

The burrow of sound

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I have met Huseyin Alptekin during my first visit to Istanbul in November 2007, shortly before his unexpected death. I was then the guest of the Amber festival and I gave two lectures on the topic of the voice, my favorite topic, this was the guideline of the festival at the time, both lectures have been published since. He came to both and we had a long conversation after the first one, and a shorter conversation after the second one, both bearing on the subject of the voice and what it entails, both in philosophy and in modern art. He was extremely astute and well informed, both in art and philosophy, very keen on the topic, we continued our exchange over the mail for a bit, I sent him the text of the lectures, until the day when a month and a half later I was completely overwhelmed by the news of his death. I didn't know much about his artistic production then, except for what he told me, and was very taken by his work afterwards, and especially now that it is presented in this overview and in the wonderful catalogue. It is a work inspiring awe and admiration. We immediately found some points in common, for it turned out that we must have been sitting side by side during the Foucault lectures in Paris in the early eighties, and indeed he seemed to me vaguely familiar, as someone I have known for a long time. I would like now to continue, in his staggering absence, our conversation bearing on the nature of the voice and of sound, its far reaching implications, to take up some threads, try to convey what I couldn't quite manage then, in a more pointed form, taking up some questions that he asked then, but I will do it in my own way, very different from his, for his attitude was both personally and artistically expansive, embracing hybridity and nomadism, while my own way is rather minimalistic, trying to reduce the thing to the core.¹ It so happened that just at the time of receiving this invitation I was working on the question of sound, yet again, taking up, by a strange coincidence, something of the conversation we had. I was extremely touched – touched is not the word, overwhelmed and shaken – by the fact that on the morning of the day he died he ordered two of my books, so I find myself in the impossible and hear-breaking position of sending back the message that he was looking for and trying to get from my work. One of Jacques Lacan's famous sayings goes that the letter always arrives at its destination, and it is

¹ HBA didn't specifically work with sound art much, although one can find in the catalogue an exhibition called Ante-Sound that he did in Poland in 2000 and another one called Les polyphonies du labyrinthe, Polyphonies of the labyrinth, done in Amiens the same year.

through us gathered here, remembering him, that the letter, sent into his absence, hopefully can arrive to a destination, and it can only arrive through our own pursuit on his tracks, by picking up threads of his own work and continuing with them.

I will take as the starting point one of the most striking of all Kafka's stories, "The burrow". It was written in the winter 1923/24, shortly before his death. Not quite the last piece he wrote, but it seems to have been the one before last (the last one being notoriously "Josephine the singer", the story of the singing mouse). If we look at these two stories together, as forming a strange diptych, then there is the astounding and inscrutable fact that Kafka, on the brink of death, took the problem of sound and voice as the last most tenacious red thread of his pursuit, something that goes perhaps most straight to the core of his work, and something that has the value of a testament, as well as something that detains the key to the very nature of modernity.²

The story has a special status among Kafka's stories, which can be illustrated by two anecdotic indications. Kafka was not Lacan's author, he practically never referred to him in all of his published work, yet we find a serious engagement in one of the unpublished seminars, 'Identification' (1961/62), where in the session of 21 March 1962 he addressed at some length precisely "The burrow" and turned it into a strange parable (to use Kafka's word) of the relation between the subject and the Other in psychoanalysis. Kafka was not Heidegger's author either, I am not aware of a single mention of Kafka in all of his published work. So very young Giorgio Agamben confronted him with this absence in a conversation in the late sixties (I hold this from a conversation with him), whereupon Heidegger responded by a longish improvised monologue on a single story, "The burrow". No recorder was turned on (one desperately wishes it would have been), this is mere hearsay evidence. So the stakes are high with this story – there is like a secretive underground thread in this, the hidden burrow of theoretical edifice, the burrow of modern philosophy, and art.

The story describes an animal, usually taken to be a badger, although it is never named in the story itself. It goes around in its elaborate and convoluted underground burrow, its subterranean castle, which is like the underground counterpart of the other Kafka's Castle and its labyrinths. This stronghold was meticulously designed in such a way that it would keep all possible enemies at bay. This took a superb effort of craftsmanship supported by a spectacular streak of paranoia. In order to make this underground bastion safe, the animal had to carefully

² The story was first published in 1931 (by Max Brod and Hans Joachim Schoeps) in the first collection of his unpublished stories.

examine all possible strategies of all imaginable enemies and devise the ways to counteract them. All possibilities had to be considered and taken into account, but no matter how scrupulous the efforts, no measures seem to be good enough. The more ‘the badger’ exerts itself, the more there remains to be done. Paranoia has the structure of a self-fulfilling prophecy, it is self-propelling, engendering ever more paranoia, the more enemies one imagines the more they lurk around the corner. The burrow is like a bunker, a convoluted and ramified version of a bunker, and HBA was very interested in this, in a very different context, with the host of bunkers in Albania,³ he was interested in this paranoia of security, he pursued this first in 2002 in Tirana, then in Kassel (“An Albanian Bunker for each Contemporary Art Museum”), in Cuba in 2003 and eventually with the exhibition *Innere Sicherheit, Inner Security*, in Marburg in 2006, concerned with the problem of ‘bunker aesthetics’. He was intrigued by this to the point of setting up the Bunker Research Group as one of his major projects. I would like to situate my concern with Kafka’s “Burrow” as a continuation of the Bunker Research Group, as another plunge into the bunker aesthetics which is very much at the core of this story, and not unrelated to the nature of modern art.⁴

