. I have come to think that we probably have the sensation of inhabiting a richly specific and significant sound space precisely because the auditory information that our ears make available to us is in fact so impoverished or equivocal, especially as regards the dimensional features of distance, orientation and elevation. Our sense of the richness of our information may in other words derive from the need to attend closely to it, not least in supplementing it with visual information, in order to make up for the conspicuous lack of locative exactitude given to us by our ears. Hearing is vividly sensible precisely because it is not, like vision, immediately

intelligible, because sound asks questions (what am I? where did that come from? what is going to happen now?) for the answers to which we must look to the eye.

However, as I have suggested, this auditory deficit is largely in one area, namely that having to do with the judgement of dimensions – distance (how near or far from us things are); orientation (whether they are to the left or the right); and elevation (whether they are above or below us). We might note that these dimensions in fact correspond to the features of visual space, and in particular the three coordinates of the so-called Cartesian grid. The Cartesian grid is so adaptable, indeed indispensable, as a way of locating position precisely in space precisely because it allows the specification of points. This ability to pinpoint a particular position relative to other positions may be related to the fact that the act of looking seems to imply or generate an answering point, the ideal, or ideal of, the *point of view*. The discovery of perspective allowed painters to organise their works around a vanishing point within or behind the depicted space that both implied and doubled the point of view of the observer. Although the phrase is frequently used, for example by sound designers in film and video, I think there can only really be a corresponding *point of audition* as a result of somewhat strained and optimistic analogy.

We may entertain the conception of a point of view because our eyes, unlike those of many other creatures, overlap to a very significant degree, giving rise to very considerable stereoscopic depth; close one eye, and you can see with the other almost everything that you would see with the first. It has even been suggested that our tendency to attribute reflexive powers to vision – to be able to imagine looking at looking – may have to do with this convergence of lines of sight, which seems to generate the idea that the viewing subject is located in a single, determinate position. Our ears, by contrast, are positioned in such a way that they are much more independent of each other, and the field of their overlap is much narrower. Where we are in a constant and a determinate position with regard to a visual object, we are usually in more than one position as regards sound – that is, one ear may be closer to the sound source. Add to this the fact that we may register the sound as vibration, through our feet, solar plexus and other portions of the body, and we get a spatial distribution as opposed to a spatial convergence. Though English allows me to be ‘all ears’, being ‘all eyes’, or ‘all fingers’ conjures up a bizarrely grotesque physiology. There is no equilibrium in hearing – which may be precisely why we attempt to approximate it when listening intently, to a lecture or to music, by adopting a balanced, or at least self-enclosed posture, hands and legs crossed, finger brought to lips. For, if it is true, as Walter Ong has claimed, that hearing puts us in the middle of the world, while seeing puts us in front of it (Ong 1981, 128), we are never

exactly in that middle. You cannot, as Michel Serres is fond of saying, sleep on both ears at once. We are always in fact slightly off-kilter, *maladroit*, on the hop, out on a limb, precisely because there is no listening post, no sweet spot of listening, because listening is a deporting and a distributing. It is because we lend our ears in listening, that there is listing and leaning, left-handedness and right-handedness, in it.

Paradoxically, the fixed position and location of the eye is actually what allows it a mobility that the ears do not have. We can rapidly change the direction and focus of our vision, whereas we are unable to focus our hearing with anything like the same finesse, partly because sounds do not stay still for our inspection. The eye aspires and approaches to omnipresence; the ear always has a particular, and mutable disposition in and to the space it is in. The eye commands space, the ear occupies, and is occupied with it.

This is to say that the ear makes *room*.

Aside: Cuisine

English is distinguished from some other languages because it is a compound or palimpsest of two languages, or, so to speak, linguistic dispositions, set side by side or sutured Siamese-twin-wise. Because of our political history, which saw from the middle of the 11th century onwards a slow, subtle collision of Anglo-Saxon, itself a *mélange* or precipitate of a number of related Northern European languages, and Norman French, one of the many more or less direct descendants of Latin, every speaker of English, wherever they may be, is a kind of lexical amphibian or hermaphrodite. Levi-Strauss's distinction between the raw and the cooked (1964), which he argues encodes the distinction between nature and culture as such, nicely illustrates the difference between what are called the Germanic and Latinate strains in English. For, as is often pointed out, the words we use to refer to animals are different from the words we use to refer to those animals once they have been killed and cooked. Pig, sheep, cow, calf and deer are Germanic words; pork, mutton, beef, veal and venison are Latin. Latin is the language we used for cooked materials because Latin has come to seem the more cooked language. Names for body parts and corporeal actions are similarly often Germanic – leg, arm, hand, skin, tongue, ear, sleep, shit, die – while the complex, derived or metaphorically cooked forms of those bodily actions often derive from Latin words – management, masturbation, language, audition, insomnia, excrement, dormancy mortality. The Germano-Latin fracture is particularly

clear in medicine, in which the names of specialisms rarely have any mention of the body parts, persons or diseases with which they are concerned.