The burrow is a retreat, the secret hideaway most carefully protected against all outer threats. It is the inside which should be clearly separated from the outside, it presents the problem of a clear division of space, a line of demarcation. Obviously, the biggest and the most immediate problem is that of the entry/exit, the neuralgic spot of transition between the inside and the outside of the burrow which is its most vulnerable point. The first part of the story deals with this at some length. No matter how much the entry is hidden and overlaid by moss, whenever ‘the badger’ has to come out from his burrow or go back inside this involves the moment of greatest danger, it requires a series of anguished strategic maneuvers, but the moment of transition is always the moment of exposure to risk which cannot be avoided. The first peep outside has to be accomplished by trusting the luck, and when re-entering one has to examine the surroundings at length to make sure that one is unobserved by the enemy eye. The point of transition between the inside and the outside is the point of incalculable risk, the moment of the unforeseeable and the uncontrollable.

³ 750.000 bunkers in Albania that HBA was interested in could be seen as the mushrooming of a single burrow all over the country, its multiplication and proliferation that boggles the mind. The logic and the logistics of protection against the imagined enemy lurking from all quarters are the same.

⁴ The bunker is like a heterotopia, this paradoxical space outside the space, cutting the continuity of space and presenting a parallel space, and HBA was passionately interested in heterotopias as presented by Foucault’s formidable text, now reprinted in the catalogue.

But this vulnerable point of entry/exit/transition is only a condensation in one point of something which is massively present overall. The burrow in its whole is far from being a safe-haven, it is at all points the space of exposure. The complex architecture of labyrinths has been entirely dictated by the invisible enemy and its omnipresent invisible threat. Quite literally, the inner safe space of ‘the badger’ is the space shaped by the Other, by the supposition of the external menacing Other, it is like the supposition turned into space, the inner dwelling coinciding with the space of the supposed threat of the Other. The safer it is, the more it is imbued with the Other. The burrow is the paranoia turned into space. It is the literal embodiment of the opposition, and the coincidence in the very opposition, that Freud was so fond of, *heimlich/unheimlich*, homely/uncanny, the home being at all points haunted by the uncanny and coinciding with it. There is no inside that could escape the outside, and ‘the badger’ occupies the space of the constantly shifting lag between the two. The inside and the outside communicate and there is an overlap, the outside is the constant crack of the inside which cannot be filled in, healed and recuperated.

At almost the precise middle of the story (the story is not finished, but probably close enough) there is a shift which brings the problem to a pinnacle, providing a very good entry into our problem of the sound:

“I must have slept for a long time. I was only wakened when I had reached the last light sleep which dissolves of itself, and it must have been very light, for it was an almost inaudible whistling noise [*ein an sich kaum hörbares Zischen*] that wakened me. I recognized what it was immediately; the small fry, whom I had allowed far too much latitude, had burrowed a new channel somewhere during my absence, this channel must have chanced to intersect an older one, the air was caught there, and that produced the whistling noise [*das zischende Geräusch*]. ... First I shall have to listen at the walls of my passages and locate the place of disturbance by experimental excavations, and only then will I be able to get rid of the noise.”⁵

So there is a sound, a noise, which appears at the edge, most significantly at the edge of sleep and wakefulness (we will come back to this) and on the edge of the inside and the outside, the intrusion of the outside into the inside. Its first interpretation seems to be easy enough: this must have been caused by some tiny animals which must have dug some channel intersecting with other channels, there was some tiny passage of air which must have caused the whistling noise. It is a nuisance, but it shouldn’t be too difficult to locate it and fill it in (“I

⁵ Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, New York: Schocken Books 1983, p. 343. This story was translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. For the original cf. *Die Erzählungen. Originalfassung*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer 1996.

must have silence in my passages.” Ibid. To be the master is to be the master over sound and its emission.). – Curiously, it never occurs to ‘the badger’ that the sound may be of inorganic origin, caused by a draught, a change of pressure etc. The assumption is that the sound is always alive, it comes from animation, a rustling movement of life, it’s the sign of a spectral life.

But this attempt at simple explanation comes to nothing.

“I don’t seem to be getting any nearer to the place where the noise is, it goes on always on the same thin note, with regular pauses, now a sort of whistling, but again like a kind of piping. [...] But whether trifling or important, I can find nothing, no matter how hard I search, or it may be that I find too much. [...] Sometimes I think that nobody but myself would hear it; it is true, I hear it now more and more distinctly, for my ear has grown keener through practice; though in reality it is exactly the same noise wherever I may hear it, as I have convinced myself by comparing my impressions.” (P. 344, 345)

The mysterious noise immediately poses the question of its cause and location, as any sound does. The sound is an enigma, it is structurally mysterious, one hears it, i. e. one perceives it by its having made its passage inside, and the moment one hears it it places one in the position of having to figure out what causes it. The sound, at its minimal, is always a rupture of causality that one has to re-establish, fill in the missing link. And the first step to determine its cause is to try to pin down its spatial location and source, that is, to pin it to a point outside and thus solve its riddle. If hearing a sound pertains to time, it is the time which demands its translation into space. The enigma of sound has a temporality which can only find its solution in spatiality. It requires a partition of space (far/close), the singling out of a separate and discrete location within indeterminate and continuous space. But for the poor ‘badger’ this spot recedes: “... wherever I listen, high or low, at the roof or the floor, at the entrance or in the corners, everywhere, everywhere, I hear the same noise.” (P. 347) The temporal fluidity of the sound calls for the spatial fixation, and the subject is caught in this loop, between time and space, between fluidity and fixation, between detachment and attachment. There is the immediate and pressing question of cause and space which precedes the question of meaning, of making sense of sounds.

Furthermore, there is an eerie quality to sound – can it be that only I can hear it? Does it have an ‘objective’ status at all? Is it in my head or does it come from outside? Its location poses the problem of whether there is a spatial location at all, there is a moment of phantasmagoria when the sound wavers, if ever so minimally, between its reality and

unreality. One has to make sound tests to ascertain that this is indeed a sound to be located outside and not a sound imagined or dreamed up. The sound is a test – of being awake, alert and conscious, of being in possession of one’s senses – but is one ever? The ability to locate the sound is like the test of sanity, for if one can’t locate its source one stands on the brink of delusion, hearing voices, incapacity to make sense of the world at large. One stands on the verge of an abyss, where the sound is suspended and wouldn’t converge into space. The tiny sound which wouldn’t go away and resists being assigned a place and a cause is like an interminable prolongation of the vacillation which is inherent in every sound. The enigma is extended and if one cannot place it it infests all parts of space, and all parts of one’s mind.

The connection of time and space in sound also produces a slide between the sound and the gaze. The one tends to translate into the other.

“I go once more the long road to the Castle Keep, all my surroundings seem filled with agitation, seem to be looking at me, and then look away again so as not to disturb me, yet cannot refrain the very next moment from trying to read the saving solution from my expression.” (P. 357)

The sound has the capacity to return the gaze. It doesn’t merely originate from anywhere and everywhere, but also entails an exposure to visibility. The impossibility to escape hearing the sound is transposed into the impossibility of evading the gaze. One is being looked at, with no hiding place, without a hideout in this huge and carefully designed hideout of the burrow. One cannot close one’s ears as one can close one’s eyes, one is always open and available to the sound, but this impossibility to stop the influx of sounds equals the impossibility for the omnipresent gaze to close its eyes. The bottom-line is: it is reading me, and I cannot read it.

How many sounds are there?

“There still remains the possibility that there are two noises, that up to now I have been listening at a good distance from the two centers, and that while its noise increases, when I draw nearer to one of them, the total result remains approximately the same for the ear in consequence of the lessening volume of sound from the other center.” (P. 345)

What is the number of the sound? Can it be submitted to count? Again there is a structural problem, for even the sound at its minimal, a thin whistling noise remaining persistently ‘the same’, poses the constant question of its division into multiplicity. There is a thesis in this which one could spell out as follows: the sound is never one, it resists oneness by its very nature, it poses a problem of an inherent multiplicity by its mere being a sound.

And the enigma it presents is not only the enigma of its cause, location and source, but through all this the attempt to render it one, to submit its multiplicity to oneness. Again, can one ever? And can one ever decompose it into discrete countable traits? The subject is caught in the turmoil between the multiple and the one, the imposition of one on something that seems to be by its nature uncountable.

Then there is the question of its intermittency, the tricks played upon its duration.

“Simply as a rest and a means to regain my composure I often make this experiment, listen intently and am overjoyed when I hear nothing. But the question still remains, what can have happened? [...] Sometimes I fancy that the noise has stopped, for it makes long pauses; sometimes such a faint whistling escapes one, one’s own blood is pounding all too loudly in one’s ears; then two pauses come one after another, and for a while one thinks that the whistling has stopped forever. I listen no longer, I jump up, all life is transfigured; it is as if the fountains from which flows the silence of the burrow were unsealed.” (P. 347, 350)