This is a matter not so much of different fields of reference as of different tonalities. Often words that coincide closely in naming the same thing undergo a division of labour so that Germanic words come to name the less abstract, more emphatic and more familiar forms. Smell, stink and stench are Germanic, odour, aroma and bouquet Latin. The Anglo-Saxon lexicon seems to us to designate the corporeal rather than the conceptual, the raw, the intimate and the comfy (bed, mum, home, cunt) – which is why we swear in Anglo-Saxon and why French obscenities seem so fey and bloodless to English ears. So a thing is Germanic, while an object is Latin, and feeling is Germanic, while sensation, which we may perhaps define as the feeling of having a feeling, is Latin. Anglo-Saxon words often seem to imply bodily participation in the object named, whereas Latin terms imply extraction or distance. This is not because indigenous Anglo-Saxons were indeed earthier and closer to a state of nature (though they may well have been seen this way by their fragrant invaders), or indeed for that matter all that indigenous, but because Latinate words tended to cluster in the institutions of law, administration and learning.

One of the most telling signs of this dual coding of English is the asymmetry that exists between two words that seem as though they have an overlapping signification; the words *space* and *room*. I want to suggest that these two words encode two different conceptions or ways of taking space that belong approximately to the eye and the ear, and that these two takings of space come together (and apart) in the practice of accommodating sound in gallery spaces. What becomes of ‘auditory space’ when one translates it into ‘ear-room’?

I am encouraged in this lexicographic folly by a remarkable exercise in anti-metaphysics undertaken by a seventeenth-century Suffolk physician and antiquary called Nathaniel Fairfax, in his *Treatise of the Bulk and Selvedge of the World* (1674). Fairfax was an enthusiastic correspondent of the Royal Society, with a promiscuous range of interests that included unnatural births, spider-eating, heraldic traditions and the size of hailstones (Fairfax 1665-6). Like many others in the early years of the Royal Society, he was driven by the desire to establish a plain language adequate to the task of describing things as they were. Fairfax’s particular itch was for an English that was shorn of ‘those bewitcheries of speech that flow from Gloss and Chimingness’ (Fairfax 1674, sig. B5v). The reason he gives for this is that he wants to be able to write about matters corporeal in a language that is fitted to and as it were instinct with body, since ‘all the words about body and hangers on to body that we have to do with, are such as flow from or mainly

well fall in with those that are utter'd by Workmen, for such things as are done by hand-deed' (Fairfax 1674, sig. B7v). Fairfax strove for a language that clove closely to things, and thus urged that 'we should gather up those scattered words of ours that speak works, rather than to suck in those of learned air from beyond Sea, which are as far off sometimes from the things they speak, as they are from those to whom they are spoken' (Fairfax 1674, sig. B7v). Ironically, Fairfax's method in the outlandish, or, as he might himself have called it, inlandish, disquisition that follows is to try to strip away from abstract conceptions like those of eternity and infinite space everything that arises from the 'more underly way of thinking' or derives from 'our animalities or beghosted bodyhood' (Fairfax 1674, 12). For, he says ' 'tis as impossible that God should be in Room, which is one of the hangers on to Body, as that he should be in Time, which is another' (Fairfax 1674, 42). But the result of his strange manhandlings of language is actually to constitute, against his own interest and intent, a kind of physiological metaphysics which, far from indicating the nature of 'what concerns that boundless Being which is neither timesom nor roomthy' (Fairfax 1674, 54), sets out the world 'as it stands to body' (Fairfax 1674, 54).

Occupation

Think of the difference between saying that an architect designs a space and that he or she designs a room. A space is open to other possibilities; it is virtual. The condition of a space is to be ready for occupation; the condition of a room is to be already occupied or recently vacated. The occupation of a space is a contingent condition of its spatiality. The emptiness of a room is an accident, a contingent variation on its essential inhabitedness. While space always implies vacancy, room, we may say, is *preoccupied*.

The very awkwardness of trying to generalise the ideas bound up in room is a proof of this condition. *Space* yields a word like *spatiality* smoothly and without awkwardness; 'roominess' or, Fairfax's earnest attempt, 'roomthiness', hints at the difficulty of generalising the condition of particularity, of thisness, or here-and-now-ness that is bound up in it. Roominess can never be an absolute concept, for it always refers us to some implied inhabitant of the space (the famous and lucklessly swung cat, for instance), for whom there will or will not be sufficient space. And this will always be an approximate space, measured by estimate and rule-of-thumb rather than precise measurement; one of the obsolete meanings for the word *room* recorded by the OED is 'A particular place or spot, without reference to its area'. You can measure the distance between things precisely in space; but you can only register the quality of closeness or coming-up-against in

room. Room is closet space. Space is defined from the outside in; room is formed from the inside out, like a burrow or a nest. In space, there is a distinction between the space and the bodies that occupy it; a room is already a compound body-space. A room, or room in general is conjoined or copenetrated with the things that inhabit it – hence ‘leg-room’, ‘elbow-room’, ‘wriggle-room’ or *Lebensraum*.