The sound is essentially temporal, but its temporality is interrupted. In order for there to be a sound, it has to be intermittent, there has to be the possibility of there being a non-sound, a silence as the backdrop against which the sound can emerge at all. But the demarcation line between the two is uncertain – can one ever be sure of hearing nothing? Of perceiving pure silence, the absence of any sound? For silence itself is always populated by infinitesimal sounds, there is the heart and the pounding of blood, there is the sounding presence of one’s own body whose limits stretch into the surroundings, if ever so little. Silence is not the absence of sounds, but quite the opposite, the state of the greatest alertness in which sub-sounds emerge, the minimal thumps of both one’s body and the ambient surroundings, slightly overlapping on the verge. Silence is the condition of sound, the punctuation of its flow, its frame, but also an elusive line of division which has to be drawn by an uncertain decision. Just as the sudden emergence of the sound had the power to transform the already nightmarish life of ‘the badger’ into a far worse nightmare,⁶ so the silence has the capacity to transfigure it instantly into bliss, although short-lived. (“I listen, but the most perfunctory listening shows at once that I was shamefully deceived: away there in the distance the whistling still remains unshaken.” P. 351) The intermittency of the duration of sound, shaping its rhythm, translates into the oscillation between nightmare and bliss.

⁶ In retrospect all the previous nightmares seem but a trifle compared to this one. “I have had a great deal of luck all those years, luck has spoiled me; I have had anxieties, but anxiety leads to nothing when you have luck to back you.” (P. 351) Luck is the retroactive product of calamity, one’s luck never coincides with one.

One's damnation and salvation depend on figuring out the sound and its treacherous absence, and the subject is again caught between the two.

The opposition between the threatening outside and the safe inside can be reversed:

“I push my way up and listen. Deep stillness; how lovely it is here, outside there nobody troubles about my burrow, everybody has his own affairs, which have no connection with me; how have I managed to achieve this? [...] A complete reversal of things in the burrow; what was once the place of danger has become a place of tranquility.” (P. 352)

The home, this tentative safe-haven achieved by so much effort, has been de-homed (if I can venture this expression) by the mere presence of the sound, embodying all threats, condensing them under a single heading, so the external space of constant threats can now turn into the refuge from the refuge, the asylum from the contaminated asylum, the outer threat offering a relief from the inner peril.

There is further the question of volume.

“The noise seems to have become louder, not much louder, of course – here it is always a matter of the subtlest shades – but all the same sufficiently louder for the ear to recognize it clearly. And this growing-louder is like a coming-nearer; still more distinctly than you hear the increasing loudness of the noise, you can literally see the step that brings it closer to you. You leap back from the wall, you try to grasp at once all the possible consequences that this discovery will bring with it.” (P. 351)

What makes the sound the same? Is it ever? Its volume and its pitch? Its volume (and its pitch) is constantly subject to fluctuation once one concentrates on it. The volume is the subtle difference of volume, it increases/decreases, if ever so slightly, it can only remain ‘the same’ if one doesn’t pay attention to it. The moment one isolates the single sound and fully concentrates on it, its mode can only be crescendo. And in the strange loop which binds together time and space in sound, it comes ever nearer. The sound is getting you, it is gaining ground on you, it is winning, you feel your defenses crumbling, all your weapons are of no avail. The sound ‘means’ getting louder and nearer, closer to the bone. And one never hears merely with the ears, the bones are involved, starting with the tiny bones in the ear.

The attempt to squeeze the inherent multiplicity of the sound into the mold of one leads to a further expansion, indeed a crescendo of oneness.

“But what avail all exhortations to be calm; my imagination will not rest, and I have actually come to believe – it is useless to deny it to myself – that the whistling is made by some beast [*ein Tier*], and moreover not by a great many small ones, but by a single big one. [...] it has a plan in view whose purpose I cannot decipher; I merely assume

that the beast ... is encircling me; it has probably made several circles around my burrow already since I began to observe it.” (P. 353, 354)

If there is to be a common denominator to this intriguing multiple sound, then it must have a single cause, one should be able to account for it by a single big creature as its unitary origin. The sound is the sound of a beast. It is a beastly sound. There is something in its nature, or its counter-nature, its super-nature and un-nature, that implies a beast. The beast not as a part of natural animal kingdom, but its excrescence, an excess of animality, the animality turned monstrous, the specter of Animal as such. If there is a search for cause and spatial location necessarily called for by every sound, then this is the next stage, seemingly impossible to avoid: imputing the cause to a ghost. The impossibility to pin down the cause to a locus and to figure out its source, offers a crack where fantasy comes in. If the sound cannot be quite counted for one, then fantasy can take the relay of oneness and give it a spectral existence. There is a beast in the machine. And the beast is encircling me – despite its being One, pulling the multiple strings of sound, it is also all around, everywhere, unplaceable, encompassing. Being is a beast. It is a creature of assumption and imagination (Kafka’s words), yet overwhelming. Its purpose cannot be deciphered, and this is what makes it intractable and inscrutable. It is the supposed One which is all over, ubiquitous.

If the question of cause and location precedes the question of meaning as its next step, there is a gap between the two where fantasy sneaks in. Isolating the source of the sound is like a deflation of meaning – so this is where it has been coming from, this is what has been producing it, there is nothing to worry about and nothing further to interpret. The sound would thus be put in place and allocated. And the possibility of doing this at least roughly and for practical purposes is no doubt what keeps us from the paranoia lurking implicitly in every sound. It is only when the sound lingers in suspense for some moments, or minutes or agonizing hours, that one is suddenly aware of the tiny gap which divorces the sound from its source, the lag which prevents it from ever being simply collapsed on its source, the fissure which prevents the proper placement of its time into a spatial slot and makes it irreducible to it. This gap is the entry point of fantasy which necessarily gets hold of meaning once this gap is kept open for any length.⁷ The meaning of a sound, the assumption one necessarily makes, is placed in the very impossibility of its neat placement, deracinating, if slightly, its firm roots. If there is a meaning to be figured out, this stems from a dislocation of natural causality, the

⁷ In the Heideggerian vein one could venture this: ‘the meaning of the beast is the beast of meaning’. But Heidegger is so easy to parody.

failed allotment of sound to a spatial point. Fantasy equally intervenes in the impossibility to reduce sound to one, and it proposes an assumed specter of One as the solution of this predicament. One is One of the beast. There is something ghostly and beastly in making sense of sound, that is, in making sense at all. In the pursuit of sense there is always a beastly moment, the elusive beast intervenes and it doesn't quite vanish in sense, but rather conditions it.

The beast behind the sound is all-powerful, but its omnipotence only gives shape and substance to what is overpowering and invasive in the sound itself. It condenses the mystery, the intrusive force of the sound, it unifies the absent cause of sounds into a single beastly creature. Once the beast is given life by this assumption, then all sounds become manifestations of the hidden beast. And if the beast seems to have suddenly appeared as lurking behind them, then it can only follow it had been there all the time without our noticing.

“Now I could not have foreseen such an opponent. But apart altogether from the beast's peculiar characteristics, what is happening now is only something which I should really have feared all the time, something against which I should have been constantly prepared: the fact that someone would come.” (P. 354)

The sound implies the beast that can overturn the whole life, and retrospectively the whole life has been a long wait for this turning moment. It is not that it has suddenly emerged from nowhere, one was foolish and naïve not to have anticipated its coming, one has been deluding oneself. The peaceful life without the beast was based on blindness, or rather deafness, actually both. The whistling sound was a surprise, totally unexpected, but it was bound to come, it had a destination to fulfill by its coming out, it was secretly lurking behind all sounds and waiting for its moment, its sudden emergence was just a materialization of its virtuality in every sound, in the crack involved in the world of sounds.

Can one come to terms with the beast, reach an understanding with it?

“If it should really break through to the burrow I shall give it some of my stores and it will go on its way again. It will go its way again, a fine story! Lying in my heap of earth I can naturally dream of all sorts of things, even of an understanding with the beast, though I know well enough that no such thing can happen, and that at the instant when we see each other, more, at the moment when we merely guess at each other's presence, we shall both blindly bare our claws and teeth, neither of us a second before or after the other ...” (P. 358)

The world is not big enough for ‘the badger’ and the beast, there is no room for a friendly coexistence, for a division of space and goods, it’s an either-or, a life and death struggle. The beast grew out of the tiniest of sounds, a mere whistling, and it grew to spectacular proportions, out of all proportion, taking over being at large. It has imbued being with an excessive presence, a presence too much, the too-muchness of presence (to use the excellent word proposed by Eric Santner), pinned to a mere sound. The beast of being has come too close by merely emitting a sound, but this pertains to the very nature of the sound: the hazard of its coming too close, the impossibility to keep it at bay. What would be the proper distance of the sound, between its closeness and remoteness? Can it ever be at an appropriate distance? Not too far, not too close? Can one ever keep being at a proper distance? The beast of being, a mere creature of sound, the slightest and the most immaterial of substances, is nevertheless endowed with claws and teeth, it can rip one apart should it appear in flesh, yet despite its unbearable closeness, the unbearable closeness of being, it pertains to its nature that it keeps in retreat, a retreat within the retreat, never stepping into the full brightness of noon, in line with the nature of the sound which immediately imposes itself, piercing all protection, but at the same time never quite discloses its source and location. It dwells in the dislocation. The sound is an advent of presence, compellingly inflicting itself, but simultaneously a truncated presence, resisting to be revealed, posing an enigma, a retreat in its very disclosure.

The sound is an entity of the edge. Before coming to some tentative conclusions let me briefly dwell on the particular edge which is crucial for Kafka: the blurred line between sleep and wakefulness, the edge of awakening.