There is always some interval, some give or space of play, between the eye and its objects. But there is no such looseness of fit between the ear and what, always hugger-mugger and hand-in-glove, it hears,. It is for this reason that, though it makes sense to speak of a relation between the eye and its objects, precisely because what one sees always thereby becomes an object of sight, there is no real relation between sound and hearing; rather, they implicate and actuate each other. The eye can come and go *from* its scenes, if only in the subliminal remissions of its blinking, but the ear seems to come and go *in* what it hears, as though it were being ceaselessly called up and stood down by the objects of its attention, as though sound were moulding and dissolving its own space of listening.

Another way of putting this is to say that space is a background phenomenon; it is that against or within which things may take place. Room allows for no background, for no distinction between figure and ground, for it is the taking of place itself. We may recall the condition evoked by John Hull in *Touching the Rock*, his account of the process of losing his sight:

When you are blind, a hand suddenly grabs you. A voice suddenly addresses you. There is no anticipation or preparation. There is no hiding round the corner. There is no lying low. I *am* grasped. I *am* greeted. I am passive in the presence of that which accosts me. I cannot escape it. The normal person can choose whom he wants to speak to, as he wanders around the streets or the market-place. People are already there for him; they have a presence prior to his greeting them, and he can choose whether or not to turn that presence into a relationship by addressing his acquaintance. For the blind person, people are in motion, they are temporal, they come and they go. They come out of nothing, they disappear. (Hull 1991, 71-2)

For the eye, there is a always a scene, unseen though it may be, against which we pick out whatever it is we are looking at, precisely by looking at it. The ear has no such infrastructure on which to repose or from which to recede. For the ear, there are no assumptions; either there is something to hear or there is nothing. A character who falls silent in a radio play drops

out of being altogether, and can be kept in existence only by the tenuous adjuncts of memory and expectation.

There is no background in ear-room because it consists of chronic or temporalised space. The eye sees against a background; the ear hears within a taut web of retentions and protentions. In hearing we gather up and disperse time as though it were a kind of plasma, we hear the tonalities, torsions and textures of time, things that are brayingly present or thinly incipient, things coming about, or falling away. Ear-room is a matter of movements, tendencies, tensions, stresses, strivings, resiliings and relaxations, of matters mined with motion. Sound is made not of objects, but of energies, intensities and inertias. It makes perfect sense to think of high sounds not just as above, but as lifted and held aloft by some force, and of low sounds as both succumbing to the pull of gravity and themselves exercising it. Ear-room, the space imparted to and occupied by the ear, is always tonic, that word that joins together the registers of music and muscular exertion. Space is free; room costs. The visible subsists; sound tires. There is always a thermodynamics or energy budget involved in listening, always an horizon of excitement and fatigue.

Gallery

When sound inhabits or comes to rest in the interesting space we call a gallery, eye-space and ear-room have to make accommodation to each other. Gallery space is open, neutral, virtual; as space in abeyance, it is a staging or exposition of space as such. A gallery, like a theatre, is a space that is not one, a space in which what is happening might as well not be. In being given over to whatever may temporarily or permanently occupy it, a gallery nevertheless holds itself in reserve, for it is in principle available to be transformed, differently disposed. Ear-room is only ever when or whatever it is (this is why it can so easily go beyond the gallery, being taken away in the form of sound files, broadcast from and to other spaces, and so forth).

This may remind us of the primary meaning of a gallery, which referred originally to a covered walkway, a long, narrow platform or balcony, often protruding from the outside of a house, or a ship. A subsidiary meaning from mining names an underground tunnel or passage. The gallery is thus both enclosed and exposed, raised up yet (as in the gallery of a theatre) able to become debased. In its complex hospitality to the arts and accidents of sound, it is as though the gallery remembers and anticipates its original way of forming a space out of passage itself. Ear-room bores out these *perce-oreille* tunnels into and out of the indifferent space of the gallery, mining with

finitude the agoraphobia of the anywhere-at-all. Ironically, ear room, which insists eyelessly on its here and now, is precisely the way in which the gallery can inhabit its condition of escaping from itself.

References

Fairfax, Nathaniel (1665-6). 'Extract of a Letter, Lately Written by Mr. Nathaniel Fairfax to the Publisher, Containing Observations about Some Insects, and Their Innoxiousness, &c.' *Philosophical Transactions*, 1, 391-392.
 ----- (1674). *A Treatise of the Bulk and Selvedge of the World: Wherein the Greatness, Littleness, and Lastingness of Bodies Are Freely Handled*. London: for Robert Boulter.

Hull, John (1991). *Touching the Rock: A Memoir of Blindness*. London: Arrow Books.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1964). *Le cru et le cuit*. Paris: Plon.

Ong, Walter (1981). *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Religious and Cultural History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.