The Trial begins with an awakening. Josef K. wakes up in his room, with two strangers at his bedside, in the space of his homely intimacy. The two intruders will proceed to eat his breakfast, seize his undergarments and present him the indictment. In the first scene, at the edge of waking up, the home is ‘de-homed’, the concept of *unheimlich* is quite literally staged. Awakening is a threshold between sleep and wakefulness, like coming back from a foreign country, but the threshold is a risk, for does one ever come simply back home from some distant oniric place? There is a crack in between, and the uncanny moment is precisely the moment of not being able to find the homely again, just for a moment. In a passage which he eventually crossed out, Kafka put it brilliantly:

“The strange thing is that when one wakes up in the morning, one generally finds things in the same places they were the previous evening. And yet in sleep and in dreams one finds oneself, at least apparently, in a state fundamentally different from wakefulness, and upon opening one’s eyes an infinite presence of mind is required, or rather quickness of wit, in order to catch everything, so to speak, in the same place one left it the evening before.”⁸

There is a thin line: on the one hand the dislocation of dreams and their strange landscape, on the other hand the elusively escaping familiar, the impossibility of placing it, one needs vigilance to catch it, to prevent it from sliding away, for its dislocation coincides with everything being seemingly in the same place. The dislocated world has to be relocated, that is, moved in order to be in the same place. If awakening is a threshold, then it is a threshold where for a moment the relation between subject and the world wavers. “Waking up is the riskiest moment. If you manage to get through it without being dragged out of place, you can relax for the rest of the day.” (Ibid.) Josef K. hesitated on this brink, and he would never be able to relax again. He will be stuck in-between, no longer asleep but not yet awake, and the whole novel will unfold on this edge. His protracted wakefulness with which he will struggle throughout the novel, to the point of utmost exhaustion, coincides with a protracted dream, or rather with what emerged at the edge of awakening. Kafka’s guideline could be stated in these terms: ‘don’t give up on the edge’, on the impossible in-between where the dream-like real infringes upon the familiar reality.

Awakening is the riskiest moment [*der riskanteste Augenblick*], says Kafka, and if one lets one’s vigilance slip even stranger things can happen, like one can wake up as an insect. Gregor Samsa, when waking up, missed for a moment the quickness of wit to catch everything in the same place, he didn’t find his own body, he mislaid it for a moment. Awakening is metamorphosis.

On the first page of *The Castle* the landsurveyor K. arrives at the village at the foot of the castle in the late evening, he calls at the inn to spend the night and since there is no room they put him up on a bank, whereupon he instantly falls asleep. But then he is soon awoken by a young man claiming that one needs permission from the castle authorities if one wants to spend the night there. And everything else follows – everything starts by an awakening, after two paragraphs, and K. wakes up caught in the middle between wakefulness and sleep. And so does the badger, awoken by the tiny sound from his sleep, awoken, but not quite.

⁸ *Der Process*, ed. Malcolm Pasley, *Kritische Ausgabe*, Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1990, p. 168. I must point out the brilliant book by Roberto Calasso, *K.*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, which gives an extended analysis of this.

Freud maintains, throughout his book on the dreams, that one crucial function of the dream is to be the guardian of sleep. Any external disturbance which might wake us up is integrated into the dream in order to keep us asleep. The dream protects the sleeper from the intrusion of reality. One eventually wakes up when the external disturbance becomes too intrusive for the dream to tackle, but on the other hand the dream itself has the capacity of producing a real which is more overpowering than any external disturbance from which one tries to escape by taking refuge in the awake reality. Dream's own logic of wish-fulfillment tends to run amok, producing something more traumatic than reality can be, so one is forced to wake up in order to escape it. So we wake up in order to be able to continue to sleep; we wake up in order to escape the excess produced by the dream in its endeavor to protect our sleep. There is a threshold in the awakening, an edge between the real of the dream and the reality into which one wakes, an 'interface' where, for a moment, the one infringes upon the other. Josef K. wakes up in this temporal modality, this is what happens to Gregor Samsa, and this is what happens to 'the badger' waking up to hear the sound – the sound of this edge which will turn everything into a nightmare. There is like an 'ontological opening' at this edge where the usual assumptions are shaken for just a moment, and this 'ontological opening', this would be my proposal, is something that largely conditioned both the advent of a vast strand of modern literature and of psychoanalysis. There was a historical turn that one could describe as 'the moment of awakening', though not to reality, but to something that gets lost in the reality once constituted and made ontologically consistent. There is a real that emerges on the very verge, and holding on to it has largely been a red thread for both theory and artistic practices pertaining to modernity. [Cf. Proust, proceeding to the same edge from the opposite direction: falling asleep, but not quite.]

This opening, with the tiny brink between sleep and wakefulness, is something that has a tenacious and internal link with the question of the nature of the sound. Why does one wake up? Quite trivially and commonly, one is awoken by a sound, by a noise, by a voice, something that has become too loud and disturbing. The sound intrusion was first integrated into the dream, this guardian of sleep, but once it got too noisy one has to wake up, it can no longer be contained. So there is something inherently bringing together, in most common experience, the line separating sleep and wakefulness and the very nature of the sound. The sound has been going on for some time during the sleep, it provokes its break and then it continues after waking up, the first thing one is aware of when coming to one's senses and the first thing one has to figure out. The sound displays its nature, in a particularly telling way,

precisely on this line of demarcation, and this paradoxically blurred line is exemplified, in a most telling way, by the nature of the sound. The sound belongs to two worlds, it embodies the break between the two, and in that break something comes up for a moment that doesn't belong to either of the two and which only flickers for a moment, and it takes a supreme alertness and mastery to hold on to it, to prolong it, to make a literature out of it, to make sound art of it, to turn it into an object of theoretical pursuit. The historical advent of modernism is profoundly linked to it, so this tiny sound in Kafka's burrow can be seen as its wake-up call.⁹

The sound is an entity of the edge. The edge between the self-present consciousness and the inscrutable realm of sleep is just one of the edges on which the sound has to be scrutinized, and I have given it more attention because of the far-reaching strategic value it holds for Kafka. I attempted to read Kafka's story as a sound laboratory, the burrow indeed mimics the 'sound-proof' laboratory situation. It isolates a single sound and systematically examines all that is at stake in it, it exhaustively lists the attitudes of the subject in relation to the sound and it closely investigates its 'ontological' stature. What kind of object is it, if it is one at all? By isolating a single sound and focusing entirely on it, it displays that the sound cannot be isolated for a moment, for everything is at stake in hearing a sound, it cannot help raising a vast array of crucial philosophical questions, the vital ones for modern theory.

There are numerous edges at stake, and let me now attempt to list them systematically. I will not insist any further on the *first* one, the edge between wakefulness/consciousness and sleep, the very edge of self-presence and awareness. The *second* one is the massive edge between the inside and the outside, in two senses. First in the sense that the sound is an intrusion of an outside into the inside, it is premised on a spatial partition – and the burrow presents a colossal effort to establish and maintain it, a bastion to fend off sound. The sound testifies to its permeability, its crack, it is the sound of this crack. And second, in the sense of inside/outside one's head: the sound presents a moment of vacillation of this divide, the most

⁹ Here I am leaving aside another thread that should be carefully scrutinized and which leads to an analogous conclusion. It is the thread of technological novelties which have, precisely at the turn of the century, profoundly modified the experience of sound and voice. Gramophone, telephone, tape-recorder, radio, all devices of 'fixed sounds', to use Chion's expression, and 'tele-sounds' – they all had far-reaching and shattering consequences for the 'ontological' status of the sound and the voice, their relation to presence. I have touched upon it in my book on the voice (*A voice and nothing more*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT 2006, pp. 63-5, 74-8).

dramatic of all divides, a moment of uncertainty whether there is an outside source at all. There is a structural moment of indecision, at the very edge of the physical and the psychical as the paramount inside/outside divide. This discriminates between sanity and insanity, it places the sound into a zone of a possible delusion.

Third, the sound presents an edge in causality. It poses the immediate question of its cause and its source, a moment of wavering whether the experience of the sound can be reduced to it, covered by it and explained away by it. There is something in sound that evokes Lacan's adage on causality, '*il n'y a de cause que de ce qui cloche*', 'there is a cause only in something that doesn't work', literally in something that limps (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Penguin 1979, p. 22). Only a glitch in causality brings forth the problem of cause, and the sound is persistently the sound of a limping cause.

Fourth, there is the edge of location/dislocation of the sound, its attachment and detachment. There is always a disparity between the floating nature of the sound and its fixation. This is where the whole discussion about the acousmatic¹⁰ voice and sound comes in: acousmatic is the voice and the sound whose source we cannot see. There is something acousmatic in every sound, not merely in the sense that one more often than not doesn't see its spatial source and merely makes a guess about it (to say nothing about the acousmatic media, i. e. all modern media, which are premised on impossibility to see the sound source), but in a more emphatic sense: even when one does see the source and location, the discrepancy between this source and its sound effect still persists – there is always more in the sound than meets the eye. There is a moment of disappointment or surprise or wandering: how could this sound stem from this banal origin? There must be some trickery or magic at work.

Fifth, there is the edge of the strange loop between time and space, the temporality of sound being forced to find its spatial translation, and the sound is always caught in the gap between the two. The sound implies a missing link of time and space at the point of their overlapping, this is the point it sounds from.

Sixth, there is the edge between the one and the multiple: the heterogeneous multiplicity inherent in the sound has to be accounted for in terms of one, hence made

¹⁰ Pierre Schaeffer, *Traité des objets musicaux*, Paris: Seuil 1966, p. 184 and passim. For the spread of this concept cf. in particular Michel Chion, *La voix au cinéma*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma 1982. The term comes from the name given to Pythagoras' pupils who were for many years of their apprenticeship limited to hearing the master's voice behind a curtain delivering his doctrine, without being able to see him.

countable, enabling the sound to count for one and/or disentangling its discrete countable components. And even the simplest of sounds, isolated by this story, turns out to be more than one, there is a mixture in it, an ineradicable hybridity. Thus listening is the necessary and sustained attempt to impose on it the realm of one and the countable, an attempt never quite successful.¹¹

Seventh, the sound implies the edge of duration and intermittency. It comes and it goes, it is fickle and quirky by its nature, and hence it poses the question of non-sound, of silence as its backdrop and its interruption. The sound is not sound, to make a quick pun. The sound is always on the edge of fading away, but also in the impossibility of ever quite dying (hence the paradoxes of its wavering volume). One could make the simple opposition between existence and insistence of the sound: one can never be quite certain about the sound's existence, of its soundness, it is always on the move, fading in and out, between the lawless and the law-like, between duration, repetition and unpredictability, yet through its very capriciousness it adamantly and implacably insists, giving no respite, not by its steady permanence but by the unpredictable intermittency of its permanence. It is the glitch of durability which is durable and enduring.

Eighth, the sound is the edge in the relation between the subject and the Other. This is the point that Lacan tried to develop at length in his reading. This brings together a topological problem – the separation and connection of the inner and the outer space, a torsion linking the two. It brings together the Other of the spatial outside and the Other of demand/desire – there is something in the sound that produces an immediate effect of interpellation, one is interpellated into a posture of listening, of interpreting, figuring out the meaning, sieving. Ultimately, this entails the effect of not being up to the mark, the mark of sound, of failing to measure up to it. It is not merely the question of recognition [which is the Althusserian mark of interpellation], but rather the impossibility of ever getting to the point of the simple recognition of the sound.

Ninth, there is the edge between reality and fantasy. The impossibility of finding a univocal location of the sound in reality opens up a crack where fantasy comes flooding in, with the capacity to contaminate the whole – and one can here appositely use the homonymy

¹¹ At some point 'the badger' says: "If reason is to be reinstated on the throne, it must be completely reinstated." (P. 349) If reason can be taken under the auspices of the imposition of one, then 'the badger's' position may be described as 'the crack of reason'. Could one propose a simple 'definition': the sound is the crack of reason?

of whole/hole. By its dis-location the sound tends to lead to the assumption of the beast. It is only the beast that can straighten out its crooked causality and provide it with being, location, oneness, stability, duration, meaning, all things that one was incapable of achieving. With the supposition of the beast, by a single stroke it all makes sense, if beastly sense. It makes a whole out of its hole. But this is not the fantasy which would put things in order and relocate everything to the rightful places, presenting a meaningful world with which one could be at peace. Quite the contrary, it is an assumption which makes the reality itself coincide with the intrusion that disrupted it. The disruption, instead of being repaired, gains reality and thus gains upper hand over reality. Making sense backfires, or it makes too much sense for the reality to cope or too bear. This is perhaps the hazard of making sense as such.

Tenth, there is the edge between the sound and the voice. The first seemingly evident dividing line between the two would be animate/inanimate, but the sound always blurs this line, it always seems to be the sound of something moving and hence alive, it's always a 'live sound', a sign of budging and hence of animation. But there is more, there is a trajectory between the sound and the voice leading from the inanimate to animation and then from life to meaning. The voice implies an opening towards meaning, while the sound is meaningless in itself. The voice implies a subjectivity which both expresses itself and inhabits the means of expression.¹² The sound is on the verge between being pure sound and thus meaningless in itself, and being a voice which would already be innerly propelled by pointing toward meaning. There is a structural wavering of sound between the senseless and the 'senseful'. Is every sound potentially a voice? As Michel Chion puts it: "Thus every sound, if listened to long enough, becomes a voice. The sounds speak." (*Le son*, p. 71) Conversely, is every voice potentially a sound? For after all the voice, such as Lacan singled it out as one of the paramount 'embodiments' of object *a* in psychoanalysis, occupies this position precisely insofar as it doesn't 'speak', its status of the object depends on its being entirely divorced from its sense making capacity. It is rather its sound value in the midst of sense making that makes it an object, and a problem. And if the voice always implies an orifice – the mouth, the ear, a bodily aperture – then one could say that the sound invokes something that one could call 'the orifice of being', a bodily opening of the world at large that overlaps with our own body as an opening, the short cut between the sound and the voice, body and being.

Eleventh, and last, the sound is placed on the edge of the modernist turn. Kafka's burrow is seemingly a timeless place of a timeless parable. All it needs is an animal and its

¹² Cf. *A voice and nothing more*, op. cit., p. 14-5.

burrow, animals being self-evidently deprived of historicity. Yet, this parable stands on the cutting edge of a historic moment. The experience of sound it describes, its curious ontology and topology it spells out and passionately examines, offers an opening, an ontological crack, as it were, intimately linked to the advent of modernity, enabling a turn in literature, philosophy, the very emergence of psychoanalysis, a turn in music in its relation to sound. On this last count, one could say the all modern sound art, the contemporary fascinating research in the realm of sound, stems from Kafka's burrow, it is its heir. HBA was very fascinated by Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*, he made an intriguing and funny remake of it. Could one say that this crack of the sound, this paradoxical opening, could be read in a very different register as another version of *L'Origine du monde*? The origin of our modern take on the world, of its fissure, although invisible? The sound counterpart of *L'Origine du monde*? And last, in a completely different vein, Kafka's burrow could be read as the modernist version of Plato's cave – so finally, can we take this flickering and fickle object sound that it so powerfully presents at the point of the greatest claustrophobic closure as the point of pursuit in our way out of the very modern, postmodern cave?